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Life in Transition:
Consecutive Essays

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***Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City
University of New York***

LIFE IN TRANSITION:

Consecutive Essays

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Preface

We speak of reinventing ourselves and I have lived a life of ongoing reinvention. Since I firmly believe that no knowledge is ever wasted, I have found ways in which prior knowledge or training has come in helpful in many new endeavors. These essays reflect growth as the transitions have taken place. From various vocations and avocations (licensed nurse, retailer, graphic artist, street vendor, importer from Mexico, jeweler, performance poet, crafter, ESL instructor, College Adjunct, and now...) always within the struggle to find meaning and happiness and self-sufficiency these essays travel as I have.

They reflect a mental and physical movement and observations on the phases.

Chapter

1

“Then, you know how it sometimes goes... You’re hot for them, they’re hot for you; then they’re not, but you still are.”

CONFESSIONS OF A WOMAN ALONE:***How I became Vibrant Vagrant***

Some years back at the close of the eighties and the onset of the nineties, I found myself at crossroads again. The lifestyle, the working lifestyle of an itinerant crafter, was coming to an end. For almost a decade I had enjoyed the heady life of living between two apartments. From May to October I was in New York the balance of the year I had Miami Beach and the smaller but comfortable studio. The thought of what would be my next step was frightening, yet with the ever waning revenue, it was clear I could no longer keep them both. Oh but it had been a lovely ride! There had been an indefinable freedom of working for and mostly by myself. I made jewelry and sold it literally from Maine to Miami. There was something empowering about knowing I could NOT be fired. Sure I could have days when the money was slow, even tight, but just knowing those days would not last and not trading my freedom for what I saw as the illusion of security, made it all worth the risks. The spiraling economy told me that, my choice while not quite clear was at least eminent. Which one could I keep? There were arguments for either. How, you could ask, had I come to even have such a dilemma? This isn't an ordinary lifestyle. Where, when, why had I begun it?

Let me say I was never a great lover of regimentation. Hell! I hated it. I guess that is, among other reasons, why I was also never a great student. I studied and passed classes, (though sometimes with great effort) but I always chafed at the idea of having to study what someone else had prescribed. The idea of working for someone else was never appealing to me. Not that I couldn't see the value, if all else failed, just that I would do my best not to have all else fail. When I finished high school, there was a part of me that just wanted nothing more, at least for a while. Oh I knew I'd go to college sometime, when I figured out what I wanted but right then, well... My mother, however, a wise West Indian, had other ideas. When I could not answer the simple question "Well what do you intend to do now, Jacquie?" She, a nurse herself, suggested nursing school. Months later, when I still had no answer she demanded nursing school.

Now, lest you think this will descend into some tirade about a cruel mother who forced her career onto a victim daughter, and how I've been scarred for life, let me say oh no!

I went to nursing school, graduated, passed the state board, got my license, and promptly put it up in the china closet, where other such unused, or rarely used items were kept.

Nor did I really blame my mother, certainly not now, but even back then there was a part of me which understood. What was she really supposed to do, let me sit around young, not especially gifted and Black? (I couldn't even type back then, still can't not really.) After all she was the mother of a girl who wrote, poetry and short stories, which neither of us was sure could ever be published. Despite piano and dancing lessons, she knew Broadway would not be calling.

She was a proud, strong West Indian, who had to retrain in this country to work as a nurse. How could she be expected not to produce an independent young women, even if I was too young to see it right away. If I had come up with something better, I'm sure she would have helped me. Still when it was all over I HAD to protest.

Not using the training was my protest. Instead I went to work for Saks Fifth Avenue. No smells, no meds, no tacky uniform, a nice clean job up in the credit department, appealed to me. The protest lasted a year before my own West Indian genes kicked in. Great clothes and a discount notwithstanding, how could I keep working for \$75 a week, after taxes, when the license in the closet unopened, would allow me to make as much as \$40 a day?

Just to put it into perspective I would be making then, what the minimum wage is now. A little rebellion is one thing; foolishness is another. Still, I hated nursing, the uniform, with the tacky star shaped cap, the rules and regulations, all of it. I tried to love just the money. I went to work as a private duty nurse, the money was better, the shift differential kicked in at some hospitals, and I didn't have to deal with families or administration as much, working nights. For a time I was enjoying the relative freedom that private duty provided. Yet it didn't feed my head. Back then (early 70's) as long as you had a license, (bare bones, no-frills, no degree) you got paid whatever the rate was for your license, regardless of whether or not you had a degree.

Staff work was another story. One night I got a call to work at a mental hospital, a sleek place on the upper east side. You would hardly have known it was a hospital of any kind. For the shift differential and the extra suicide watch paid, I agreed to venture into this new realm of nursing. We had had psych nursing as part of the training, but I'd never worked at it, even though it meant more money. When I got there, I found that my patient was (don't laugh) another nurse. It seems some unfortunate love triangle involving her roommate, made her snap!

She had hit her own narcotics cabinet, at the hospital where she worked, in an attempt to end it all. Seconals, Phenobarbitals, with a lovely Crème de Menthe green, Chloral Hydrate, chaser something like that. Spending the night just watching her talking to her, was a sobering experience. Just like that she had lost her license, her freedom, (jail would be waiting when she was released. You steal narcotics; they don't play with you) and nearly her life. It redefined the ideal of freedom for me. Maybe that's why I fight to be happy or at least not miserable.

Later when I went to college, I took a job in retail selling shoes. When I needed money quickly I'd work at some hospital as a private duty nurse. Small stints were all I could manage. The beauty of it, and the reason I can hold no grudge against my mother, was that whenever I found something I wanted to do, I had the money to pay for it. Like when my boyfriend, who could not get into med. school here, was going to Mexico to try his luck there. His parents paid for his trip. I was able to pay for mine to keep him company. Of course after he got in, I wanted to spend the summer with him, and I did.

College meant enjoying the courses in Graphic Arts, graduating (AAS) and transferring to Baruch College. I spent my time embracing in Advertising, Sales and Marketing.

Understanding how and what made people buy intrigued me. Later, when my interest in writing reignited, I transferred to Brooklyn College where the English department was stronger. After a while, with the help of The CUNY BA program, I was able to tie all the credits together and graduate with a B.S. in English (minor in business).

By that time I was so burned out with school, I didn't even bother to go to my graduation. My mother, poor soul didn't believe I had graduated, she thought I must have dropped out, it was unfathomable to her that a person would skip her own graduation. It wasn't until they mailed the diploma to the house, that she finally believed me.

I hadn't realized that for my parents, who had struggled so hard for my education, to whom education and the independence it brings, a graduation represented the culmination of all hopes. These were West Indian immigrants. My father is a Bajan (from Barbados, which I am told has the highest literacy rate among the other Caribbean islands). He had come to this country from the police force, to work and study at night, in an effort to start another career as a licensed electrician.

After all that, he discovered that the system of union membership was racially biased against outsiders. It was largely not what, but who you knew.

Still he had a wonderful mind for figures. It was he who held my hand mathematically all through school.

My mother a Vincentian (from St. Vincent) was the granddaughter of a Head Master of schools, with whom she grew up, so you know how steeped in education she was. She put me in private school and paid for a tutor when I needed help. Sorry Mom, I ought to have gone, just so you could have gone.

I liked retail well enough to endure working for someone else, actually I loved the energy of the stores. For a while there was still the nursing, but just enough to keep my license current. Even that was getting stale, though.

I guess for as much as I liked retail, and I did, I never quite built a career at it. For one thing doing so meant long hours and relatively low pay, and a dedication which I didn't quite have. I had gotten spoiled; having a ready source of higher income, made me unwilling to settle for what retail would have paid at entry level. Still, without a massive investment, and the experience to make it work, a store of my own was not in the offing.

Just the same the idea of being self- employed haunted me like a demon.

There was the seduction of working harder than I'd ever let anyone make me work, but knowing all while it was all mine.

Yes, my responsibility, my energy, my headache, but my money too, made at my own schedule and pace. The idea of having someone who controls my time (or seeks to as much as they can, or I will allow then) doles out the pittance in just the increments to keep me above starvation, is galling to me. Yet from time to time I have had to chafe under the bit.

I don't remember exactly what made me go into that showroom one fall afternoon, in the early 80's. It certainly was not the flashy window display; I don't recall there being one. Sand and Something or was it Something and Sand whatever, the case I went in on 32nd Street just off Broadway.

The salesman, a middle aged man, came out, greeted me and asked if I had something special in mind. When I hesitated he asked if I had a business which sold gloves. Well I had no business. I also had no business taking up this man's time asking silly questions about gloves. I suspect he knew this too, but he was patient with me. Finally he brought out a yellow box, a little larger than a shoe box.

“Maybe you would like to look at these. I could let you have them for a dollar a pair, but,” he hastened to add “you’d have to buy two dozen pair.”

I took a look at them and saw that they were little puppet gloves, mittens really cartoon characters and animals. I don’t remember the rest of the conversation. I do remember he had a new customer.

That’s how it really began. During the summer I’d sold beer in the park at concerts and made about as much sometimes more per night, in a much less time than an eight hour shift. Not to mention I enjoyed the open air concerts too. When fall came and the concerts ceased, I’d reluctantly returned to the hospital. That year would be different. I was back for more mittens in less than a week.

Although I didn’t recognize them as such, they were “Winnie the Pooh” characters. Parents loved them. All I knew was that they were so cute and I had not seen them around. Eventually I branched out into children’s snake scarves.

After I made \$300 at the Thanksgiving Day Parade, in less than an hour, I was hooked for good. I had underestimated the sales and had to go home early; I had nothing left to sell.

Two things were in my favor: the weather had turned suddenly; the tourists, throngs of them, unprepared for the weather, were quite prepared to spend. No, not every day was like that, but in the right spot it could be almost as good, even without a parade. I got a vendor's license and consigned the nursing license back to 'China.'

Greenwich Village was just such a spot, people down there had a taste for the different, the unusual, or the hand crafted, and they had the money to pay for it. They would pay \$4.each, 2 for \$7.,or 3 for \$9 (which was more than I would have paid for children's mittens). After the joy of Thanksgiving, Christmas was very merry in the Village.

There was a community of vendors there and the artists, who came out primarily in the warmer months, set up on one side of the street, while the vendors had the other curb side. On the block between W. 3^d and W. 4th of 6th Avenue, where the basketball courts and subway still are, was where we set up. At that time vendors could set up and artists, protected by the First Amendment, needed no license. Sometimes on weekends, we were out there until the small hours of the morning. People hung out there coming home from a jazz club, or other musical venue. Artists sketched or did caricatures of tourists who were always eager to spend.

Men on their way home with dates often stopped to buy a little memento of the evening. By spring I'd shifted to jewelry, feather earrings to be exact.

I had seen a Black woman about my size perched up on the railing in the park, the summer before. I had seen her more than once, but had never spoken to her I'd also seen the bright feather earrings she sold from a small folding board.

She had watched as I hauled a load of beer up an incline, just as I passed she chirped, "Feathers are lighter!" in a crisp British accent. She had been right. Over the spring and into the summer I sold out there on 6th Avenue.

In time I came to claim my own spot. I was selling in that spot when I met the man who would eventually send me to Miami, Florida.

Maybe it was a year or so later when he first came by one night with his girlfriend. All night long couples came by; that was the nature of summer nights in the Village. This pair stopped, looked at the merchandise, didn't buy; but they were so nice I didn't mind. From her accent I made her out to be a Trini (from Trinidad). They asked about business, but the tone was genuine so I didn't take offense. There was no haughtiness so often seen in people who thought vendors were the folks who could do nothing better.

There was just something different about them. She was a shapely Black woman of average size and height, just slightly shorter than he was, with flawless medium complexion. I thought he was a Puerto Rican. Later on I found out he was exotic combination of Columbian Arab. Whatever, they made a nice couple. From time to time I would see them. Always together, holding hands or embracing, they stopped and chatted when they had time, other times they would just wave as they dashed to catch a movie or show.

One night he showed up alone. Quite naturally I asked about her. He shrugged and looked down at his feet.

“We’re not together anymore. Do you want to get something to eat?”

Just that quickly he had changed the subject. It had been a long busy night and I hadn’t eaten much since I’d opened. He even helped me pack and we were off. It turned he had sold food from one of those carts in the Wall Street area. He knew the business of selling on the street. Unlike so many other men I’d met, he saw no shame in it. He understood the freedom of fresh cash everyday cash which had not been “stepped on” before you got it. Fresh cash in the right quantities is cash you can do something with, if a person were so inclined. He was. His girlfriend was not. She was a medical student, who despite his financial help, the street had provided, could not see selling as an occupation with any future in it.

After working a year for a man who had a few carts, he wanted to get a cart of his own. . Then with that money, eventually he'd get a group of carts and have people work for him. On a good day he could make as much as a thousand depending on the location and the competition. (of course since the cart was not his, neither was the entire take, but even half was not a bad day's work) He had gotten into the business to help his girlfriend pay for Med school... they had met in college, and had been together four years. I only half listened to that.

When he spoke of his plans I perked up. He also wanted to get into street fairs and then state fairs where there's real money.

"People eat when they do nothing else. At the right show or State fair, for ten or twenty long fourteen hour days, of intense work, you might have the down payment on a house", he had pronounced with a confidence I found beyond sexy. He was physically and fiscally appealing. I couldn't want a man with neither money nor ambition. A man who enjoyed the street as much as I did, was gold. That's how our association began. I had known from the first time I'd seen him and his girlfriend, even when they stopped to talk to me at length, they were not "hangers". The nature of selling on the street is that it can be easy to attract people who are willing to hang out with you, clocking your sales, assessing you, hanging around or about in general, or God forbid

hang onto you when you'd much rather be rid of them. They come in either the male or female variety.

Either way they always ask the same stupid things: "Do you really make any money doing this?...You're so bright, well spoken, you've been to college, I can tell" (the smart ones don't bother to finish the question; the fools finish with "Why are you out here? Male Hangers will sometimes come around for days, leering and looking only to come up with "What 'else' do you sell?" It takes lots of time to think up that one. Haven't I had to tell more than a few, "I am (working) ON the street, but I am not OF the street!" The notion is that if you do not have a J-O-B you're a vagrant to be questioned as they see fit. Since I could NOT be fired, I gave as good as I got.

With him around, the male hangers usually assumed whatever 'else' I might have available, he was already consuming. For a time that was true. As the saying goes "we had a minute." For one thing he was a very attractive man. For another, it turned out he had a particular liking for Black women. He found us "especially attractive." While white women fawned over him he flirted, to make the sale, but found them "too bland" or as he put it "sin savor" When so many of my own did not want us, it was refreshing to find

favor in a lighter eye. His were light brown. I have to say his best feature was those eyes. He had the kind of eyelashes Sephora charges women thirty dollars to imitate.

Lashes women would die for and say were wasted on a man, even as they secretly hoped he might at least pass them on to some daughter of theirs.

You can't really appreciate a man's eyes until they're gazing at you.

Then, you know how it sometimes goes... You're hot for them, they're hot for you; then they're not, but you still are. They throw a chill, start acting funny, make sounds of "time" and "space" as in I want some... Sometimes the really articulate ones will say "This is all moving too fast." In his case there were unresolved feelings for his girlfriend. Sometimes patience pays when time and space are concerned. Sometimes if you give them enough of the first, they no longer want the other. I was willing to chance it for several reasons. He was an easy person to work with. There was no learning curve. We had started doing shows together. He had the van which meant we could carry more merchandise. We both made more money together than we would have separately. There's just that energy that two people can generate, that lifts the sales. Not to mention having a good looking man selling jewelry, draws the women. What a boon! He had an innate charm: he knew the perfect

balance between the flirt and the affront; he knew with whom to risk the risqué. ...And of course though I was playing it cool, I was not. I still craved him and the idea of us.

Since he had left the food cart, he worked at his own messenger business, during the week. With the van we did street fairs or block parties on weekends for as little as \$50.aspace. Sometimes we did two block parties each day when we split up. Usually we did not split up for street fairs; there was just too much business for one person to handle the booth alone. When we did split up, depending upon the event we could each make a few hundred a day, from each fair. It was sweet! I had begun doing shows before I met him: I was happy to book and schedule the shows, and set up extra displays, in exchange for the transportation. He was glad not to have the headache. We sold each other's merchandise and made more money that way for each of us.

I guess what I liked so much about him, besides the obvious, was his ambition; he did not shy away from physical work. He was supportive of my lifestyle. Unlike others I'd met, he understood what it felt like to work for yourself. Even if you never make it to the multi- million dollar stage there's a pride in making it happen for yourself. When I suggested that we go to New

Orleans to sell feather masks at Mardi Gras, he couldn't leave his business. I understood that since he'd just started, his clients might find other messengers if he were suddenly unavailable.

Yet instead of "You want to go where and do what? Why?" and all the usual 'don't do it' statements, he had my back. He considered the idea and said, "Only a hundred masks, even at \$10 each, what if you sell out? Maybe you should take more. Whatever you don't sell you can wholesale, or bring back. I know some people who can help you make the stock." He went so far as to find a company in China town to help with production. It turned out they were not craftspeople, merely assemblers. I ended up going with the two hundred plus masks I had made and selling most. That, however, is not the point. I had never had such support from a man; it made such a difference.

I taught him about doing trade shows, to get a better class of merchandise and about going to the warehouses to get the best price on closeouts. Sometimes when a buyer is willing to cash and carry the goods, the seller will give an additional discount, there's also a savings in shipping. (I had gotten into the warehouse thing when I needed discontinued styles of children's hats and scarves).When we set up at a fair, there wasn't likely to be anyone else with the item. We needed business credentials to get into

some of the trade shows. It was the Graphic Arts skill which provided the business cards, et al.

Could I say we'd never have gotten in otherwise, I'm not sure, but it was certainly a help to know how to design business cards and stationary, long before computers were in every home and the skill devalued by ease.

Maybe it was a year or so later, when we had done most of the street fair, had even gone up state, spent two weeks doing the Orange County fair with two other vendors, made so much money with the knock-off Rubick's cubes the first weekend, that he had to go back to the city to reinvest before we could open on Monday, cooked chicken and steaks on an open grill behind the booth every night after we closed, slept in the van and showered on the campgrounds, one of us had the bright idea a Feast would be the way to cap the first part of summer. Since business at the fairs fell off during the heat of August and the city was drained of customers when the heat became intense, a feast might permit us to chill out until the fall and hit Christmas refreshed and renewed .A Feast, you know one of those ten or twelve day affairs with lots of Italian sausage trucks, every kind of Italian food and others as well, can be found at a feast, hence the name. This was no \$50. Buy in, but by then we had a few dollars to spend, just to spread the cost, we

picked up a third partner. A quiet , serious, slightly older, business minded Jamaican vendor we knew because he had a shop not far from where I lived. He was an easy choice because he had enough money for the split and another van. We found a Pakistani wholesaler for the tee shirts we were going to sell. He had a line of New York shirts, with a spread of pastel colors and black, size spread, cute sayings with novel graphic designs, suitable for quick tourist sales. That's how you make money at a Feast. You have to have a cheap item you can turn quickly to offset the thousands you paid just to set up. That's why the hours are so long, but the money is there if you work it right. It is not for nine to five mentalities. The Feast, which opened at 4pm during the week, closed at 11pm. On weekends Friday to Sunday we opened at 10 am and closed at 1am. With a complete breakdown every night and a complete set up the following day. That was another reason for picking another partner. It meant that if one of us was away from the booth, there were still two people to handle the customers, restock and watch for thieves.

The day before we opened, the men built the booth, while I made the signs and got the shirts folded. They had to be folded in such a way as to show the

design, but not take up too much space, then grouped by size and color, so that as a customer asked for a size or color, it could be quickly located.

One morning, maybe the second or third day after the Feast began, we were folding t-shirts and taking inventory from the previous night's sales. I noticed a thin Black woman on the periphery of the booth. I paid no particular attention, since she did not look as though she were a thief looking for an opportunity, but she just hung around watching us work.

Some Black women are rail thin but with the curves any woman should have. The lack of extra fat on them, along with those curves can produce a stunning figure. I'm not one to clock other women other than to check out the competition, but as a member of a sex, which is expected to look good, seeing and assessing is just part of the game. This one, however, was thin but the lack of curves, coupled with her short stature, and vaguely forlorn aspect, created a waif like persona. Instead of a thin, fit look, this one had a dry hardness to her. Sad, I thought since she was quite young, early twenties, from what I could see. She knew another vendor we knew; she wasn't really a person we knew.

The display consisted of a large low wooden platform, with a high backdrop upon which open t-shirts could be displayed. The lower portion, the platform itself was for the folded shirts.

This was where the stock would be spread out and grouped according to size and color. She perched on the corner. Smiling at us, she giggled little before she spoke.

“Do you mind?”

“We’ll be putting out the shirts soon.” That should have been a hint Instead she countered with her own reasoning.

“I’ll get up as soon as you need the space.”

There it was again the little giggle, when nothing funny had been said. “You work so hard,” she said as he got up to get the next batch of shirts.

“He’s so strong and masculine.” She looked at me. I smiled and nodded in agreement. She had lit on him. Women often did. Just what had he done to elicit such a spontaneous compliment? Merely picked up half of the gross of shirts I was holding. He blushed but continued to work. She kept up the banter.

“I got up very early this morning,” she began taking a new tact, “my landlord is looking for me. I owe him three months and now the asshole is threatening to take me to court. I lost my job a couple months ago.”

He’s looking for her, but instead of looking for a job she’s out here looking at us. ...but he’s the asshole. There it was again, that foolish little giggle. There was nothing for me to say, when the focus is that fucked.

He was seated on a crate with two gross shirts to be folded before him when I heard him say “That’s rough.”

The following day, she was back somewhat later in the day. Interspaced with her complaints to him, and that annoying little giggle, was more of the saga. How she had pretended not to be home that morning. Then she dashed out while he was in the basement. On and on, she went as if we should care.

She seemed to need to talk, whether we were engaged or not. There was an awkward sadness behind the giggle. She was definitely a “hanger.”

Our partner was already out of patience with her.

“Don’t make she hang about. She bad for business.” Was all he would say and shook his head in mild disgust. We did not need to encourage her. She probably had little or no money and certainly could not afford to stay home. Though I agreed with the partner, shamefully I actually found her pathetic in an amusing way.

A day or so later, late into the evening she reappeared. I think it was a Friday, we were busy then customers as fast as we could handle them. She stood on the side of the booth, but it was clear we had no time to chat. During the weekdays it was one thing to entertain “hangers” but this was Friday night in Greenwich Village. The Village was teeming with people, tourists galore, date night of a payday weekend. We had to focus on our customers. She stayed but took every opportunity to tell us something...anything. There wasn’t any reason to be rude, but she ought to have seen we were busy. In a store, there would have been security or a manager, but on the street, it was up to us. Though she did not enhance business, she was harmless even if annoying. Somewhere in the course of the evening she took the hint and took a hike.

I rather hoped it would be the last of her. The weekend would be even busier; the selling would begin as soon as we opened. We were selling shirts at two for five, at that price profit depended on volume.

Saturday morning there she was. It had been 4am by the time we had sold to the last of the lingering customers, broken down all stock, packed the stock into the partners van (so the other van was free to make the 7am pickup of fresh stock) before we got out of there the night before. We were tired, dog tired but back there to set up for business. That's what it is to work for yourself. There's no boss to make you stay late or come in early or do anything, but you know what must be done, and you do it.

The Feast would be opening in hours and we were hustling to take inventory, get set up and there she was telling us that her landlord had met her in the hall the day before. We had been too busy making money (so we would not fall to her state) to care about her so she left and spent the night in the subway... (I noticed that despite her claim, she had changed her clothes. I was too busy to challenge her claims which meant nothing anyway, still I noticed.) She didn't want another run-in with 'that asshole'. Then more of the guilt, how people just don't care about other people...Last night she really needed someone to talk to... He (that asshole) was really going to

throw her out, she had nowhere else to go. All the while I could see she was working herself up. The voice was becoming more and more strained. Yeah, Yeah, how much of this was really true?

All the actresses in New York are not performing on Broadway. Some do their finest work for an audience of one. I was thinking until I heard him say "Sounds like you still have time before anything serious happens, but if and when he does throw you out, my roommate moved out we have an extra room, you can stay at my place, 'til you get straight."

I could tell by his expression and tone he was only half serious.

It was a throw away statement like "Yeah, we'll do lunch sometime, or I'll call you", merely meant to pacify. Immediately she pounced on it. In just that instant she brightened.

There was a profusion of praise, how she knew he had a good spirit, had the heart to save her, how she was so blessed to have met a man like him, on and on with him swelling like a puffer fish all the while. I knew he was wondering about this, but in the face of such effusive praise, how could he retract or even modify the invitation I can't say for sure how much he wanted to, there was just that "What have I done?" look on his face. That was Saturday.

Monday afternoon the third partner and I were at the booth to set up. He took the shirts left over from the weekend out of his van. We were six days into a twelve day Feast. We kept the stock there because he had a garage and a loaded van would be safe there. That left the other van empty for my friend to pick up stock on his way in every morning. Having two vans to store and transport worked well. During the week it was slow until evening when people got off from work. Although the Feast did not open until four, the partner and I had arrived around two to re prep old stock, fold incoming stock and combine it all for the setup. After the weekend, we were low on stock, but we put out what we had, while we waited for the other van to arrive with the new styles.

Working on the street gives ample opportunity to observe people. In the Village there are lots of couples in varying stages of their relationship, I had seen the quiet settled appearance of a secure relationship and the flirty giddy glow of the “night before” when things were still tentative and exciting. There’s that playful banter, sometimes a mock fight, any reason to touch that other person. Something about the look in the eyes or on the face of new couples makes their status unmistakable.

It was almost 6pm when the familiar orange van, I'd ridden in countless times, with the one dark green mismatched door, on the driver's side, rolled up. In the passenger seat, she now sat. That unmistakable look was on her face.

I wish I could say I handled the thing with style and grace of a mature polished woman, but since I was not yet, I did not. From the time they stepped out of the van, in the sweltering heat of late July, the look I gave them would have sunk the Titanic. He caught the chill immediately. She prattled on about what a lovely day they had had at the beach. I recalled the last time we had gone, and how we had spent the balance of the evening. The third partner berated him for his tardiness, which he reasoned had resulted in lost sales, while I merely continued to glare.

Since I had said nothing, he had nothing to respond to or refute. If he had forgotten the shirts, the partner would have killed him and I would have danced. It would almost have been worth the loss of cash to see him in some kind of pain. I know Rasta would have beaten him and easily could have. He was livid to hear he'd left the shirts in the van while he and she had

been sunning themselves. Luckily the stock was there, safe and sound; no blood was shed.

The rest of the Feast I watched as she breast fed his ego with what little she had of either. How wonderful he was how sexy... How lucky she was... Good training and West Indian pride prevented me from doing anything which would have shamed me or scarred her. But oh the temptation was there. Had I yielded I would have been beyond wrong. As it was I couldn't justify my feelings of rage. We were no longer lovers; as far as the story went he was still dallying with the girlfriend. I ought to have been used to being out.

The week stretched forth like a stroll across the Mohave. Suddenly that creature was in and I was firmly out. The worst part was that I could make none of the claims wronged women usually made. I couldn't say he had cheated on me.

What we had, had been long ago. I couldn't say she "stole my man." He hadn't been 'mine'; besides men are never really stolen. We had both been free to see other people and had. Still I had all the same feelings as if that salient point were not true. I compared her to the med student then to

myself. How could he have chosen her after either of us? What had he seen in her I questioned myself since I couldn't question him. She had neither brains, (beyond bagging him) breasts, nor butt.

Oh I knew looks were only part of it. Still I railed against what I saw as the 'injustice' of it all. I rolled the whole thing over and over in my mind. Where had she the key to turn the lock which had barred me? How had those "unresolved feelings" dissolved in the presence of such a thing.

A West Indian invective; I'd ceased to use the female pronoun when referring to her. All the while my mother had been teaching me to be strong, and independent, her mother had been teaching her to do what my mother called "flat Work". We had often spoken about such women with disdain. That was the worst part. I found that I had become reduced to the meanest, most competitive aspect of my sex.

Even now as I write this, more than twenty years later, I can still feel the fangs which had spewed such venomous statements, itching in my head. I couldn't muster the charity to say "maybe she has to live too."

I see why writers who can so easily make heroines out of unloved women often do so by outing such lines as "I hope you'll be very happy together."

into their moths, often do so. But, I couldn't get there. Instead I hated everything she represented.

I saw something like that who could "lick for lodging" as the reason why some men, despite a table full of merchandise would still feel certain I had something 'else' to offer. I needed to know how all that I'd been taught to do had failed so miserably.

If he had gone back to the med student girlfriend, I'd have been disappointed for myself, a little wistful but I would have understood. A doctor (even one in training) trumps a nurse any day.

He hadn't met me prancing around in a white frock, but he knew anytime the sales on the street went south, I'd just go to North General. Either way my rent got paid. Even without the aspect of professions, he and the girlfriend had history; she had put in her time. They had almost had a child together. He had left the food carts, and was running his messenger business.

Perhaps that had been on her account. If they had gotten back together, I wouldn't have felt so bad. How had something with what I had judged as nothing to offer, come along and sucked up so much?

It would take me time and distance to see that, what I saw as nothing to offer was exactly what she had to offer.

She had brought her raw naked neediness to the table. She reached him by a route I would never have taken. Neither I nor the girlfriend could ever have needed him the way this one could.

Despite the fact that he had been helping the girlfriend with med school, she found fault with his methods, independence or Ingratitude? I don't know. I could want him, and I, did. Maybe a different sort of woman would not have gone to New Orleans without him, but I don't regret going.

To display such neediness as she had, or even worse to pretend such neediness, would have debased me, maybe it had her too. The difference was I would not have allowed my situation to become so dire. I may never really know what it costs to need so much. There's no one to blame. He merely did what we all do; he sought a comfort level. Maybe she made him feel safe in a way that a more independent woman, or even one whose independence was not obvious, never could. It had to hurt him when he and the girlfriend did not reconcile. For whatever reasons, though he had been attracted to me and we made a good partnership, for him that was not enough. He knew what he needed. Can you hate someone for that? Who

knows what being with the med student felt like for him. Maybe the choice to be with her or not, had not been his.

Better to choose someone who won't leave you even better if they can't.

Such things I would never really know: I couldn't even ponder them at the time

All I had was my hurt, my pain, unreasonable unsubstantiated pain. Even then I knew I couldn't truthfully say I was so in love with him. I just couldn't fathom choosing her!

By the close of the Feast I knew I'd still be upset for days, maybe 365 of them. I could tough it out; after all this was my city. So what if they were together. I could deal. A month later, when it seemed as though someone had shrunken the city, everywhere I went I seemed to see them. Worse sometimes I'd see the van and just know they were somewhere about. It was natural; he was taking her to all the places that he and I had gone. My favorite haunts would become hers. I began to think I had other ways to be strong. What was it going to be like to see them at every fair? If I hadn't detested her so, I might have continued the working relationship, been civil, even nice, but feeling as I did; it was out of the question. The summer was only mid- way.

The thought of having to see them at fairs we had done, would be unbearable. I heard from other vendors about some West Indian Carnival in Baltimore.

West Indians that's a mentality I could embrace. I understood the mentality. No, I didn't know Baltimore, any more than it was hour before D.C., but I was going just the same. The only thing to do was get there a day early and orient myself.

It turned out that there were festivals almost every week in Baltimore. When that failed, there were some in Conn. or Mass.

In between there was Rhode Island, home of jewelry manufacturers, warehouses full of closeouts on the way to Mass. and the latest festival. Up there they had three day festivals and the blessed relief from seeing them around every corner. I went to them all, as many as I could get to. The money was even better than I had expected.

At the close of summer, there were fall festivals to do. As it got colder in New England the festivals were winding down. Maybe I could make it

through Christmas in peace. I knew they would not be standing in the cold to make a dollar.

Even if he came out on the street, I was sure that waif would not be joining him. Working in the cold is actual work, not like hanging out in the summer. Christmas cash can be too sweet for real troopers to bypass.

When Christmas was over, the last money to be made in New York at least for a couple months safely in my pocket, bill paid up to March I looked around for something else. I heard as usual from other vendors, about something called the "Art Deco Weekend" on Miami Beach. Fun, sun, and MONEY TOO, didn't I deserve something nice? Who could ask for anything more? It was scheduled for the second week in January. Once I called them, sent in the fee, called Amtrak, I had just enough time to get together a line for the show.

I knew vendors (the same ones who had been upstate with nus at the Orange County fair) who had porcelain dolls, and someone else who had Art Deco picture frames. I bought a close-out of jewelry, and I was off. When hopes of love go awry, some nurses hit the narcotics; (remember the patient I had who did) this nurse hit the road. After a summer and the fall on the road, it was easy to go to a new place where I knew no one and make my way alone.

I must say it was so empowering knowing I could and did. My new adventure would be the first step in “moving” to Miami Beach.

For half the year for the next nine years I floated back and forth, the snow bird with jewelry. Just to think if that woman had been able to keep one apartment, I would never have had two. So began the odyssey of the vibrant vagrant.

Chapter

2

“It isn’t just a matter of strength, at least not the physical type. For a strong woman the ‘upper body strength’ must largely be above her shoulders.”

MIAMI: THE FIRST TIME EVER I SAW THIS PLACE

There are some for whom the terms alone and lonely are interchangeable.

For those souls the condition of the former immediately imposes the loathsome burden of the latter. It had been harder giving up the dream of sharing my lifestyle with the Columbian Arab than it had been to give up the reality. Now frankly being alone was bordering on feeling lonely. I was not used to feeling lonely; I was used to being alone. For those who were not, the constant need for others makes them shun the freedom that periods of being alone can offer. Living alone, traveling alone, just being alone, can present a myriad of options. Of course I would be the first to say that prolonged accidental aloneness can border on loneliness. It just depends upon the person. It is as though without active vigilance loneliness will creep into the pleasure of being alone and simply silently steal space until it has completely usurped a life. The vigilance comes in keeping up social obligations, reaching out making and keeping connections. Without husband or children, the handy excuse for not doing so, does not exist.

Loneliness is what we get when we become too good at being alone.

Somewhere like a moon eclipsing the sun, loneliness plunges us into darkness. We isolate; then we are isolated.

Life and its vagaries have rendered me extremely good (but hopefully not too good) at being alone. Except for periods of temporary company, I have always lived alone. I never moved in; I kept my space. He wouldn't get the chance to toss me out, when he was done with me. Either in New York or Miami or both, the space was always mine. The end of the loving didn't have to mean the end of the lodging. Besides, didn't I do enough wandering around traveling and selling up and down the east coast? Didn't I require some form of stability? A space, any space indoor or out, anchors a person like me, in ways I hadn't always known.

Being alone can often mean traveling alone, especially my current reason for traveling. Even with someone in my life the logistics of having some travel with me are difficult. He's not part of the business, this is not his lifestyle. For him it would be a vacation. I am careful not to seek help for things I am used to doing by myself. This can cause some people to append themselves on to the business, and expect pay. If I hire someone, it is with the knowledge that I can afford to do so. A price is agreed upon; there is no ambiguity.

It is the wont of people (friends and lovers) not involved with the business to count (my) money before it has been made, that is before the costs have been accounted for. If he can't afford the time off from his job, I wouldn't ask him to come. The location of the show may not be of interest to him. If he can't afford the cost... that's another issue, better to leave such people home. The point of the trip is to make money, not eat it up in the same town where you made it. Besides if I'm with someone with whom I'm spending time I want to enjoy him. That's what vacations are for. In which case, he can join me later. Any number of reasons can account for a solitary journey. Anyway traveling alone can offer the freedom to see so much more, without the natural distractions of family, friends or even a lover.

There are times when just being able to absorb my surroundings without having to put out the energy interaction requires, can be restful liberating and refreshing all at once. It is one of the reasons why I enjoy train travel so much. The destination is where the work begins, until then I can relish the process of getting there. That is particularly true of very long trips to new places like the ones to New Orleans, though by the time I took the train I'd already been there once by underground bus The Grey Rabbit (a low cost, hippie sleeping bag, version of Greyhound).

Hounds chase rabbits, you get the pun, but I digress. The first really long train trip to a new place was to the Miami Beach Art Deco Weekend. It was heady, just putting everything together. Pulling out summer clothes for a trip in the dead of winter, while everyone else I knew was wondering if snow boots would go on sale before the next snowfall. I checked travel books, asked other seasoned vendors and joyfully stuffed two bathing suits into the bag, even though I can't swim and therefore don't usually go to the beach. With all the other things I had to take to do the show, I couldn't take too much for myself. Besides it was only supposed to be a weekend. Even then I knew that if I liked the place I just might extend the stay. What was there to stop me?

I knew from the countless trips to Baltimore that some baggage handlers are precise about the weight, contents, size and number of pieces. In the halcyon pre 911 days, anything, well just about anything could be gotten anywhere if you knew how to do it. It came down to knowing the opponent, but never approaching him as such. In this case, the baggage handler, someone probably overworked, underpaid, for whom this was just a job. Who could actually call this a life's vocation? Not to stereotype, but when something is true, it is true. Indian employees go by the letter.

Yes there may be exceptions but by and large, they will count, weigh, and measure each piece. People like me have to be careful of them, or risk paying for extra baggage or having goods sent as freight. This could result in having your goods arrive after the show. I always have enough for a small set-up with me just in case.

At the same time, other types, without mentioning ethnicities, are less stringent. It also helps to get there at the close of a shift. Less people around, either passengers or supervisors, who might observe infractions. I always leave home with a load in the evening in full view of anyone who might be observing my activities, only to return in an hour or two. That way they have no idea I would be away for any length of time.

Once I got to the Amtrak baggage, I worked it. As usual, I wore a dress, nothing salacious but a dress or a skirt with a nice top. The point was not to look sexy but female, not especially feminine; no lace or frills; that would be gilding the lily. It was the same type of attire I would have worn to sell beer in the park. It made the beer drinking men come over yet did not seem like beer selling attire to the police. Smiles, laughter, and conversation, but no overt flirting, are all a part of it.

When I lifted and 'rolled' the box with what seemed like an effortless ease, was the baggage handler supposed to know that the box and I were old friends, that I could visualize its contents, that I knew exactly where the center of gravity was? Was he supposed to know that in another life, a seemingly frail blond woman, Miss Haggarty, (older than he is now) in a nursing school had taught a class called "Body Mechanics," which was designed to teach nurses how to move large inert objects without injury. Objects like a paralyzed patient, or a comatose one or even the occasional dead one. Was he supposed to know that hauling beer had developed the muscles he didn't see? No, but I did. Actually it didn't matter what he knew it only mattered what he thought or could be led to think. What he would likely think was if that woman dress and all could lift that box how heavy could it be? Did he really need to haul it over to the scale (and back) at the end of the shift, to find out, probably not. According to the printing on the box it is a folding bike, permitted as luggage, not the tables or racks, easels and boards, which are not. The difference between five or ten pounds overweight is not immediately noticeable especially for a strong man, so if he has no reason to weigh the box he will probably not take note even when he eventually picks it up to put with the rest of the checked luggage.

With enough conversation he just might forget to punch the number of pieces I checked that nigh in the second week of January that year. So began the Miami adventure. Can I say that this is a flawless technique? No, but then what is. It has worked enough times to be worth the trouble. No it did not work with more than one Indian.

I have waited for some baggage handlers to go on break too, because I knew from previous experience they would weigh the box. Nor would it have likely worked if I had a man with me. Instead he (as the man in the presence of another) would be expected to handle or at least help or risk the silent glance of. "Man why don't you help your woman? What kind of man are you?" Especially if they were two culture men (Black or Hispanic) to save his pride I would have to let him and risk the overweight charge if the handler weighed the box. At the same time, my friend, unfamiliar with the size or weight distribution, might fumble the ungainly package and make the box seem even heavier. Maybe that box IS overweight. His assistance could have the same effect. So much depends upon perception. The perception that strength is not required, is what's desired. For just these reasons, I let the man I'm with handle what will not invite unwanted inspection.

It isn't a matter of just strength, at least not the physical type. For a strong woman the 'upper body strength' must largely be above her shoulders. You have to be able to back up your actions, you can't pretend to have what everyone can see you lack. It's all a game. Play and win. ...or lose.

For me the game has not been about feeling more intelligent than others, but rather a fight not to be less intelligent than they are. I always feel the need to use my intellect to the fullest and survive. It has never been about pretending that things don't bother me or that I don't feel trepidation, but in challenging myself to go ahead and do it anyway. Go somewhere new face being alone there and come through. I guess it's an unwillingness to let being alone, hamper me and make me lonely.

I think about the two words and remember coming into Miami for the first time was all at once exciting and strange I was not frightened but once again I was far from home and very likely there would be no one I knew for the entire trip. I always feel a little wistful at those times.

Standing on the open air platform unsure of my surroundings, watching those who were coming home being greeted by loved ones, the ones who had traveled with others, organizing themselves, I took a deep breath and resolved as I always did at such times to make it through.

“Well girl you’re here. You made it this far.” I had been told there was a bus which went to Miami Beach from the Train station. Although I had some boxes with me, they were on a luggage cart and while bulky they were not heavy. The checked box would be held until I picked it up later.

Riding on that ‘L’ bus for the first time, a slightly more rounded version of our buses, I took in the cleanness, the humidity and the charm of the sun streaked streets. I loved the way the back doors swung open wide with just a touch of the pole beside them. They stayed open long enough for an elderly person or a person like me with luggage to get off without having to hold the door too. It was after six and it looked almost like it might have at noon in New York. I remembered the cold dreary edge of the day, twenty –seven hours earlier, when I’d departed. What a difference. It was Wednesday. We opened on Friday. I’d have a day to get myself together to do the show. I’d pick up the other box tomorrow. I kept my mind busy. Maybe it forestalled the empty time to come.

I would eat alone in some restaurant while around me there were people who knew each other. At least I was staying at a hostel. The Clay Hotel was on Washington Ave and Espanola Way. There would be people there to talk to and a roommate or maybe I'd get the room to myself for just one night...

The 'L' bus finally deposited me Lincoln Road and Washington Ave. The driver said Espanola Way wasn't far. The Clay turned out to be like the rest of Miami Beach back then, living on the threads of past glory. Still there was a charm to the place. A seediness which did not pretend to be otherwise, it did not intimidate either with airs or impending danger. Instead like its neighbors it accepted the status which had befallen it with a quiet energy of a place not yet dead. The people on the other hand were quite lively. Before the evening was out I would hear about but not meet the liveliest one Benoit, the Canadian. My roommate (whose name is gone from my memory) was quite charmed by him. Maybe it was the French accent. Then there was Ricky who according to her was adorable but, too skinny. He was Benoit's pal. I hadn't a chance to meet either of them. I wanted to explore. After a quick shower, I went wandering to find the beach. It had been described as "just blocks away."

I passed the soft muted pastel hotels with their “for rent” signs out front. I marveled at the Art Deco style of the buildings and wondered why had the place slipped so from prominence it once had. I noticed the narrowness of the street alongside the beach. The other side where the sister hotels Carlyle and Cardozo sat on either sides of a small street leading to Ocean Drive. Peaceful, that was the word I could use for it. There were just enough people to make the place human, but even in the January warmth, there were not so many as to create a throng.

Walking down Ocean Drive with the beach and its ground up coral and shells for sand, on one side and Art Deco hotels across the street one after another, on the other, I wandered aimlessly. I turned around. There was sadness Seeing once great hotels another of the Sister hotels, The Leslie boarded up. It seemed that the renovations had gone on a bit too long. The layers of peeling paint revealed a long life. There was the same sadness to be seen over and over. Beyond the faded sun bleached paint, the clean precise lines of Art Deco were there to be celebrated. I wandered north again toward the Lincoln Road stop where the bus had left me hours before. There was a Denny’s on the corner of Ocean Drive. I knew Denny’s from other road trips. It reminded me of VIPS in Mexico, steady if not creative food.

Friday came as soon as it should have I was ready to get to work. I left the hotel and walked to the show along the beach. The day before the booths had been put up and there was an aura of festivity around everyone. There were cars unloading and the vendors for the show were busy with anticipation of the weekend's business. I was charged. I had gone into new towns before and I always had the same feeling a latent yearning for something or someone familiar among the unfamiliar. I couldn't call it a sadness or a real hunger just a wistfulness. I can't exactly explain it. And even when there is no such thing or person, I do fine. I just do better with that thing or person. I walked amid the vendors looking for the space that had been assigned to me. My booth would have a table in it already. As soon as I got there I could store my load under the table, throw a cloth over the whole thing and get a cup of coffee. The night before I had discovered Cuban café con leche quite different from what I'd had in Mexico. I looked up to see Claudette with her daughter Janene. Two booths down from them was Mildred, whom I'd last seen in New Bedford Mass., next to her was Shobia and her mother SUZANNE. New York had come to Miami!

Chapter

3

“There are the misperceptions we have about others, the ones we foster about ourselves for others to believe, and the ones we passively allow to persist.”

MISPERCEPTION: THE GAME

There are some for whom the terms alone and lonely are interchangeable. For those souls the condition of the former immediately imposes the loathsome burden of the latter. Of course prolonged accidental aloneness can border on loneliness. Living alone, traveling alone, just being alone can present a myriad of options. It just depends upon the person...

The phone rang Saturday when I had not been out on the street to work for almost a year. It was Gerri a fellow vendor I'd known for over twenty years. She called to talk about Suzanne, another vendor we'd known almost as long, and I found myself thinking about our common lifestyle: who is lonely and who is merely alone. I thought about the freedom of living alone the road trips taken alone, the happy times and memories on the road. And the crazy things, like the time Suzanne and I were in Atlanta...

As I recall, the setup was Thursday, for a Friday opening. I got into town Thursday afternoon, after my layover in Charlotte North Carolina, where my arts and crafts festival had closed the previous weekend. She had gotten into Atlanta's Piedmont Arts Festival, held in the park by the same name. I was working the fringe, a parking lot just adjacent to the park.

In the parking lot we set up and broke down every night, but we could sell whatever. In the park they paid more for the space and were strictly limited to handmade products; they could, therefore, charge more, but they didn't have to break down every night. In those days we would often take our last money to get to a show. We could open without enough to afford breakfast and know that by the close of the day we could afford a great dinner because we knew that once we opened we would get paid. We left town with a book of stamps, envelopes and bills. We paid bills from the road; it kept our situations intact. It kept us from holding (too much cash) as we traveled around the country. If there were two or more strong shows, we paid bills which were not yet due or paid more than was due. Sometimes we paid off an entire credit card. Other times we celebrated the "landlord's birthday" a few weeks early. This offset the times when things reversed and we would otherwise have had to celebrate belatedly. Besides, no landlord would mind two gifts in one month.

Flush from my own show, Atlanta was just an overnight train ride down the road. I was holding, and holding very well; I could easily have afforded my own room at the Red Roof Inn, but my conversation with Suzanne created another option.

"I have two beds in my room, if you'd like" Suzanne began.

"Isn't Shobia with you?"

"No, she's with her father." Then a little wishfully, Suzanne added,

"She wants to do something else with her friends this week."

The little girl who at five had pretended her mother's covered table was a tent, under which she could play, sleep, and peer out at customer's feet, was growing up. I accepted the offer. If she was light on cash herself, I didn't bother to ponder. When we traveled alone as much as we did, sometimes the company was reason enough.

She went back to the hotel where she could organize her stock. I went back to the train station to get my baggage. By the time I got to the hotel, she had her work laid out and her tumbler in motion. Suzanne had the baby version to the big red tumbler I still have. Some tumblers vibrate; others rotate.

Ours rotated, and depending upon the medium used, they can polish gemstones, brass, silver, or even gold. In effect they worked like a miniature washing machine, with a similar sound. The constant rotation also helped to smooth the metal edges and diminished the amount of filing required.

Tumbling gave the metal a cleaner shine but not as bright as the buffing wheel. There was also the dust and residue left by buffing, which would not be suitable in a hotel room. In addition, the buffing wheel though it gave a higher shine, also required a pass through an ultrasonic machine to clean the residue of the buffing compound from the metal pieces.

The one drawback of the tumbler was the time it required to polish, days for some stones and at least several hours for metal, depending on the original condition of the stock. My stock was up from the previous show. At Charlotte's "Festival in the Park" the contract required that artists be willing and able to demonstrate the craft. This insured that the products had been made by the seller, or at least could have been. Some customers liked to see the work produced; it boosted sales. For this reason, my stock was up. I had had the machines with me. At my festival, I had been in a tent with outlets and I had buffed and tumbled extra to get me through Atlanta. I knew I was coming to a parking lot and would have light but no outlets for my machines. At her booth in the Park Suzanne had ample light but no outlet to plug anything in; prep had to be done in the hotel.

Friday morning Suzanne pulled out the overnight load, which still had to be finished, rinsed and dried them, put in another load and we left the hotel. She opened to better sales than she'd expected. It meant a nice dinner; it also meant even more stock would have to be made before the next day. A strong Friday is usually an indication of what the rest of the weekend will bring. At a ten day show, like this one, we pace the prep so we don't stock out. We will not always see the same customers more than once, there are so many other artists to see, so if we lose a sale for lack of stock, we may not get a second shot. It also looks bad not to be prepared. When the boards are light, it makes the rest of the stock look picked over, which does not encourage sales. With all this in mind, we stopped to get a dinner after the close of the show. We took our time and enjoyed the meal. We did not bother to drink, but we did eat and even took time to eat dessert...

The minute we put the key in the hotel door, we knew something was wrong. Silence... The familiar sound of the washing machine was not there. Some busy body maid had turned off the tumbler. She thought we had forgotten. I thought Suzanne was going to kill someone, but of course that maid was long off duty; the damage had been already done. Tonight the repair would have to be done to save the next day's business.

The stock, which ought to have been gleaming by now, was instead, a dull, soggy mess. We put in a fresh load of pieces she'd hammered during the day.

In her baby tumbler she could only do sixty or seventy pieces (depending on the size) or half as many pairs of earrings. My tumbler would have done three times as much, but it was packed and shipped. I had no expectation of needing it. That meant polishing the load we'd taken out by hand.

The ultrasonic might have helped, but I had no more solution for the machine. We were up for hours, I polished; she filed and finished adding the stones...

"God, what a nightmare!" I laugh into the phone.

"Well that's the road for you." Gerri laughs along with me...

Suzanne had been the face more than any of the others, which had been that touch of the familiar in places that were not. In places like, Ann Arbor, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, the Carolinas, Detroit, Newburyport, Savannah, Washington D.C and who knows how many places I can't recall, even nearby places like Atlantic City, it was just nice to see a familiar face. I couldn't really say we were the best of friends. I had never been to her house, nor had she visited mine.

She was that face, round gleaming black with velvet complexion, which I was always brightened to see. Because she traveled more than most of the other vendors, it was most often her face I saw.

Lately in the preceding year, we had become estranged. Where I had seen her most recently, had not brightened me. Construction near her market space in Soho, forced her to move. She settled on my block. Just what I needed: another jewelry vendor, whose line rivaled mine. You wonder where was "my" block and perhaps how did I come to "own" it. To which I say it does not matter. Neither question matters. The first matters even less than the second. However, since this is not about real estate, but rather imagined estate, the answer to both is, that the same perceived feeling of ownership would have existed on any block down there be it Prince, Spring, Broome, or Greene Street.

Things would have been the same, if not worse on West Broadway or Broadway. This perception of ownership comes not from a deed, lease, or even rent receipt but the repeated return to the same place over time. Together the vendors on a given block form a community, of which you're either a part, or you're not.

You earn that over time with consistency and respect for the space. Floaters, people who did not understand the way of this working lifestyle, who failed to see that trouble (like setting up in the wrong place) meant we might not work at all, were not welcomed.

For years (four or five) I had been on that block with just one other vendor selling jewelry at our end. Gerri had the high end customers, she also had gold filled with a higher quality of semiprecious stones. That left the rest of the market for me.

For years I had lived off the crumbs (low to intermediate customers, folks who wouldn't pay her prices) which fell from Gerri's table. I didn't mind that she made more than I did, since she put so much more into her stock than I could. My jobs (ESL two evenings a week for the Board of Ed and English instructor at some inner city two year college in Jersey) ate up too much time, just as I had known they would.

So I made what I had time to make and bought the rest. Gerri and I co-existed and kept out of each other's way. Suzanne's presence tipped the balance on the block.

Since she also had sterling silver wire sculpture earrings and Gold filled earrings, her silver sales cut into mine and her gold filled sales cut into Gerri's business, or so we reasoned.

Business had dropped from what it had been a decade earlier; in a sagging economy, luxuries like feather accessories and wild silver jewelry, are the first to go. Thus, I felt the drop sooner than others, so despite my own aversion, I had yielded to taking jobs. Gerri, God bless her, had not. Instead she had used the same fine artist's eye she'd had twenty five years earlier, when she was a caricature artist, to produce a line of beautiful handcrafted jewelry.

Even when business began to fall off, and the crumbs got smaller, I could still subsist, because of the balance on the street. Along came Suzanne and suddenly I had to vie with her for the crumbs of an ever decreasing pie. I was livid. Had I been warming the spot cultivating customers all that time for this interloper to swoop in and fleece?

She came onto the block, squatted in my space during the week when I was tied up at work.

On weekends she belittled another artist's work, thus she sought to justify why she should usurp his space. She had a unique way of pronouncing the word "garbage" so that the 'r' was removed and the remaining 'a' flattened out.

Mark did not spray on buildings or on subway trains, instead he chose subway maps. The tourists loved them. With every 20 dollar sale he made, Suzanne would declare he had "gaabage". I'll admit it could be galling to see what was selling when your own goods were not, but that's the game, he had something different.

With three of us now selling jewelry it was hard to be different. She had her sights on his space and toward that end she claimed painting on subway maps was illegal; she was going to report him blah, blah blah... The local subways refused to give him more than one map at a time, if any. Even surrogates he'd send came up empty. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I went to the MTA, told them I was an ESL teacher who needed maps to teach travel classes, (well half of that was true) and got Mark six dozen maps just to make sure he would have an ample supply. She could only wonder where he'd gotten them. Next, she came out on the street as early as 7 am and just squatted in his space.

Generally no one sets up before 10 am, usually on our block, noon. Words were exchanged, with her threatening to call the police, but rather than a fight and perhaps have the scene get out of hand, eventually Mark backed down. Still, having his spot was not enough, there were times I'd roll up on my spot and she'd be in it, with similar jewelry and even a purple table covering.

Maybe she'd had that color long before she came there, but I'd always had it, in one combination or another. I can't say the same for her. Now she had the same red purple shade, similar jewelry and would have had my spot.

What nerve! I'll agree my spot, right in the center, might have been perceived as better in terms of location. Had she bought that much nerve wholesale? What was worse, by being in the spot when I was not there, customers began to confuse us; she was trading on my flow. When I set up they would come inquiring about what they'd seen on her table earlier in the week.

It was like going into McDonalds and asking for a Whopper, just because they both use red and yellow. She insisted on poaching the spot whenever I was not in it. Colors and location are important.

Often it is those ancillary things customers remember rather than the vendor herself. She was determined to have a spot; I was determined it would not be mine.

“Are you setting up today? If so, I’ll move.”

Whenever I rolled up she would offer to move without being asked, at least she showed that much respect, but the affront lay in her setting up there in the first place. She had already pushed Mark out of his spot. What more was she supposed to have? Even when she set up there she set up on the west side of the traffic pole, which squeezed everyone else on the block. Someone, usually Kadette, who sold leather bags, since it was her space most curtailed, had to go down and ask her again each time to move to the east side of the pole so we could all have enough space.

Other times it was another row with Kadette to tell her to lower the thin tinny sound of her radio. Sometimes the sheer annoyance of having to tell her the same thing repeatedly left little room for the buffers “Please” and “Thanks”. Instead there was only the harshness of a demand.

“That thing is giving me a headache, could you turn it down?”

“I’ve got a right to enjoy my ‘gotdamn’ music!”

More unusual pronunciations. So it would begin until one or the other softened. Music is fine, but not if it's so loud you can't hear the customers and not if there's more static than music.

At times Suzanne just seemed to need to suck up energy. The business with the space meant she was making a statement. I was supposed to answer, yes but not in words. It seemed so senseless to quarrel over spaces for which none of us had deed or even lease.

Intellectually I knew that she needed to live; I knew it could be hard getting a job when you're no longer young, and that as a woman in her sixties, she too was struggling as we all were. I also knew the perception was that I had a job (two part-time jobs) so the street was only extra. They saw the stack of papers I sometimes marked when it was slow, with my name preceded by "professor" and sometimes they saw my ID tangled in my keys, with the word "Adjunct" combined with "professor". They never knew it was all a joke, or that I was the butt of it. They took such trappings seriously, never suspecting the trap had sprung around me.

Outside of academia the word adjunct is rarely used and therefore to the unaware it is exotic, coupled with the loosely brandished term professor, often bestowed on the most undeserving souls, like me, it is understandable why the misperception of wealth, position, and power- in short greatness, ran rampant.

The reality, I was a poorly paid part-timer whose position didn't warrant so much as one stinking sick day no matter how long I worked for them. I teach what used to be called remedial classes. Now newly renamed as "non credit foundation courses" like the "...rose by any other name" they still have me treading the ground which ought to have been long ago trod in High school. So while my street mates saw the word Adjunct and conflated it with Assistant or Associate Professor, I knew we could have more accurately stopped with the first three letters of either word. For those who had never been to college or had dropped out before learning the difference, I was to be envied and resented.

There are the misperceptions we have about others, the ones we foster about ourselves for others to believe, and the ones we passively allow to persist. So, for all the misperceptions about me, no, I didn't bother to embark

upon the futile task of setting them straight; it Besides, maybe I derived a perverse pleasure from the ridiculous idea that I might be the object of anyone's envy. Privately I was ashamed not to be doing better. I would have been embarrassed to admit I was working for so little.

The nonexistent, but highly envied wealth consisted of four hundred and fifty dollars per credit, dragged out over a fifteen week semester. We had all known times when we'd made as much in a single day. Since, however those opulent days lived in the haze of our memories, and none of us knew when or if they would return, I found myself pulling pennies in Jersey.

Everyone (except Suzanne, who had lost her job) had something else. They had their situations whether it was a roommate with a below market rent who paid the rent or a janitorial arrangement which eliminated the need to pay anything. Gerri had her wholesale business, derived mostly from her street sales. Kadette had her decorating business. While rumors swirled about the hundred dollar bills which padded the carpet on my parquet floors, I knew there was only dust...

I would not have begrudged her a living, but once she had taken up residence in my pocket, I would have to handle her. I couldn't make her move. I could, however, make being there a lot less lucrative.

Recalling the days when I used to import jewelry and textiles from Mexico, I came upon a solution. Luckily, the ESL job, which dragged until late June, was on spring break. The college semester ended in mid-April. Thus opened the window. Quietly I made arrangements for a quick five day trip to Mexico.

"Las mayoristas" were just where I'd left them, and some of them even remembered me. I came back with two fresh, strong lines sterling and non sterling and plenty of them. It had rained three days in a row up here while I was gone. It had been overcast for another two after I got back. No one had reason to suspect I'd been anywhere but home, making stock.

When I set up the following weekend, I said nothing. I just put the earrings up on new purple velvet boards on an easel, so they could gleam in the sun at a 45 degree angle. I would teach her to test my teeth and dare me to bite. Suzanne stood in front of the setup as though she would commit every style

to memory. Right then, seeing the look on her face, I knew that with that silver, I had hit gold. The edge with Mexico is not the price of silver. Silver is what it will be; it is sold by the weight. The edge comes in the work; the labor is to be had at a fraction of what it would have cost up here. The only place where the edge might have been better was Bali.

I had not the time, connections or money for Bali. I would never have had time enough to get that much stock up so quickly. Buying anything up here would have meant she could get the same product. This way even if she chose to try duplication, I'd have price advantage. I regained the bounce immediately as I had known I would. The crowd on the block loves to see (even if not always buy) something new. In this case they were also buying. I could feel Suzanne's glare as each customer came and left with a purchase and my effusive thanks. Ah, perception, the more I thanked them, the bigger she would think the sale had been. It was the same bounce Suzanne had experienced when she first arrived on the block. They streamed to her table; the same styles she'd been selling for eons, were new to them.

By now, those styles were stale, just as the stock I'd had when Suzanne arrived had become stale to them. It is, has always been the bane of that block. The constant hunger for something new can be a challenge. It has

been why I can't help but admire Gerri. She keeps up with the fickle crowd of young customers. In Soho there are Hispanics, a few Black middle class customers and a large composition of Asian customers, which fall into two major categories Chinese and Japanese.

My jewelry and accessories are wild; mostly audacious women buy them. They do draw all types to the table. The Chinese like to inspect and try on everything, but because of the price and the size, my work is rarely their choice. They are frugal shoppers and prefer investment items.

Gold (even as in this case gold filled or vermeil, gold overlaid on sterling silver) is seen as an investment. They were Gerri's customers. Such customers were hard won, but once won they returned over the weeks as long as Gerri had something new. Some young Japanese on the other hand, are less traditional and love flamboyant creative unusual items. They were often my customers. They had the hair, long, dark and thick to carry off feather accessories or large earrings. And they were adventurous enough to buy something different, simply because it was.

Tourists are another matter, what was old in New York, had probably not yet hit in other parts of the country. Everything is new to them. Beyond the initial bounce, the weak economy was like a ball with a slow leak. The height

of the bounce would gradually decrease no matter how many times you replaced the air. I could and did extend the bounce by re doing the display every other week. It created the illusion that new stock had been put up, when in reality, it had been merely rearranged.

This at least kept the sales up for the summer. In a few months by fall, when the tourists were gone, business was as bad as it had been in general. Not much mattered, once the economic malaise set in.

The only consolation was that it was as bad for Suzanne as it was for me, but judging from the look on her face, she still thought every looker who came to my table was a buyer. The fact that I thanked them audibly regardless, did nothing to dispel her perception. When Hispanic customers came by, I laughed and chatted with them, in Spanish. Sometimes it resulted in a sale. Whether or not they were buying, this created the illusion that they were. I could see Suzanne craning her neck scowling at me.

That's the thing about perception. People who know better, or ought to, are still vulnerable to its pull. Suzanne fell into bragging about sales we knew she had not made. When there is no money there just is none. Gerri and I

would just nod and exchange knowing looks. When you work on a block for five years you know its pulse. We understood that after all the pushing to get a spot, It was embarrassing to admit she still was making no money.

How much money either of us would have made without the other, I will never know for certain, but I know I had stemmed the cash hemorrhage. At least there was enough interest to get a few sales among the lookers.

To sit there day after day shooting glares at each other was pointless, but say what anyone will, I derived a pleasure just knowing that I'd done to her business what she'd done to mine. Now we were both sucking salt.

I hated the jobs, not the work itself, certainly never the students, or even fellow co-workers, but the situation of our common plight. Eight weeks into each semester before any of us tasted a dime of the salary which sat meanwhile in some bank account gathering interest. In the interim the greedy took their time doling the pennies out. The jobs would have been fine if they could be confined to the dead days when there was no money to be made on the street anyway.

Little classes which could have run two days (preferably the same two dead days already partially consumed by the evening job) instead spread like a

filthy stain over three. Thus they poisoned pristine pay day Fridays when my customers, whose pay was better and more frequent than mine, would have augmented this adjunct. Even a bad Friday might be worth the equivalent of an impatient utility bill. There is something empowering about not waiting around for someone else to decide it might be time to pay you.

When I couldn't make those Fridays, the others took delight in telling me how good the Friday had been, often adding "...but I guess you didn't need to be here."

I kept it, that measly job because the fact that had escaped the others but not me, was that there was little else to do with a lone English degree. If that job had been better, it would have been swooped up by someone with better creds.

As it was, folks who wore their degrees like a necklace, their delicate but sturdy Bachelors' cabochon in the center, flanked on either side by two faceted Masters or perhaps a luminous Law degree, set off with gleaming pave encrusted bezels on each, wandered in to this place.

I shared an office with one of them, she flaunted her necklace once too often and her contract was not picked up. Niggardly, mean spirited institutions are loathe to hear how much better you had done, before you fell into their

miserly clutches. They read the resumes with glee, gazing greedily at the plethora of intellectual goods this economy has presented to them for a pittance. They know that those who wander into this financial tundra, have been expelled from warmer climes. They also know that, to paraphrase Dante, we who enter here have only temporarily abandoned hope.

They know our every minute is spent in hopes of an eventual return to better times, but we cannot be foolish enough to remind them of what they already know, lest they grow tired of hearing it. Instead, all working "actors" are not on stage; some perform portraying pleasure in poverty, perpetuating pathetic productions, three times a week in Jersey.

When business slipped and on days when the street would have been impossible, the difference was that I still had the jobs. In better times we might all have made money, but even before Suzanne came, money had been on the wane. That's the truth. I knew it still I resented her mightily and perceived that every sale she had made ought to have been or at least could have been mine, especially when customers came to show what they had bought. Those same tacky people probably did the same to her in reverse. I knew I was stressing her when Suzanne called a meeting with Gerri and me. Away from the tables at the curb, we gathered next to the ledge of one of the buildings on the block. There was a lull in business, so why not see what she

wanted. The small round dark face was contorted with anger. The shiny crimson glossed lips twisted as she hurled accusations at me as though she'd been storing them up for just this moment.

"I'm highly intelligent. I see what you're doing. Some friend you are.

Even Gerri can see you're copying her necklaces." Of course Gerri's necklaces were of no concern to Suzanne; what she really wanted to rail about was her own earrings. Gerri and I exchanged glances. The same knowing looks, when Suzanne came with unsolicited brags of money we knew she had not made. This time I smiled faintly.

"Has Gerri complained to you?"

Suzanne side stepped the question with another.

"You're supposed to be her friend for how many years, how could you?"

"If Gerri had any fault with me she would have come to me with it."

Gerri, who had remained silent all this while, knew that great effort had gone into choosing stones and an oversized link which would not compete with hers.

No such effort had been made where Suzanne's earrings were concerned. It's safe to say we all knew that. I felt rightfully or otherwise, that since I'd been there first, I had a right to whatever I chose to sell. Anyone coming after

should make adjustments, or deal. Even Gerri, who had reminded me that Suzanne had once made space for us in a market, later admitted that she too had lost Asian customers to Suzanne.

“You’re so smart, well I’m also a highly intelligent person too.”

I wondered who had said otherwise, but thought better of asking her.

The more aggrieved I am about something, likely the less I’ll say. A still tongue keeps a wise head. Why warn the opponent with threats? Besides threats are for those who can do nothing more than make them.

Was I to fuel an argument with taunts? I had seen how she seemed to thrive on the anger her actions engendered. I wasn’t sure exactly what her game had been, but I knew I had to play my game not hers. At any rate I also knew that mindless arguments, in addition to sucking up my good energy, were death to business. Even when I did not allow myself to be enveloped by one, they put a pall on business. Customers fled the area, crossed the street, or just hurried away without the merest glance at the merchandise.

The paltry degree which prepared me for indicating to so called college students that a plural subject still required a plural verb, despite the lyrics of the latest song, also threatened Suzanne. Perhaps because her actions, (Did

she really think she could row with me, and not expect a fight?) had not evidenced her intellect, she felt compelled to tell me. It seemed (to her) that I imagined myself to be one of superior intellect. Secretly given my penury state, I had my doubts.

Well perhaps I had out foxed her, perhaps she thought I wouldn't fight for the business she imagined I didn't need any how, or maybe I'd just rail and fume uselessly on the street. I had always been on the street but never of the street. Maybe now that I had handled her, she finally saw the difference. The seemingly still waters had proven deep; she now feared drowning. That's what had Suzanne foaming. She kept telling me she was "highly intelligent" as if repeating the phrase was supposed to spur an answer from me, while I just stared at her, finally I shrugged and left her still railing, to herself. Someone was at my table. Gerri had already returned to her table, so ended the meeting.

I wish I could claim such wisdom as my own, but my mother was a devout believer in the 'still tongue' theory. There was nothing better than the delicious coldness of how she could leave the other person raging while she appeared unruffled. I didn't bother to tell Suzanne that the solution to her

problem was so obvious that I need not mention it. Nor did I mention that she was the flea who had crawled up into my armpit sucking out my financial blood. She would either have to move or put up with the stink. Still the bitter feelings were there. Eventually business was bad enough that even torturing Suzanne was not reason enough to continue. I had other options.

I decided to trade my ESL for an MFA, that is the time I'd spent working at the former could now be spent acquiring the latter. I would lose nothing and could even gain; even if I gave the space a rest, it would do Suzanne no good. All those months in the preceding year, whenever I got the report, it was always the same.

Like basketball, although the outdoor game is a little rougher, played with more spirit and sometimes less grace, it is the same game whether played indoors or out. It required the same cunning strategy. I decided to concentrate on my indoor game.

Back in college I began to carefully select the stones for my own necklace. I discovered an unexpected bonus; those years of teaching have made me a better student. With things bad everywhere, what had I to lose? I took a

small delight in knowing that my absence had not helped her. I came out briefly for what Christmas would yield.

It was more like taking the pulse of a dead patient just to make sure he was really dead.

Once I could be sure of that, looking in other directions became easier. After that I hadn't seen Suzanne. Having made my point, I let the matter go.

I hadn't been out there or even thought about all this for almost a year, not until this unexpected call from Gerri gave me reason to remember. We chatted and remembered the prior events, as though she were taking her time before she got to real news she had to convey...

Suzanne had been found dead alone in her house. Her house, which had been cold, an effort no doubt to save on heating, had helped preserve the condition of the body; no one knew how long she'd been there. Stiff, cold, alone. What a lonely death.

She'd gone home, stopped to rest on her couch and just never got up... That's where they found her. She never even made it to her bed. I take a deep breath and listen to sketchy details until Gerri finally says,

"That's not the way you'd want to get rid of a competitor."

Suzanne had been feeling ill for some time. Who could have known it was this serious? I want the answers she does not have. I end by asking her to let me know when the wake will be.

The week elapses without a word, until Friday and my cell rings at work. The wake will be that night from 4pm to 9pm Gerri's somber voice informs me. She gives me the rest of the information, and I'm off to see Suzanne one last time.

I walk through the doors of Samson's Funeral home, in Brooklyn . I'm yet again in a new place, and once again Suzanne is there. I smile to see the arrangement of red purple flowers on the lower half of a grey casket and the matching skirt beneath the casket. I guess those were her colors too. The others have not yet arrived, even though they are coming from Soho and I have come in from Newark, New Jersey. I will wait for them.

I turn to Rasool, who like me, had not been on the block in quite some time. He tells me he had to come even though he has not been to a funeral since his mother's more than twenty years earlier. In the background there is music, Suzanne would have loved. He recalls how she'd been nice to him. Calling her a "great lady" he compliments her jewelry and we chat. He does not know much more than I do. I see her daughter Shobia, and we hug. She tells a companion that I watched her grow up. Over the years she and her mother made the rounds.

They had done all those shows, in all those cities. Married, widowed, married again, divorced, Suzanne always appeared to be a single mother. Looking at her daughter, I see the same little girl's face on a grown woman's body.

"I'm so sorry." is all I can manage. It hits. It hurts. I find myself thinking about the language, about the way we use or misuse words. A pair of such words comes to mind, shame and embarrassment.

I think of the subtle and often overlooked difference between them. Shame is an inner feeling experienced in solitude. It is the reason why the utterance, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," might cause embarrassment even if not shame. Because embarrassment is only caused in the glare of observation, the embarrassment Suzanne had sought to make me feel with her accusations, has been replaced with the shame I feel now. I will not lie either to myself or you. I will not say I was overcome with shame, would do otherwise in the future, but there was just that little trickle. There wasn't any way to know that the seemingly petty greedy actions had been a desperate attempt to survive. All of us out there had something else to derive an income from. Some of us had a business, wholesale orders a roommate to cover the rent, even I had the jobs, much as I cursed them, I held on to them.

How must it have felt to know that she was getting weaker and her strong little body was failing her as she fought with everyone around her? I knew that she'd chosen our block to be among, if not friends, at least people she knew. Despite this, we did not invite her to eat with us when we went out after work. Even those of us who were not openly at war, were not always at peace.

The others arrive; I have been waiting for their support. Gerri, Kadette,, Ron, another artist with his own African American art, who set up next to Suzanne in what had been Mark's spot, and Jasmine, who worked in the area and had become friendly with all of us. We talk and I get the answers.

We sit together in our little section among other groups who had known Suzanne in various phases of her life. The union people from the last job she had, the church people, old childhood friends, friends of her late husband and Shobia's friends. Each group catches up with one another. In our group we speak in hushed tones. They talk; I listen.

"We had no idea she was this sick" Gerri begins gravely

"I remember seeing her just sitting in the car for more than an hour one night" Kadette contributes.

“She was still there long after I had returned from Gerri’s” Ron was recalling “I remember because that night I had trouble getting Gerri’s things in, it took me longer than usual. It was almost ten by then and she had packed up around eight.”

“She must have been too weak to drive.” Jasmine reasons then with a quiver she continues. “I had to come in to work around six one morning and I saw her slumped over in the car sleeping.”

“Maybe she had spent the night there. I didn’t think of it then but that’s what must have happened. Oh, why didn’t she get help? People aren’t supposed to die like this.”

Bits and pieces of information from each of them fill in the chilling picture. She had been on the decline for months. They had watched, not really knowing they had been watching her gradual demise. Suzanne’s performance had been that good. She had played the game until it played her out. I am struck by the simple sadness of it all how had she become so isolated. Forget about us, we were merely co-workers of sorts, friendly at times but not much more. I think of her friends all these other people in this room. How could it be that there was no one she could turn to not even her daughter?

Why wasn't there someone to be a voice of reason to hold her hand through this? People don't have to die of diabetes, not in this day and age. Nor do they automatically have to suffer amputations. Her sister says she'd been diagnosed with the disease three years before.

This she had not chosen to share with her daughter, I'm not sure how her sister found out. I know the street can be a hard place to work if your health is fragile. Still she came out there every day. Sometime ago, she had showed a stubborn sore on her leg, which would not heal to a Vietnamese vendor on the other side of the street. He remembered telling Gerri that he had told Suzanne they would have to cut her leg off.

I guess she just panicked, shut down, didn't seek any other information. Perhaps if she had she would have found out he was wrong. Perhaps she would have found out he was right, that possibility was too much for her.

How had she gone from being alone but so fiercely independent to this? It could be just that independence that terrified her at the prospect of its loss. She hid it all to the very end.

They tell me about how she'd been limping for weeks. Someone else remembers that her leg was so swollen that it had become evident despite the pants she wore...

How when she'd been struggling to pack up one night, Gem's offer of help had been met with a snarl, "I'm a grown woman!" Another time she'd gotten into her car and simply keeled over. That time it happened when the others were around. They'd had no idea it had happened before. Protests that she was just tired, would be just fine, "didn't need no fucking help," kept anyone from calling for the paramedics... If anyone had known how very sick she had been... Suzanne had played the game too well for help.

We all play the game to one degree or another. The difference is I know it is a game. Some relationships I guard: others I guard against. I also know the lies we tell ourselves are the worst.

When we pretend we are not in pain we make it impossible for others who would, to help. Sometimes when the pain we sought to hide is seen, aid is offered, yet we pretend. We even push away others in order to continue the pretense. Her car had been on the street, where she always parked for days. The excuse she'd given for leaving it there had been to keep the space. It is only now that it is obvious she had been too sick to drive herself home.

It was only when she failed to come out for over a week that people began to wonder. Other vendors had seen the car, but had not known. One of the last times they'd seen her, she'd come out but did not (we understand perhaps could not) set up. She just sat in the space. Late into the day and she had still not set up, Kadette's offer to help was met with the same response Gerri's offer had evoked. We speculate on the possible reasons for the actions of such a strange person. She must have known she was dying. Maybe she had no medical insurance, didn't want to be a burden... why had she felt embarrassed to accept help. Why had she seen such shame in having an illness, which was not self-incurred, that she closed everyone in her family out? Maybe she got along with them as well as she had with us. Who can say? Too much aloneness...too much loneliness.

For me the real pity of this comes in knowing she was just like any one of us and for whatever reason, she didn't feel she could reach out to anyone in her life. I have already said my good- bye, silently. Kadette is standing up in front of the gathering, an awkward look on her face.

"Some of you know," she starts looking at us "that Suzanne and I didn't always get along. But I want to tell you how she used to help my stepson anyway. She used to take him to the bathroom when I had a customer and he needed to go." Here her voice trails off. "She was a good person."

Kadette concludes and returns to our group. We tell nervous jokes remembering Suzanne's sense of humor among ourselves, but no one else feels like getting up. Rasool who has been sitting apart from us because he did not get along with either Geri or Kadette, (both of whom resented his bragging about what he owned and the way he set up opposite either of them and drew the eye of potential customers) rises and makes his way to the front. He is a tall dark skinned man who for all the cockiness he has shown on the street seems strangely ill at ease once he gets there. We watch him with new interest.

"I wasn't on the block where she worked for long," here he shrugs as though he was unsure how to continue "and I won't say I knew her as well as the rest of you, but whenever I saw her she was always friendly to me.

For that I thank her. She was a great jeweler and a great lady" With that he is finished and we exchange curious smiling looks. Was that directed at us? Neither Gerri nor I had thought she was a "great jeweler", perhaps for obvious reasons. When he came on the block he was treated like any other interloper. Maybe that was what made Suzanne welcome him and wherein lay her "greatness".

This prompts Jasmine to get to her feet. It as though she cannot let Rasool be the last from the block to speak. She had no particular connection with us; she was not a vendor. Instead she worked upstairs for someone, in one of the opulent lofts.

“I liked Suzanne,” she starts “I don’t know but she had a way of cheering me up whenever I had a bad day. She just always had something nice or encouraging to say. I’m going to miss her.” Jasmine has hurried through her statement and quickly rejoins us. Everyone has spoken except Gerri and me. We have both declined.

People in her life have been speaking about her. Jasmine tells how Suzanne used to cheer her up when she was having a bad day. Gerri urges me to get up and regale the crowd with stories from the flea market, or the road. I will not. I will not pretend to these people, or worse to myself, we were friends to the end. Gerri knows my actions, she may even have been secretly glad, but only I know the harsh feelings I had held inside. How many times had I wished she would just go somewhere? Well she has. Maybe today I’m just a little tired of the game.

R.I.P. Suzanne (July 5, 1946- March 20, 2008)

Chapter

4

“Thus despite having graduated from Brooklyn College, they were not about to let that happen again... Granted I had submitted poetry for my writing sample, still what exactly is so hard about MLA?”

CONFESSIONS OF A WOULD BE GRAD STUDENT

M, as in more or money or perhaps the two words in tandem, or maybe a string of them, M-m-m-m, the suggestion of something appetizing. M.D., M.A., MS., M.B.A. and ah yes M.F.A. All of which seemed too rich for the diet of my mind. I knew such food was available but whether it would be for me, well I wasn't so sure. Somewhere the artist in me did not believe I would actually aspire to a career or even a job where such letters trailing after my name would be required. Maybe it was the hedonist in me which pushed the idea off and away until it could not be denied. If I were to survive successfully, I would need to return to school. In the last chapter I spoke of going back to school, perhaps I over simplified that. This chapter gives me a chance to share the actual journey. The idea hovered like a cloud or should I be more precise, the sword of Damocles.

As far back as when the Grad Center was on 42nd street, and I had gone there for other business, I would pick up the bulletin to look it over. No, I made no serious moves beyond that until 2000. Prior to that time I toyed with the idea of teacher certification.

Yes, me, but only because I had fallen into sub work for the Board of Ed. It seemed like a possible use for that B.S. in English.

I didn't mind teaching ESL to adults and the notion of a paycheck was not entirely unappealing. As long as I was not tied into a term of obligation, I could still travel and do other things. That's always been the hurdle, fear of getting stuck. That's been the guiding force behind so many choices in my life.

When I was in college I wanted to get into writing, but when I looked at the idea realistically I realized, that until I sold something, I might be a long while just writing for me. That would never do. Still the idea of installing myself in some life sucking, creativity killing career or even a job, with all its demands on time and energy, was not on my to do list. On the other hand I like to eat. Starving for my art, mooching off others who had chosen such jobs would not do. Besides my friends are like me. They think as I do: they would not permit it any more than I would. The idea of actually trying to make a go of writing sat by the side of my brain, while I lived a creative life. I prowled the country selling and making my way. As much as I enjoyed the lifestyle, if there's anything I can regret it is not pushing harder to at least work in journalism. Even if I had worked as a freelancer, I would have built up my writing skills. It would have given me a base, gotten my name out. I know it might not have been easy, but I should have pushed harder.

I have to admit, had I wanted to, I could have done more personal writing during the Miami days or even while I was doing private duty nursing. On the other hand journalism can strengthen researching skills but at a cost to the creative skills. Who's to say what might have been? I found though, that while I might have had the time, the spirit for writing and concentration were lacking. I have come to see that as much as I might love them both the selling and the writing, the two are like riding two horses at the same time, only one of whom was able to carry me. Thus while I might strive to straddle the two, I'd be required to question the wisdom of the effort.

Selling, especially since I had to make the stock before I could sell it, takes its own share of time. The one salvation is that at least it was all for me; no one else was being enriched by my sacrifice. Just the same the writing suffered. Half written manuscripts were thrown out (not by me) but gone is still gone. In college the idea of working for a newspaper or magazine was interesting, but without a track record, something to show, who was going to hire me?

Someone suggested I might be a secretary, get my foot In the door. Yes, if I could type.

Don't let this fool you. I'm the one who, when my private high school decided to confer on a 'lucky' few, the dubious honor of a dual diploma (Academic and Commercial) failed typing. In summer school at Erasmus (since my school did not provide for repeats) my last chance to salvage the situation, I made by wit not skill. In the large double long typing rooms were the training typewriters with no letters on the keys; you were supposed to memorize the keyboard from the oversized chart in the front of the room. In a room with over eighty typewriters, only half of them worked. The teacher told us to select one which did for the typing Regents. I selected one way in the back of the room and proceeded to insert the missing letters with a Magic Marker. Lest the plan be discovered, I covered the machine with a plastic cover (to keep dust out) and the teacher assigned and tagged it with my name for the next day's test. After the test I removed the evidence of my wit with acetone.

For all of it I got a B and the format of the letters and memos was good, but I lost points on the spacing. Did I know then that decades later computers, with that same awkward configuration (designed purposely to keep people from typing too fast and breaking early fragile machines) would take over the world?

These days my finished work looks professional; it just takes me longer than any professional. I couldn't type then and still can't, not at least for anyone waiting for the work. My own work, well that's another matter.

By 2000 I had given up nursing, enjoyed the road for long enough, given up the Miami Beach place and reconciled myself that I would make becoming a grad student somewhere my next goal. I had a permanent assignment at the Board of Ed (back then uncertified teachers could teach ESL in the adult continuing ed. program) two nights a week and I'd gotten an adjunct position with a two year college in Jersey teaching low level English to folks for whom it might as well have been a second language. God love them; God save me. Between the two I kept busy, out of trouble and out of debt. Even though I was dallying in education, it was not my heart. I was a good effective teacher, the more I taught, the better I got and so did my writing. Yes, I knew my stuff, but there again the system did not excite me. I perused the pages of catalogs and thought I might look at my Alma Mater for re-entry.

Brooklyn College, out here in Brooklyn, part of the CUNY system, close to home, maybe there would still be some professors around from my undergraduate days.

After the heady days of the 90s I fancied myself a poet of sorts.

I'd spent the intervening decade between giving up Miami Beach and the new millennium making the rounds, featuring at poetry events, hosting quite a few venues, doing a public radio performance, making cable appearances and getting back to the craft. A few modest publications bolstered my opinion. It also enlivened my interest in writing. It was also about that time I developed a preference for Sans Serif typefaces. I didn't know it then but it was the ease of reading them which accounted for the choice. As my eyesight worsened, I found it hard to read my own poems. Because memorizing also enhanced the delivery, this was my compensation. Since the poems were my original work, if I forgot a line, I could easily improvise. The audience would be no wiser. Still, it did not occur to me that there was any real problem. It wasn't until I had a script of some other poet's work to perform, a play too lengthy to memorize in the time allotted, when even the enlarged version proved too difficult, I finally sought help. In that same building where the Grad center had been was SUNY College of Optometry. Later I was diagnosed with Starghards disease (one of the offshoots of macular degeneration). In my case, the malady makes it had to see all the letters in a word if the letters are not in sharp contrast to the paper.

Sometimes I don't see a "c" and mistake it for an "e" (seene for scene). I realized that school would be a little harder. Almost everything, newspapers, magazines, novels, text books, are usually in a serif typeface.

Little wispy serif typefaces, like Times Roman (the default typeface on computers) or Caslon, are harder to see than bold clean faces like Futura, (street signs) Helvetica (subway signs) and my favorite Arial Black. The additional cost of more ink also accounts for why these typefaces aren't used for ordinary printing.

Initially, I was frightened and became depressed until I understood that the condition was steady and could remain so if I took precautions. I was still determined; I was going back to school. I would just have to work around it. Having to produce something new for features and workshops, made me get into a rhythm I'd been lacking. I found that unlike some writers, I actually liked the process of revision. I did it in stages often re-working one section several times before being able to continue with the piece. When I was working on longer pieces (a writing sample) the system became cumbersome but I still enjoyed honing the work.

I found that inserting details after the bulk of the work had been written worked for me. All of this set me up for the idea of taking the leap back into school.

Brooklyn College. I filled out the forms carefully. I remember pouring over them, going back to recheck information. If I recall I even went for the GRE, and later found out that some programs don't require it. I'm not sure if Brooklyn College did then or does now. I had graduated from there in 1979, in the CUNY BA program which allowed a combination of credits from several programs at different schools within the CUNY system (in my case Graphic Arts Advertising, Sales/Marketing, and finally English). In all I'd gone to three colleges, plodding along gathering knowledge as I went but no distinct career goal: what is now called City Tech in Brooklyn, next to Baruch College, then to Brooklyn College.

Without the CUNY BA program, I would have lost several credits every time I changed my major or my mind. Who knows when or if I would ever have graduated? Instead the ability to combine them allowed me to dally in the things that interested me and made the formulation of a unique package possible.

I use the Graphic Arts whenever I make signs for the display or design business cards and stationary. I've even made signs for other businesses which provided another source of income at times. These days computers have pretty much killed that. I'd be the first to say that the classes in advertising, sales and marketing helped when I was selling. Some of the concepts worked just as well in or out of an actual store. Either way customers are the same personality types. Placement of merchandise and signage are always important.

The odd assortment of classes I had taken did not, however, seem to make me the ideal candidate for grad school. Thus despite having graduated from Brooklyn College once, they were not about to let that happen again. When the rejection letter came, (no need to finesse the language, I'd gotten rejection letters from publishers before, so what else was new,) it was still a shock. How could they have rejected me. I had graduated from there why wouldn't I be allowed back in?

When I could gather my forces, I arranged a meeting with one Professor Black for answers. I called and a friendly voice assured me she'd be willing to meet with me to "discuss the matter."

I sat in her office while she carefully outlined all that she thought was lacking from my previous foray in academia. Never mind the intervening years, during which I'd returned to college, Medgar Evers and Long Island University, to gain education credits, gotten a N.Y. State license to teach English and ESL in business schools, (different requirements) and the fact that currently I had been teaching the very things she thought I might not be able to handle like MLA formatted papers. Granted I had submitted poetry for my writing sample, but still what exactly is so hard about MLA?

You just select your topic, (if your instructor hasn't) do your preliminary research, let that "marinate" while you "strain out" what isn't needed, sort of a "reduction process", in other words narrow it down to a thesis, be sure to "season" your ideas and salient points with accurate but appropriate in text citations, explain the unfamiliar with footnotes, document your facts, PLEASE, Please don't plagiarize, whatever you do, follow the rules of placement, pagination, margins, bibliography, work cited page et al "roast" up the paper, hopefully "well done," complete to "recipe" specifications, nothing half baked, "trim excess fat and drain liquids" just before you "serve" it, with or without garnish, to your professor, get your grade and if all that has failed to kill you, go on living. Live to write many more papers for equally important reasons!

It was harder teaching MLA than it had been learning it. Somehow she thought I still hadn't mastered that relatively simple feat.

Patiently as one would with a child, she circled the classes from the undergraduate catalog she thought I should take in preparation for grad school. I kept that catalog for years, like a favorite wound.

"Here," she was saying as she circled another course. Her pen hovered over another listing as I gazed at her in disbelief.

"Yes, and maybe these too," She finally concluded with another stroke of the pen. If you take these, I think they will prepare you for the course work.

They will give you a solid base for MLA papers. Right now I'm not sure you'd be able to handle the work."

Whatever else she may have said escapes me now. Before she was done I could see she meant I should reenroll as an undergrad. Professor Black. She wasn't, but I was.

On the surface I did not seem like much. SSDD.* There she sat with all that I've told you in her hand on the resume, what more was I to say in my defense?

****SSDD Same Shit Different Day***

Did she really look at all those classes and imagine I hadn't written a paper (or two) in all that time? What would it say about the institution she was bound to bar me from re-entering if I hadn't been required to write such a paper in my previous time there? As far back as the Associate degree in Graphic Arts, I'd written a research paper on the creation of paper. How had I come to be sitting in this sow's office? Not to worry I didn't come undone. That would only have confirmed or lowered her already subterranean view of me. When she asked if I understood, my silent glare did all I wouldn't. Lethal looks notwithstanding, still it couldn't be said I had said... Given the size of the world, I might yet collide with her again. Better not to have made an enemy.

I returned home to lick my wounds, teach MLA to my students at the County College in Jersey, and wonder just where to attempt my next effort. I took a long while licking those wounds. I looked into several programs, and all the while I kept writing. I looked into Queens College but that was a hard day's ride from Brooklyn; I was already commuting to New Jersey every other day for work.

By 2005 I had nursed my ego long enough to risk battering it again. This time I chose Fairleigh Dickenson out in New Jersey. I looked at their program all three years (sixty credits) of it, and wondered what it had to cost so much in time and money. I had asked myself the same thing about the New School in New York. I might have gone for their program, but their classes were on consecutive nights which would cancel my ESL job. The New School is not to be taken without money. Yes, they have financial aid, but the fees are still rich. What really sold me on Fairleigh Dickenson, despite the time and cost, was the internship in England.

A summer in some old castle on the outskirts of English countryside, a foreign country, whose language I already spoke, in Europe so close to the rest of the continent, a ferry ride away, what could be better? I fairly saw myself basking in all that history and returning with something new to say. For that I would have chased as many festivals as I needed to scrape up the tuition. I might even have sold off old stock at a reduced price just to turn it into workable capital. I even bought a guide to London. I could taste the place.

First things first; I needed to be accepted. This time I would write my way in. I would write a sample to show my current skill.

Something which would be sure to convince any of Professor Black's academic cousins, I had advanced from the student who had graduated all that time before.

I set the sample in England and took it back to when England still held sway over the people of India. I named my main character Lachme. In the Hindi religion she's the goddess of Abundance; I prayed she might bring me some. I researched the history and culture of Indians, the peculiar relationship of the British and their distant subjects and wove a story of illicit love (no torrid sex scenes) class differential and cultural difficulties, angst, pain and resulting consequences.

My family is West Indian and there was a connection to England before the various islands obtained independence. That part was easy. I had no computer at home. That was the beginning of what made it hard. Long story why, but since I worked at a college, with rooms and rooms of computers at my disposal, when I lost my tower, I didn't worry about it. I should have.

The FDU application called for a maximum of thirty pages, typed, double spaced (standard MLA page format I figured, lest anyone doubt my

knowledge this time) the only exception was that I didn't use Times Roman, I never do. For the rest I had it down cold. Slow as ice but visually and artistically beautiful to read, I carefully crafted and produced the saga of Lachme.

The story was pacing well with the details coming in easily and the flow at an even pace. I wasn't writing a mystery still there had to be sufficient suspense and action to hold interest, mine and the reader's.

When I couldn't use the computers at school, like over the summer break, I used the ones at the Donnell Library on 53rd Street. There was an odd combination of users. Everyone from people who spoke to themselves about the coming of Judgment Day, bag ladies, (and men), smelly but computer literate, (in some cases better typists than I was) students, regular people who just wanted to check their e-mail, to folks like me, writers without computers, could be found there. Whatever the case, an hour was the maximum allotment per day.

For those who typed with some skill and speed, an hour might produce much more work than I could.

An appointment had to be made ahead of time (no more than three per week, but sometimes I could pick up the remaining minutes from someone's session or a missed appointment). There was also a limit of ten free pages to be printed per session. Additional pages could be had at a cost of .10 each.

With these rules in place I trudged up there for months over the summer to refine the work. If I recall the application deadline for Spring '06 entry was 5pm, September 15, 2005. On the surface from June to September should have been enough time for even an amputee to type a mere thirty pages.

For me the process of re writing and correcting, together with the printing limitations, proved a hurdle to surmount. Those computers did not have newer adaptive technology; I found it hard at times to read the work on the screen.

The font size could only be increased so much and there certainly was no audio read back feature. This meant that I needed a printed copy to correct, rather than being able to see the errors or changes on the screen and correct them from there. Running up there after teaching a morning ESL class in Brooklyn, at a school which had no computers I could use, proved

exhausting. There were days when I couldn't get there. If anyone missed a session, and did not call two hour earlier to cancel was made to wait to reschedule. Anyone more than fifteen minutes late might miss the appointment and the computer would be assigned to someone else.

All of these factors became part of the challenge, still I was making progress. Given the printing limits, I did not always print out the most recent corrections. Instead I waited until I had finished a section, gone over it several times and was fairly sure I had it where I wanted it before printing out those sheets as final sections to be submitted. This system was working well enough. As soon as summer school was finished I felt confident I'd be able to make all my appointments. Then it happened.

How or why I still don't know. I went to the computer at Donnell in the afternoon. I had a regular appointment, but I knew that later in the evening, on late nights, there was a young girl who worked there and she would let me have more time if no one else was waiting.

She was also pretty good about printing a few extra copies when we needed them. I might have gotten half of the sample printed out.

I was almost finished the piece. With all this in mind I made the corrections at the earlier appointment, intending to do the printing in the evening.

Usually if I timed it right I'd get there in time to catch the end of someone's session. All of it was in place; I popped the floppy into the slot that evening and when I opened the file, instead of the familiar letters, numbers and boxes danced across the screen.

I watched in frozen horror as the words changed into a garbled mass of useless unintelligible symbols. It was gone, before I could call for help or think what I should do, it was all gone, eaten up by some unseen monster virus. What comes of using public facilities, where budget cuts may delete virus detecting programs. You would ask, why didn't I have a back-up copy? It too would have been created, when the changes were saved, on a virus infected computer.

It was late August, getting ready for September, all I had was the collection of sheets I'd printed out at various intervals, with the hand written corrections scribbled into the margins.

With a fast approaching deadline, I had nothing suitable to submit. I wanted to die, and maybe if I weren't so stubborn, I would have.

When I could breathe again I took a long deep breath, exhaled, ignored the nagging voice telling me "Maybe it just wasn't to be" and called my friend, Albert to bemoan my plight. He suggested that I might come up to the tenant's association office and scan what I had on paper, onto a fresh disk, and maybe I could remember the rest of the changes. It was worth a try.

Once the printed words were scanned in I had to make all the adjustments and corrections. Paragraphs needed to be put in all over again. The computer did not reconfigure the words as I had originally had them. I wasn't taking any more chances with library computers, but this computer was in the Bronx. I lived in Brooklyn and by the time my job at the college started, I'd be out in New Jersey.

The logistics were going to be a problem. In addition some of the pages had never been printed; they'd have to be re written from memory. Time was not on my side. When school started, I'd be able to use one of those computers, rather than going up to the Bronx. So, I thought.

Over the summer the college computers had been changed over to a newer version which no longer used floppy disks. As luck would have it, there was still one last department which had not made the change. Unfortunately it was not my department; luckily it was my sister's old department; they knew me and were willing to let me use their lab, but only sometimes. Each obstacle seemed to be asking "How badly do you want this?"

The night before the deadline found me inserting pagination by hand, gluing in the numbers on pieced together pages. Unlike the regular MLA, these instructions called for the name and address in the upper right corner of each page; (I used address labels for that, and blocked them with Wite Out, so the borders would not show in reproduction.) None of this had been done in the original, nor would it have helped since this version was pieced together from rough copies.

I had intended doing pagination at the end when I was finished with the actual writing. Now with all the delays and confusion it still had to be done. I had pasted together fragments, trying to recall where they were supposed to go.

I knew that when I made the three required copies of it there would be no trace of where the sections had been pasted or the other information had been inserted. With the name and address already on the top right, I pasted the page numbers on the bottom right. Not quite the MLA format I had intended, but visually the finished product looked clean, straight, and balanced. Graphic arts training of countless manual layouts and paste ups helped me save the mess it would otherwise have been.

The next day I didn't have to teach until six fifty. I spent the morning making sure all the other components of the application, along with a new resume were in order.

I left the house around noon. With everything in an oversized envelope, I went to Newark the way I usually did then at Broad Street I caught the New Jersey transit.

I had spoken to more than one person at Fairleigh Dickenson, but all of them drove to work and were unsure of how to get there by train. I ended up with a series of conflicting directions.

It was one of those overcast days and I was glad when I got off the train in Madison, New Jersey that it hadn't begun to rain. According to the instructions the University was supposed to be "right there". It wasn't.

I later discovered that while the town was Madison, the next stop Convent Station, would have brought me almost onto the campus itself.

The next local train would not be coming for two hours, not until rush hour had begun. By that time the admissions office would be closed and I would have missed the deadline. The idea of walking had not seemed impossible, not after all I'd already gone through to make this deadline. Again, "How badly do you want this?"

I set out to walk, asking people along the way for directions. Each time they assured me it wasn't far "just up there" or "Just past such and such road." Some parts of Jersey are like some parts of Miami, without sidewalks, the grass comes right out to the road. Pedestrians just don't exist, and if they do that's their problem. Gradually it began to rain, just to make the walk more interesting and the likelihood of injury greater.

I had an umbrella, but dodging cars, puddles and avoiding the slippery patches of grass did not make a pleasant stroll. You think taxi. Had I known the exact distance, and had I the extra money, I would have thought so too, right there at the train station, but taxis in Madison, New Jersey don't cruise. Once I left the station the option of hailing one did not exist.

It was almost four fifteen when I finally arrived tired, damp, and anxious on the sprawling campus. As I walked through the wrought iron arch, I could see in the distance a cluster of buildings, and another cluster beyond that. Since the guard station was unmanned for the moment, I wandered forward, with the rain now pouring down, following a winding path with lush, well-tended lawns on either side, without seeing anyone to direct me, until a grounds man came along on a motor cart. He gave me a timesaving ride to the correct building. I was blessed that these employees were not scheduled to leave before five.

Upstairs in one of the halls, I walked across carpet and gleaming hardwood floors to reach the office where my application would be accepted. Sitting in an office waiting for someone to take the application, I had a few minutes to review the personal essay I'd written and think of what else I might have said

if only there had been more time. Finally a middle aged woman, with her rain jacket on, came out to take my folder. I looked up at the clock four fifty six.

“Normal” applicants had mailed their applications in weeks or months earlier, here I was looking (and feeling) like the first cousin of a drowned rat. Since the outer envelope was now a soggy mess, I was grateful the inner folder was plastic. Just under the deadline, at least I had made it.

Notification would not come for months. Outside of my friend Albert, I had not told anyone else of my effort to enter Fairleigh Dickenson. Even the letters of recommendation had not stated the exact institution. Even professors at the college where I worked did not need to know my exact plans. Just as I had not told anyone about Brooklyn College, I find it better not to say anything until there's something to say. Still, this time I felt strong. I wondered how the selection process was made. For instance, did earlier applicants have an edge that last minute submissions did not? Just how many spaces did they have in the program? I didn't pester the department with my queries, but I wondered.

One January afternoon, as I left my apartment I collected the mail from the box. There were several letters bills and post cards. I shoved the bunch into my bag and hurried to pay a bill at the bank before they closed. When I came out of the bank on Flatbush Avenue, I stopped in the lobby where people were rushing to cash machines.

I positioned myself on the ledge facing the window so I could go through my mail while I kept an eye out for the bus. Among the bills was a letter from Fairleigh Dickenson. I held the letter and made a silent prayer before opening it.

“Thank you for your recent application to the MFA program in Creative writing; however, we are unable to offer you a place in the program at this time...” I cannot tell you what else it said; I had stopped reading. I was crying. I sat there for who knows how long and cried.

I cried the tears I would not have shown in Professor Black’s office, the tears that had not come, when I thought I’d go blind, or when the sample was ruined. The tears that would have come so many times before, if I had let them, now flooded my face and would not stop...

There was a woman in crisp blue uniform, a manager from the bank asking if there was anything she could do for me. Clearly, this was not good for business.

“Miss, are you alright? Has something happened to you? She began quietly then as though re-thinking the question she continued.

“Is there any way I can assist you?” In other words, had I lost funds? Were my tears in her lobby anything to do with her employees or her establishment? “Are you hurt, have you been injured?” Could I sue? “Is there anyone I can call for you? Who can get this distressed woman out of my lobby? Her questions came in rapid fire, but it was clear I ought to make a reply, and swiftly.

She might call the cops, she might call an ambulance, unless I assured her I would be alright. All that remained was to assure myself.

I knew I could still write; not every writer goes through an MFA program.

Damn I really wanted to do this! Just like the time when the apartment was stripped of everything while I was in N.Y. and the “sympathetic” well-meant suggestions came that I should just give up on a place in Miami, “nobody needs two apartments, anyway” I couldn’t. I couldn’t conceive of letting this whip me. Quitting wasn’t the solution. I knew I’d feel no better if I did.

This time I didn't dally. I took Lachme back to the copy machine. Time was short. This time I chose CCNY. They had a rep for turning out scholars and writers. I would be in somebody's program, or else before I lost my nerve. My cousins had and attended CCNY and later one had worked there...

Unlike the previous attempts, gone was the joy of anticipation.

I took a far less excited stance. Now there was only gritty determination and I'll admit a bit of anger. Again I didn't mention the effort to anyone.

When I finally got the letter which began with, "We are pleased..." I too was pleased; only then could I permit myself to become excited. When I had news, I had something to share...

Well I made it. At least I'm about to make it –make it to graduation for the third time in my college career. This has been about the road to this place.

Once I finally thought it was time to go back and get that elusive Masters everyone else, including one of my baby sisters, seemed to have, I never really doubted that I could do it. I did wonder, many times, if anyone would let me.

For myriad reasons it took me a year after that to finally begin. I started off slowly with one class per term. Once I got an A there, I went back with renewed confidence. I got up to speed, after the finances were in place. I even managed to win a couple of writing awards; one was for a literary paper.

This from someone once accused of not knowing MLA! Working toward this degree and being back in class full time has been a sweet heady ride, made sweeter by the struggle to embark upon it.

Chapter

5

“Just before the sun could puncture the deep purple canopy, the moon, a vampire’s harlot, would gather up the twinkling decorations of her stage, and flee. It was then that the boyfriend would silently steal from the tangle of the sheets and return home.”

IF MY MOTHER...

If my mother had had a boyfriend, he would have come over to take her shopping in his ample sky blue Chevrolet Impala (the one so big that it could not get up his driveway, much less enter his garage). We would not have had to pull that overburdened cart of groceries. I think of this as I recall an instance when the last minute purchase of Quaker oats rolled off the top of the cart during one of the countless times my mother and I trudged home from our weekly trips to the A&P, a few blocks away from our house. Such were the thoughts of a shallow adolescent as she chased the cardboard tube rolling down the sidewalk, heading for the gutter...

I revisit the supposition now, with all the value of womanly wisdom the intervening years have given me. I float between a speculation on what would have been, and recollections of what was...

If my mother had had a boyfriend sometimes the boyfriend would have come over a few times a week to get the things she had forgotten (on purpose) during the last trip. He would very likely have been married. Young single men don't always have money for a large "junior Cadillac," with its triple tail lights.

They are the ones you marry, work beside stroke for stride, hope to build a comfortable life with, have your children with if you will be a wife.

If my mother would have chosen a boyfriend, then better to wait until the his working wife had done the heavy lifting, built him up so that he had something to offer a girlfriend. Wait 'til the fruit is ripe before you pluck it. Let the wife do the planting, weeding, feeding, cultivating and watering, then swoop in and plunder. That's what my mother would have had to do, if she'd had a boyfriend.

He would have taken time from his wife and family to court my mother. With little but his time and money to offer, he would have had to be liberal with both. Tenuous relationships, unbound by laws or vows need extra attention. The sun would have risen or not at her pleasure or displeasure, but alas my mother did not have a boyfriend, instead she had a husband.

If my mother had had a boyfriend, he would have installed himself in her household, to be a father to her children, before giving her two more, leaving his own to make do with the scraps of time left over from his work. If my mother had had a boyfriend, for whom she'd had daughters, we would have wornour mother's ex-husband's name, a name actually no longer hers, much less ours, a name she clung to in place of the one she craved.

No matter how many of us there eventually were, she would not have been able to give us what she herself lacked.

We would have worn the moniker with the same false pride, never claiming what might otherwise have been ours, had the status and legitimacy not already been bestowed.

The girlfriend poached off his wife's relationship to create her own. She garnered the sweets of his wife's love and support.

The business from which her goodies came would not have been possible had not for his wife. Still the girlfriend's resentment overflowed.

If my mother had had a boyfriend she would have called him on Christmas day, the outrage at his absence thick in her voice. She would have greeted the wife with the arrogant demand.

"Can I speak to...?"

When that happened, moments later the boyfriend had to leave his dinner, or face another call, and another. No aid of answering machines or caller I.D. to salvage the moment, abate the glare of his wife's eyes, or stem the torrent of his children's questions, as the uneaten food lay abandoned. By way of reply to it all came the terse utterance.

"I'm going out."

She who must be obeyed, the girlfriend, won that round. Of course the girlfriend knew he would eventually have visited, but to have left his

Christmas dinner unmarred by her presence in his life, would not have slapped his wife. To have waited for him to come in his own time, after he had eaten dinner with his family, played with his children and their new toys, admired the gifts they had bought him, would have relegated the girlfriend to the place (if any) she deserved, somewhere well behind his wife. It would not have sent the right message.

“See me here! I can drag your husband from your dinner table just as I have dragged him from your bed.”

The message, however, and its intended malicious import, required the boyfriend's compliant actions for accurate delivery. Only a woman knows how best to wound another, but it is usually the man who provides the weapon and the reason.

If my mother had had a boyfriend, he would have arrived laden with gifts, his own at home yet unopened, fresh from the ignored dinner his wife had spent days preparing. He would have left her cakes and pone deferred, untouched, piled high. My mother had no boyfriend; she had a husband; therefore, while she made sure the sweet potatoes and coconut were hand grated to perfection for the pone, she made no Christmas calls.

How desperate my mother would have been to be alone on Christmas day, if she'd had a boyfriend, who was enjoying dinner with his family as she sat awaiting his visit. My mother had too much pride for that, to be reduced to railing over a phone on Christmas day. Knowing this maybe that's why she always cautioned me and my sisters.

"...Leave them alone...nothing but pain with a married man."

There was however, no advice if the married man in question happened to be the one to whom she herself was married. What she did not say was that the danger of pain might be the same if you were the one to whom he was married.

I heard the words back then; it took me longer to listen for what lay in the space between them. While the girlfriend fervently hoped, my mother would leave her married man alone, I see the quiet strength (I'd never have) of what it cost a wife to stay and keep her home intact.

If my mother had had a boyfriend we would have been at that amusement park with him and our mother when his cash flush, teenage children and their friends encountered us, one fine hot summer day.

We would have been the ones they surveyed with the curious combination of wonder, contempt, and hostility. He would have smiled sheepishly at his other older children; we would have heard them call him “Daddy” and wondered. He would have asked them if they had enough money to enjoy themselves, then by way of hush money he would have increased their existing sums. We would have seen the twenties for each of them. None the less they would go home to report.

“Guess who we saw at...”

I can see now why such reported sightings functioned on two levels for the girlfriend. For one thing they allowed the wife’s children to unwittingly carry a painful missive to their mother.

“See US here! I also have his children; your children now know it too.”

There was the added benefit of insuring that, despite the wife’s best efforts to ignore and endure with civility, the girlfriend and her children gained the prominence of something beyond myth or rumor. Any time the boyfriend’s children answered the question from one of their friends:

“Isn’t that your father over there? But who are those other people?”

Their reality was re confirmed. A fresh unexpected pain, replenishing itself like some eternal spring, the girlfriend was determined she would neither be forgotten nor ignored. The cunning of the strategy, harsh, bold and loud which eluded me then, has since become clear.

“There was never an outside woman who didn’t want to come in. I don’t care what they say; you only have to see how they act to know.”

My mother’s words return to me and the recollection of my laughter at the vision of some woman shivering out in the cold, until she said

“Just be sure you’re never one of them.”

If my mother had had a boyfriend we would have passed his house, where he lived with his wife and their children, perhaps heard the music and laughter as they entertained friends in the backyard, up the driveway where the blue Impala was parked, seen the garden, where his wife had planted fragrant red and pink roses, seen the berry strewn walk stained with dropping mulberries from the trees on either side, leading up to the porch, with the inviting glider, a perfect match to the green and white rocking chairs, and merely dreamt of ringing the bell.

Instead we would have relied on our mother’s haughty calls to hasten his arrival or chance visits to see him.

We would have envied his children, whom we assumed saw him constantly.

No excuses of work for them, or so we would have thought.

Yes, the boyfriend had to work long hours, which provided the perfect excuse for absences from his wife and family, or why he would never once be able to get away and take a vacation with them. His girlfriend might have become offended, and then what?

The boyfriend's wife was a married single parent. When their youngest daughter was hurtling, like some errant space projectile through the vast unknown of adolescence, it was his wife who single handedly halted and ultimately reversed the downward trajectory. The boyfriend was otherwise occupied with his latest batch of hatchlings. It was also the wife, who traveled around each summer with their children. Otherwise she took vacations with friends like other single woman. He couldn't have afforded so much time without working. He always had to have money. Whores don't work for free! What else is there to call a woman up under a married man for years such that he becomes an additional stream of income for her family?

When her own marriage was merely moribund, instead of seeking means of salvage, this girlfriend, the interloping parasite, sought a replacement man (spare part) from another (her cousin's) marriage. Stinking, miserable, low life flat back worker! What does misery love?

So, yes the boyfriend worked and so did his wife. It was her strong professional income, which freed more of his to augment the support of the girlfriend and her spawn. That's how poor men manage the costly paramours, rich men could always successfully have. No, the boyfriend's children would not lack the material, perhaps only the emotional, but say whatever the boyfriend would never actually leave his family.

His children would see him daily coming or going. Other times there would be monetary indication of his fleeting presence left on the kitchen table. Or in response to some "Dear Daddy" note left on the refrigerator, neat piles of cash (usually fives and singles) answered the request. On Wednesdays the regular piles were laid out. In tens and twenties for the wife, was the 'house money' with which she kept house. Next in descending order were smaller sums of allowances for each of his children. Thus though he would have had little time for his family, the boyfriend maintained good care of them. After all, even when she no longer worked outside the home, his wife still kept house for him, cooked his food, and washed his clothes. The boyfriend would have had to change and be fresh for his visits with my mother. That way he would have arrived at my mother's house (not too far from his) fresh and fed.

Later on, when his wife grew sick, no doubt from years of stressful unhappiness, and could no longer work at all, and the girlfriend's pulse quickened at the prospect of a speedy exit, the wife's husband remained her husband. Neither of them was going anywhere.

He was there to pay for the nurses who tended her, fight for the right doctors and sometimes fight with the others on her behalf. In the interim, however, rather than a total departure, it was more like an extended emotional vacation.

Just before the sun could puncture the regal dark purple canopy, the moon, a vampire's harlot, would gather up the twinkling decorations of her stage and flee. It was then the boyfriend would steal silently from the tangle of the sheets and return home. If my mother had had a boyfriend, she too would have awoken alone.

The boyfriend and girlfriend would have sipped and, supped, snacked, and sucked, loved and laughed the previous night away. He would not, however, be eating breakfast there. Thus of all the things she bought when her boyfriend took her shopping, the girlfriend did not buy oatmeal.

At home the boyfriend pattered around the kitchen, putting on the kettle for tea and the pot of water for oatmeal.

He would make a large pot before going to work and leave the remainder thick, hot, and sweet with cream and honey for his children's breakfast.

Between a mother, who despite her own job, cooked daily, and a father whose money bought the food, the boyfriend's children never knew a hungry day (or night) in that house. If his wife awoke, together they would maintain the farce that he had wakened only shortly before she had. The children might not notice.

If my mother had been a girlfriend, over the years she would have continued her campaign to drive the wife out of her marriage. She would have so provoked the wife that she (the girlfriend) would finally have had a putrid concoction of pungent acrid spices, suspended in a thick 'fragrantly, fermented elixir' of bodily fluids, hurled in her face one fine fall evening, just as she was about to go dancing with her boyfriend.

Upon seeing the familiar sky blue Impala pulling up, certain that none but the beloved boyfriend could be at the wheel, the girlfriend, hot and eager, flung wide her door. What a surprise!

"Here's some perfume to suit your dress!"

With that the contents of a large peanut butter jar, which had pureed and putrefied for months in the nether regions beneath the wife's bed, splashed forward and landed with accurate aim.

The peppers, onions and garlic diced by the same deft hand which had seasoned countless meals, to the delight of her spice loving husband, performed another task. Tiny bits of assorted peppers (seeds and all) which had absorbed Angustora bitters, salt, vinegar and lemon to amplify their intensity, clung to the freshly pressed hair, mingled with the array of kiss curls framing the fat contorted face, slid down into the shock widened eyes, before finally dripping into the gaping over-rouged hole of the girlfriend's howling mouth.

Momentarily blinded, while simultaneously nauseated, the girlfriend was immobilized by the searing pain in her eyes and the filthy taste in her mouth. Fat fists rubbed the flaming eyes, yielding the effect of rubbing marinade into meat. This of course made it all but impossible for the wailing woman to mount a response before the slight, sly wife retreated to the sanctuary of the car. Whatever curses, invectives or threats uttered, landed on the rear of the sky blue Impala, with its triple lights twinkling as it receded down the block...

In the rearview mirror the driver could enjoy her handiwork. The hair, so carefully coifed then a shrinking, stinking mess.

The new dress, tacky and tight, cut to show off the bubbling bosom, which threatened to overflow and escape its bounds, was a splotched ruin, never to be worn again. The look of agony on the short round woman's face, and best the taste of the wife's personal essence on those thick raging lips would not soon be erased.

No, there would be no dancing that night. Safe to say the wife had won that round. How is revenge best served?

At the end, if my mother had had a boyfriend, she would have been the one (her own health questionable) to make bold and enter the home of a woman who would never have invited her in.

Hobbling on the lone leg the surgeons had not yet claimed, she would have been the one skulking around his wife's sickbed like some evil scavenger albatross, hoping the wife would hasten along and die and clear the path for her, that one day she could at least limp about their house as freely as her own.

If my mother had had a boyfriend, perhaps she would not have known that there are some women men will marry and others with whom they will merely tarry, and the two are not often the same.

There are also some who will keep a wife around as an excuse not to marry some sixty year old girlfriend. Never mind that he would have been with the girlfriend since she was thirty-five, she would still not have been wife material. There are even some who actually love the wife despite a girlfriend.

Because my mother was not a girlfriend, she knew these things only too well. She was a wife, she didn't have to wait for wives to clear her path; she had the 'status' others coveted.

Because my mother did not have a boyfriend, when such unwelcomed guests came to call, to check on the estimated time of her departure, my mother, ever the strong woman of her word, determined to win the championship, and emerge the last one remaining, smirked and stared through her pain as if to say,

"After you, dear. I'll go, but only after you do."

Jacqueline Annette Phillips

2.24.12