

# Still Writing

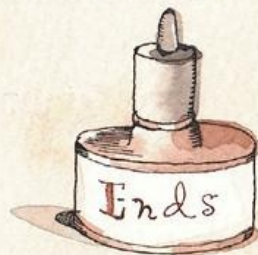
The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life



Dani Shapiro

# Still Writing

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*The Pleasures and Perils of a Creative Life*

Also by Dani Shapiro

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*Devotion*

*Black & White*

*Family History*

*Slow Motion*

*Picturing the Wreck*

*Fugitive Blue*

*Playing with Fire*

# STILL WRITING

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## *The Pleasures and Perils of a Creative Life*

BY DANI SHAPIRO



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*In Memory of Grace Paley*

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*“I have to get lost so I can invent some way out.”*

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—David Sal



# STILL WRITING

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*The Pleasures and Perils of a Creative Life*

## INTRODUCTION

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I've heard it said that everything you need to know about life can be learned from watching baseball. I'm not what you'd call a sports fan, so I don't know if this is true, but I do believe in a similar philosophy, which is that everything you need to know about life can be learned from a genuine and ongoing attempt to write.

At least this has been the case for me.

I have been writing all my life. Growing up, I wrote in soft-covered journals, in spiral-bound notebooks, in diaries with locks and keys. I wrote love letters and lies, stories and missives. When I wasn't writing, I was reading. And when I wasn't writing or reading, I was staring out the window, lost in thought. Life was elsewhere—I was sure of it—and writing was what took me there. In my notebooks, I escaped an unhappy and lonely childhood. I tried to make sense of myself. I had no intention of becoming a writer. I didn't know that becoming a writer was possible. Still, writing was what saved me. It presented me with a window into the infinite. It allowed me to create order out of chaos.

Of course, there's a huge difference between the scribblings of a young girl in her journals—would never get out from under my bed if anyone were ever to read them—and the sustained, grown-up work of crafting something resonant and lasting, a story that might shed light on our human condition. "The good writer," Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal, "seems to be writing about himself, but has his eye always on that thread of the universe which runs through himself and all things."

Sitting down to write isn't easy. A few years ago, a local high school asked me if a student who was interested in becoming a writer might come and observe me. Observe me! I had to decline. I couldn't imagine what the poor student would think, watching me sit, then stand, sit again, decide that I needed more coffee, go downstairs and make the coffee, come back up, sit again, get up, comb my hair, sit again, stare at the screen, check e-mail, stand up, pet the dog, sit again . . .

You get the picture.

The writing life requires courage, patience, persistence, empathy, openness, and the ability to deal with rejection. It requires the willingness to be alone with oneself. To be gentle with oneself. To look at the world without blinders on. To observe and withstand what one sees. To be disciplined, and at the same time, take risks. To be willing to fail—not just once, but again and again, over the course of a lifetime. "Ever tried, ever failed," Samuel Beckett once wrote. "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." It requires what the great editor Ted Solotoroff once called *endurability*. It is this quality, most of all, that I think of when I look around a classroom at a group of aspiring writers. Some of them will be more gifted than others. Some of them will be driven, ambitious for success or fame, rather than by the determination to do their best possible work. But of the students I have taught, it is not necessarily the most gifted, or the ones most focused on imminent literary fame (I think of them as short sprinters), but the ones who endure, who are still writing, decades later.

It is my hope that—whether you're a writer or not—this book will help you to discover or rediscover the qualities necessary for a creative life. We are all unsure of ourselves. Every one of us walking the planet wonders, secretly, if we are getting it wrong. We stumble along. We love and we lose. At times, we find unexpected strength, and at other times, we succumb to our fears. We are impatient. We want to know what's around the corner, and the writing life won't offer us this. It forces us into the here and now. There is only this moment, when we put pen to page.

Had I not, as a young woman, discovered that I was a writer, had I not met some extraordinary generous role models and teachers and mentors who helped me along the way, had I not begun to forge a path out of my own personal wilderness with words, I might not be here to tell this story. I would

spinning, whirling, without any sense of who I was, or what I was made of. I was slowly, quietly killing myself. But after writing saved my life, the practice of it also became my teacher. It is impossible to spend your days writing and not begin to know your own mind.

The page is your mirror. What happens inside you is reflected back. You come face-to-face with your own resistance, lack of balance, self-loathing, and insatiable ego—and also with your singular vision, guts, and fortitude. No matter what you've achieved the day before, you begin each day at the bottom of the mountain. Isn't this true for most of us? A surgeon about to perform a difficult operation is at the bottom of the mountain. A lawyer delivering a closing argument. An actor waiting in the wings. A teacher on the first day of school. Sometimes we may think that we're in charge, that we have things figured out. Life is usually right there, though, ready to knock us over when we get too sure of ourselves. Fortunately, if we have learned the lessons that years of practice have taught us, when this happens, we endure. We fail better. We sit up, dust ourselves off, and begin again.



“Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin

—DONALD BARTHELEME

I grew up the only child of older parents. If I were to give you a list of all the facts of my early life that made me a writer, this one would be near the top. *Only child. Older parents.* It now almost seems like a job requirement—though back then, I wished it to be otherwise. A lonely, isolated childhood isn't a prerequisite for a writing life, of course, but it certainly helped. My parents were observant Jews. We kept a kosher home. On the Sabbath, from sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday, we didn't drive, we didn't turn on lights, or the radio, or television, and I wasn't allowed to ride my bike, or play the piano, or do homework. This left me with a lot of time to do nothing. Most Saturday mornings, I walked a half-mile to synagogue with my father while my mother stayed home with a sinus headache.

Our house was silent and spotless. Dirt, smudges, noise—any kind of disarray would have been unthinkable. Housekeepers were always quitting. No one could keep the house to my mother's standards. Every surface gleamed. Picture frames were dusted daily. Sheets and pillowcases were ironed three times a week. My drawers were color-coordinated: blue Danskin tops perfectly folded next to blue Danskin bottoms. The exterminator came monthly. The toxic mold guy made biannual visits. Summers, the lawn man came every few days with his mower and hedge trimmer, clipping our suburban New Jersey acre into shape.

Control was important. It wasn't the messiness of life that we were girding ourselves against. Secrets floated through our home like dust motes in the air. Every word spoken by my parents contained within it a hidden hard kernel of what wasn't being said. Though I couldn't have expressed it, I knew with a child's instincts that life was seen by both my parents as a teeming, seething, frightful hall of mirrors. Something had made them scared. They tried to protect me from themselves from their own histories—*das kind*, one of them would whisper harshly and they'd stop talking after I entered the room. I loved my parents, but I didn't want to be like them. I didn't want to be afraid of life. The trouble was, their way was all I knew.

And so I spent my childhood straining to hear. With no siblings to distract me, I had plenty of time and eavesdropped and snooped in every way I could devise. I lurked outside doorways, crouched on staircase landings. I fiddled with the intercom system in our house, attempting to tune in to rooms where one or both of my parents might be. I riffled through filing cabinets when my parents were out to dinner and the babysitter was downstairs watching "The Partridge Family." I haunted my mother's closets—the cashmere sweaters in individual plastic garment bags, the shoes and purses in their original boxes. What was I hoping to find? A clue. A *reason*. We had telephones in almost every room, but the one in my mother's office had a little doohickey that you could lift up, preventing anyone from picking up another extension, and listening in. I noticed that whenever my mother was on the phone, she used it. What was she saying that I wasn't meant to hear?

I didn't know that this spying was the beginning of my literary education. That the need to know, to discover, to peel away the surface was a training ground for who and what I would grow up to become. The idea of becoming a writer was more remote to me than becoming an astronaut. I didn't know any writers. Our neighborhood wasn't an artistic hotbed. I didn't draw parallels between the books I loved and read every night under the covers with a flashlight, and the idea that someone—a woman, sitting alone in a room, wrestling with words and thoughts and ideas—could in fact spend her life writing them.

I slunk around like a detective. I learned to hide on the staircase without making a sound. I wanted to unearth the sources of my parents' pain, though it would be many years before I would begin to understand it. All I knew was this: life seemed sad. It seemed parched, fruitless, devoid of joy. By the time I was eleven or twelve, I began to escape into my room and to write. I discovered m

imagination, where I was free of my father's sorrow, my mother's headaches. I was free from the sense that my parents were disappointed in each other, and from my fear that they would be disappointed in me. I was free from *das kind!*, and the Sabbath rules. I closed and locked my bedroom door—take *that*, parents!—and I made up stories. Sometimes I wrote them as letters to friends. Sometimes I pretended every word was true.

I wondered if I might be crazy.

I had no idea that I was becoming a writer.

Here's a short list of what not to do when you sit down to write. Don't answer the phone. Don't look e-mail. Don't go on the Internet for any reason, including checking the spelling of some obscure word or for what you might think of as research but is really a fancy form of procrastination. Do you need to know, right this minute, the exact make and year of the car your character is driving? Do you need to know which exit on the interstate has a rest stop? Can it wait? It can almost always wait. On the list of other, less fancy procrastinations, when your wild surge of energy is accompanied by the urge to leap up from your desk, are: laundry, baking, marketing, filling out insurance claims, writing thank-you notes, cleaning closets, sorting files, weeding, scrubbing, polishing, arranging, removing stairs, bathing the dog.

Sit down. Stay there. It's hard—I know just how hard—and I hate to tell you this, but it doesn't get easier. Ever. Get used to the discomfort. Make some kind of peace with it. Several years ago, I decided to learn how to meditate, though I thought, as many do, that I'd be bad at it: *I'm too type A. I can't sit still*. But I needed something that, when I did get up from my desk, would bring me peace and clarity. All of my writer friends have rituals: my friend Jenny runs. John cooks barbecue. Mary swims. Ann knits. These are meditative acts—ones that allow the mind to roam, and ultimately to rest. When I sit down to meditate, I feel much the same way I do when I sit down to write: resistant, fidgety, anxious, eager, cranky, despairing, hopeful, my mind jammed so full of ideas, my heart so full of feelings that it seems impossible to contain them. And yet . . . if I do just sit there without checking the clock without answering the ringing phone, without jumping up to make a note of an all-important task, then slowly the random thoughts pinging around my mind begin to settle. If I allow myself, I begin to see more clearly what's going on. Like a snow globe, that flurry of white floats down.

During the time devoted to your writing, think of the surges of energy coursing through your body as waves. They will come, they will crash over you, and then they will go. You'll still be sitting there. Nothing terrible will have happened. Try not to run from the wave. If, at one moment, you are sitting quietly at your desk, and then—fugue state alert!—you are suddenly on your knees planting tulips, perusing your favorite online shopping Web site, and you don't know how you got there, then the wave has won. We don't want the wave to win. We want to recognize it, accept its power, and eventually learn to ride it. We want to learn to withstand those wild surges, because everything we need to know, everything valuable, is contained within them.

Sometimes, when I'm teaching, I'll start to talk to my students about the nasty little two-timing frenemy of everyone who struggles to put words down on the page—and, without even realizing I'm doing it, I'll start gesturing to my left shoulder. Never my right, always my left. That's apparently where my censor sits. She has been in residence on my left shoulder for so many years that it's a wonder I'm not completely lopsided.

Here are some of the things she whispers, or shouts, depending on her mood, whenever I'm beginning something new:

This is stupid.

What a waste of time.

(Condescending laugh)

You really think you can pull that off?

So-and-so did it better.

What a dumb idea.

How boring.

Are you ready for a nap?

My inner censor wants to shut me down. She wants me to close up shop, like the man in one of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons, who stands in the left frame, staring out a window looking bored and resigned. This frame is titled "Writer's Block: Temporary." The right frame shows him standing in the exact same way; nothing has changed, except now he's in front of a fish store bearing his name. The title? "Writer's Block: Permanent." My censor wants no less than to turn me into a fish salesman. Not that there's anything wrong with selling fish, except that I don't know anything about selling fish and I am not particularly fond of the way it smells. What I do know—what I've spent the past couple decades learning about myself—is that if I'm not writing, I'm not well. If I'm not writing, the world around me is slowly leached of its color. My senses are dulled. I am crabby with my husband, short-tempered with my kid, and more inclined to see small things wrong with my house (the crack in the ceiling, the smudge prints along the staircase wall) than look out the window at the blazing maple tree or the family of geese making its way across our driveway. If I'm not writing, my heart hardens, rather than lifts.

And so I have learned how to live with my censor. It doesn't happen by fighting her. It happens first by recognizing her—*oh, hello, it's you again*—and accepting our coexistence. Like those bumper stickers most often seen on the backs of Priuses spelling out *coexist* in the symbols of all the world's religions, the writer and her inner censor need to learn to get along. The I.C., once you're on a nickname basis, should be treated like an annoying, potentially undermining colleague. Try managing her with corporate-speak: *Thanks for reaching out, but can I circle back to you later?*

The daily discipline of this creates a muscle memory. It becomes ingrained, thereby habit. I try to remember this, each morning, as I make the solitary trek from the kitchen to my desk. My house is quiet. My family is gone. The hours stretch ahead of me. The beds have been made, the dogs have been walked. There is nothing stopping me. Nothing, except for the toxic little troll sitting on my left shoulder. Just when I think I have her beat, she will assume a new disguise. I have to be vigilant, on the ready. She will pretend to be well-intentioned. She's telling me *for my own good*.

Maybe you should try writing something more commercial.

You know, thrillers are hot. Why not write a thriller? Or at least a mystery?

Sweetheart (I hate it when she calls me sweetheart) no one wants to read a book about a depressed old man. Or a passive-aggressive mother. Why not write a book with a strong female protagonist, for change? You know, a superheroine. Someone less . . . I don't know . . . victimy?



Under the guise of being helpful, or honest, my censor is like a guided missile aiming at every nook and cranny where I am at my weakest and most vulnerable. She will stoop and connive. All she wants to do is stop me from entering that sacred space from which the work springs. She is at her most insidious when I am at the beginning, because she knows that once I have begun, she will lose her power over me. And so I dip my toe into the stream. I feel the rush of words there. Words that are like a thousand silvery minnows, below the surface, rushing by. If I don't capture them, they will be lost.

Start small. If you try to think about all of it at once—the world you hope to capture on the page, everything you know, every idea you’ve ever had, each person you’ve met, and the panoply of feelings coursing through you like a river—you’ll be overcome with paralysis. Who wouldn’t be? Just the way we put one foot in front of the other as we get out of bed, the way we brush our teeth, splash water on our faces, feed our animals if we have animals, and our children if we have them, measure the coffee put on the kettle, we need to approach our writing one step at a time. It’s impossible to evoke an entire world at the start. But it *is* possible to describe a crack in the sidewalk, the scuffed heel of a shoe. And that sidewalk crack or scuffed heel can be the point of entry, like a pinhole of light, to a story, a character, a universe.

Think of a jigsaw puzzle—one of those vexingly complicated puzzles that comes in a big box. Almost every family rec room has, at one point or another, seen one of these puzzles, spilled from its box, hundreds of pieces strewn across the floor. It starts out as a fun rainy day activity and—unless the family members are both freakishly patient and spacially gifted—there it will stay, gathering dust until, finally, someone sweeps all the puzzle pieces back into the box and retires it to the far reaches of a cupboard, never to be seen again. Too many colors and shapes! Too many possibilities! Where do we even begin?

This is the writer’s mind when embarking on a piece of work. We sit perched in front of our laptop screen, or our spiral-bound notebook, or giant desktop monitor, and—we freeze. After all, it’s so important, isn’t it, where we start? Don’t we need a plan? Hadn’t we better know where we’re going? The stakes feel impossibly high. We’re convinced that first word will dictate every word that follows. We are tyrannized by our options. All sorts of voices scream in our heads. First person or third? Present tense or past? The span of five minutes? Or two hundred years? What the hell are we doing? We don’t know.

Build a corner. This is what people who are good at puzzles do. They ignore the heap of colors and shapes and simply look for straight edges. They focus on piecing together one tiny corner. Every book, story, and essay begins with a single word. Then a sentence. Then a paragraph. These words, sentences, paragraphs may well end up not being the actual beginning. You can’t know that now. Straining to know the whole of the story before you set out is a bit like imagining great-grandchildren on a first date. But you can start with the smallest detail. Give us the gravel scattering along the highway as the pickup truck roars past. The crumb of food the wife wipes from her husband’s beard. The ripped bottom of a girl’s faded jeans. Anchor yourself somewhere—anywhere—on the page. You are committing, yes—but the commitment is to this tiny corner. One word. One image. One detail. Go ahead. Then see what happens next.

One of my dearest friends began her last novel—one that went on to become a prizewinning best seller—by telling herself that she was going to write a short, bad book. For a long time, she talked about the short, bad book she was writing. And she believed it. It released her from her fear of failure. It's a beautiful strategy. Anyone can write a short, bad book, right?

A while back, I was looking through a file on my computer in which I keep drafts of all my essays and stories and book reviews, and I realized that each one of these dozens of pieces had begun with the same phrase rolling through my head: *here goes nothing*. It's my version of telling myself that I'm going to write a short, bad book. *Here goes nothing*. The more we have at stake, the harder it is to make the leap into writing. The more we think about who's going to read it, what they're going to think, how many copies will be printed, whether this magazine or that magazine will accept it for publication, the further away we are from accomplishing anything alive on the page.

My son Jacob is in a rock band. When he starts learning a new song, he likes to spend a lot of time printing out the sheet music, getting it to look just right before he puts it in his binder. Then, he thinks about the YouTube video he wants to make, the record label who will sign them. All this, before he's learned to play the thing. I know this feeling well, this fantasy, these dreams of glory. I smile at them in my son, who, after all, is twelve and doing exactly what twelve-year-olds should be doing: trying on different identities for size. But I try to eliminate them in myself.

Years ago, I received my first big assignment from *The New Yorker*. On the checklist of dreams I pretended not to have, this was at the top. Now I had the chance. I had a contract for one of those "Personal History" pieces. A deadline. The story, which was an investigation into a family secret—an early, tragic marriage of my late father—was rich and sad and beautiful, and I wanted to do it justice. In the days and weeks after landing the assignment, I sat down each morning to write, and nothing happened. As I sat at my desk on West Ninety-second Street in Manhattan, instead of making that journalistic and imaginative leap into the world of Brooklyn circa 1948, I pictured my story in the pages of *The New Yorker*. What would it look like in *New Yorker* font? Would it have an illustration? What would the illustration be? Maybe they'd want an old picture of my dad. I made sure I had several of these around, should the photo department call.

I couldn't write. I grew tense. I was strangled by my own ego, by my petty desire for what I perceived to be the literary brass ring. I was missing the point, of course. The reward is in the doing. Most published writers will tell you that the moment they hold the book, or the prestigious magazine piece, or the good review, or the *whatever* in their hands—that moment is curiously hollow. It can't live up to the sweat, the solitude, the bloody battle that it represents.

I did eventually tire of my fantasies of being published in *The New Yorker*, and just got down to work. I set my alarm clock for a predawn hour and stumbled straight from bed to desk in an attempt to short-circuit the cocktail party chatter in my head, which went something like: *Oh, did you read . . . Yes, brilliant . . . and a National Magazine Award to boot*, and started with one word, and then another, then another, until I had a sentence. *Here goes nothing*. Eventually, I had pages. They were imperfect, maybe even *bad*, but I had begun. And these years later, when I think of that essay, what I remember most is not the moment I saw my work in *New Yorker* font, not when I saw the illustration of my father, not the congratulatory phone calls and notes that followed, but that predawn morning in my bedroom, at my desk, the lights of cars below on Broadway, my computer screen glowing in the dark.

It doesn't really matter what or where it is, as long as it is yours. I don't necessarily mean that it has to belong to you. Only that, for the time that you're working, you have what you need. Learning what you need to do your best work is a big step forward in the life of any writer. We all have different requirements, different ways of working. I have a friend who likes to write on the subway. She will board the F train just to get work done. The jostle and cacophony—she finds it clears her mind. My friend would have to shoot me first. For one, I'm a wee bit claustrophobic. Also, I need solitude and silence. I have friends who work best in coffee shops, others who like to work in the same room as their partners. Friends who have written multiple books at their kitchen tables. Marcel Proust famously wrote in bed, and so did Wendy Wasserstein. Gay Talese, the son of an Italian tailor, dresses in a custom-made suit each morning and descends the stairs to his basement study. Hemingway wrote standing up. One writer I know works best late at night, a habit left over from the years when she had young children under her roof and those were the only hours that were hers alone.

As I write these words, I am sitting in a small chair upholstered in a blue-and-white checkered pattern, my feet resting on an ottoman. I am in a guest bedroom in a large and empty house that belongs to a friend. My own home just a few miles away is uninhabitable because of a freak autumn blizzard that caused a loss of power all over New England. For the past couple of days I have burrowed into this chair and haven't moved for hours. I learned to make myself a cappuccino—caffeine being one of my requirements—using my friend's machine. I've worked well in this blue-and-white checkered chair. In this strange time-out-of-time, while my son has been sledding with his friends and my husband has been driving around helping marooned motorists, I have been here in the silence, save for the hum of the generator. No one knows where I am. The Internet is down. The phone won't ring. There is no laundry to do, no rearranging of the spice drawer. And so this guest room in my borrowed home has become my room of my own.

We writers spend our days making something out of nothing. There is the blank page (or screen) and then there is the fraught and magical process of putting words down on that page. There is no shape, no blueprint until one emerges from the page, as if through a mist. Is it a mirage? Is it real? We can't know. And so we need a sense of structure around us. These four walls. This cup. The wheels of the train beneath us. This borrowed room. The weight of this particular pen. Whatever it is that makes us feel secure in our physical space allows us to make the leap, hoping that the page will catch up. Writing, after all, is an act of faith. We must believe, without the slightest evidence that believing will get us anywhere.

Recently I was wandering through one of my favorite stores in a town near my home, and I saw a chaise longue. It wasn't just any chaise longue, it was the perfect chaise longue, the one I had been dreaming of, the one I hadn't even known existed. Delicate yet sturdy, covered in an antique Tibetan blanket . . . oh, how I wanted it. It wasn't cheap, and I'm not in the habit of buying furniture on impulse, or really at all. I took a photo of the chaise with my phone, and occasionally, in the days that followed, I'd sneak a peek. I went back to the store often enough that the saleswoman asked me if I was coming to visit my chair. Finally, I plunked down my credit card, feeling slightly sick to my stomach. There are a lot of things we need in our home more than a chaise longue covered by an antique Tibetan blanket. A generator, for instance. But I had to have it, and here's why: although I have an office in my home, it had grown stale. My desk was piled high with papers, mail, and various forms that had nothing to do with my writing life. My office had begun to feel like a prison rather than a sanctuary. Its walls no longer supported me and the view out my window might as well have been of a brick wall rather than a lovely meadow. I needed a change. I knew I would write well, that I would curl up and *read* well, in that chaise longue. I would settle myself on that soft Tibetan blanket, m

notebook in my lap, books strewn all around me. Safe and secure in that space, I'd dare to dig for the elusive words.

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In my yoga practice, I have been taught to begin in mountain pose. Mountain pose—standing with feet slightly apart, with head, neck, and pelvis in alignment, eyes softly focused, face relaxed—is a grounding pose. Until we can feel the ground beneath our feet, supporting us, we cannot attempt the other poses: eagle, dancer, warrior. We need to be rooted before we can fly. And although those other poses might look more challenging, sometimes it feels as if mountain pose is the most challenging of all. To be still. To be grounded. To claim one's place in the world.

In our New Jersey neighborhood when I was young, a family called the Adlers lived a few blocks away. If you can have a crush not just on one person but on an entire family, I had one on the Adlers. The father, mother, two sons and daughter seemed to be everything my small family was not. The house was alive with comings and goings. Cars and bicycles filled their driveway. They always had visitors for weekend lunch, and dined outdoors in warm weather, the sound of their easy conversation drifting through the hedges that separated their backyard from the street. They were content with each other—a family who sought out the company only of itself.

Most Sundays, I would ride my bike in circles around their block until one of them would notice me and wave me over. The kids were all older than me, and they took me in, sort of the way you'd take in a cute but needy stray cat. I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, and they would gently tease me. Harvey and Eddie Adler would tell me that they'd wait for me and marry me some day. They were both in medical school, and on weekends they'd bring home girlfriends—beautiful, sophisticated, long-haired young women who wore stacked-heel boots and dangling earrings, who were in law school or did social work or advertising. I wanted to be them. I wanted to skip my teenage years entirely and leapfrog into adulthood. I wanted out of my parents' quiet house and the feeling I couldn't shake that something was very wrong.

Sorrow had by then taken up a permanent place in our home. My father injured his back and underwent spinal-fusion surgery, which at the time was quite dangerous. Now I understand the chronic pain that would have driven a man to sign up for an operation that carried with it a real risk of paralysis. But back then, I watched my father fade into an angry, rigid, stricken figure who hung by traction from the door of our den, the folds of his neck squished around his face by a brace, watching *Hogan's Heroes*. I didn't know about the failures, both real and self-perceived, that had become too much for him to bear. I didn't know about the Valium and codeine that he had begun to abuse. I didn't know anything about my parents' marriage except that a brittleness existed between them, the air so dry that it seemed always ready to ignite.

It would be twenty more years before I would get the assignment from *The New Yorker* and, through the writing of it, begin to understand. I exhumed the ghost of my father's early marriage to a young woman who was dying of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma as she walked down the aisle. A woman whose name had never been uttered in our home but who was later described to me, by relatives and friends interviewed, as the love of his life. As a writer, I assembled and arranged the pieces of my grieving young father on the page until they became a portrait—true to memory, reporting, imagination, collage and an elegy.

All I knew then, with the canny survival instincts of a teenager, was that the Adler house was way more fun than ours. Harvey and Eddie played tennis with me, and on another neighbor's court I became a strong player, slamming the ball boy-style, low over the net, but mostly I was eyeing Eddie's thighs, his blond hair glistening in the sun. That tennis court, those young medical students, their noblesse oblige willingness to call me into their midst—those were the hours in which it seemed a door opened to a brighter, easier, happier future. Who knew? Maybe Eddie *would* wait for me.

The year I turned sixteen, the youngest Adler, a dark, wild beauty named Joyce, was found lying unconscious on the floor of her college dormitory room. She'd had a stroke—a freak aneurysm—from which she never recovered. She and I hadn't been close—I was an interloper, she tolerated me—but I had admired and envied her for what I imagined to be her perfect life. The first time I went to visit her, at a rehabilitation center in New Jersey, she was propped in a wheelchair, her eyes unfocused, her face contorted. She remained quadriplegic and unable to speak, but fully conscious, for the next twenty years until she died. This was my awakening. *Randomness, suddenness, the fickle nature*

*good fortune.* These drilled themselves into me, and eventually became the themes central to all of my work. ~~I started sleeping with Eddie Adler when I was seventeen, and he very quickly broke my heart.~~ *Things are not what they seem.* The Adler parents were never again able to look at me without thinking: *Why not you?* My father, pale and wincing in pain. A lazy Susan in the center of our kitchen table, slowly filling with narcotics. My mother, who hadn't paid attention to her wedding vows. *For better or for worse.*

From the chaise longue, the subway seat, the borrowed room, we see: a man hanging in traction, his angry wife, the strong, tanned thighs of a callow medical student, a beautiful, ruined girl. We see: a still and silent house, a bicycle circling, a girl who is lost, who is confused by all she sees, for which she doesn't have language. She will grow up to find the language. Finding the language. It's what we can hope for.

Ann Sexton once remarked in an interview, when asked why she wrote such dark and painful poems that pain engraves a deeper memory. *Pain engraves a deeper memory.* Think of a time in your own life when you have experienced a sudden shock, a betrayal, terrible news. Perhaps you remember the weather, the quality of the breeze, a half-full ashtray, a scratch on the wooden floor, the moth-eaten sweater you were wearing, the siren in the distance. Pain carves details into us, yes. I would wager though, that great joy does as well. Strong emotion, Virginia Woolf said, must leave its trace. Staring at the page while writing, grow still and quiet, press toward that strong emotion and you will discover it anew. The Adlers were the first of a particular kind of hurt for me. And so they stayed alive inside of me. They are alive still.

These traces that live within us often lead us to our stories. Joan Didion called this a *shimmer around the edges*. Emerson called it a gleam. “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within,” he wrote in his great essay, “On Self Reliance.” “You he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.” *Because it is his.* That knowledge, that *ping*, the hair on our arms standing up, that sudden, electric sense of knowing. We must learn to watch for these moments. To not discount them. To take note: *I’ll have to write about this.* It can happen in a split second, or as a slow dawning. It happens when our histories collide with the present. When it arrives, it’s unmistakable, indelible. It comes with the certainty of its own rightness. When I first met my husband, at a Halloween party, I thought: *There you are.* It’s a bit like that with our subject matter. We don’t walk around trolling for ideas like people on beaches with those funny little machines panning for coins; we don’t go looking on the equivalent of match.com in search of Emerson’s gleam. But when we stumble upon it, we know. We know because it shimmers. And if you are a writer, you will find that you won’t give up that shimmer for anything. You live for it. Like falling in love, moments that announce themselves as your subject are rare, and there’s a magic to them. Ignore them at your own peril.



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