The Other Side

by
Bonnie Lee Black

(Photo: Rainbow and Storm over the Gorge, courtesy of Geraint Smith)

In loving memory of my
oldest and dearest friend,
Kathy Collins
(24 July 1945 - 23 August 2024)

Nos vemos pronto, espero, Kath

“Each time a woman
stands up for herself –
without knowing it,
possibly, without claiming it –
she stands up for all women.”

~ ~ Maya Angelou

Preface

People have asked me why I chose to marry him. The simplest answer to this question is a two-word sentence: *I didn't*. He chose me. He told me, "You are the answer to my prayers. I'm going to marry you." And then he proceeded to do so.

I was a different person then, and that was a different time and place. I was young, only 19 – almost half his age – and utterly naïve. I was not yet fully formed. I had no confidence in myself, no backbone. I've tried to correct these crippling flaws over the past 60 years.

My first book, SOMEWHERE CHILD (Viking Press, 1981), tells the *what* of the story of my daughter's abduction by her father. I was in my mid-30s when I wrote SOMEWHERE CHILD, a recent graduate of Columbia University's writing program, a brokenhearted mother desperate to find her missing child. And, thankfully, the book did that.

But by then, I found, the damage had been done. She was raised to believe the reason she and her father had been living on the run for so many years was that I, her mother, was a bad person from whom he had to do all to protect her.

He'd filled her mind with the same monstrous lies he'd tried to use in custody cases in court when she was a young child, cases he'd lost for good reason. With her, however, he won. He even changed her first name to Victoria, representing his "victory."

Now that I'm much older, nearing 80, and I like to think wiser about many things, including men, I feel I can be more dispassionate and perhaps even somewhat analytical in approaching this tragic, but not unique, parental abduction story.

In doing so I need to ask – and attempt to answer – some haunting questions: *Why did he do what he did? Why did he take our baby and run away? Why did he fill her mind with such horrible, indelible lies? Why would a person do such a thing?*

He was a complicated, mysterious man – a man of his time and place, I now believe. I must try to solve some of these mysteries, for myself as well as others. I must pick up this story again but this time try to look at it from all sides. I can hope, but I don't expect that my daughter will be swayed by my findings. I simply need to devote what's left of my life to seeking the larger truths.

Military Might

"But never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime. Ask any infantry and ask the dead." – Ernest Hemingway

This quest to find some plausible reasons why my ex-husband did what he did was sparked in part by recent news reports of scientific findings that soldiers who experience repeated exposure to blasts can suffer permanent traumatic brain injury, leading in some cases to extremely harmful, even violent behavior.

I learned that postmortem studies, which is the only way this damage can be examined at this time, have found a pattern of brain scarring unique to service members who've endured repeated explosions. Experts and researchers appear to agree that the research and technology needed to fully understand and treat this type of traumatic brain injury – similar to but not the same as CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy), a degenerative brain disease associated with behavioral and cognitive issues in athletes who suffer repeated blows to the head – is still lagging.

I learned there is no officially accepted name for this condition yet, but the research team doing most of the documentation is calling it Interface Astroglial Scarring. Scientists think that the injury caused by the energy wave from blasts affects different parts of the brain, in different ways (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27291520/).

"There are signs that the damage can come from a wide array of weapons," according to Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporter Dave Philipps, writing in a recent *New York Times* top news story. "Artillery crew members who fired thousands of rounds in combat came home plagued by hallucinations and psychosis. Mortar teams suffered from headaches and deteriorating memory. Reliable soldiers suddenly turned violent and murdered neighbors after years of working around the blasts from tanks and grenades in combat or in training."

"In many cases," Philipps writes, "doctors treating the injured troops give them diagnoses of psychiatric disorders that miss the underlying physical damage. Much of what

is categorized as post-traumatic stress disorder may actually be caused by repeated exposure to blasts" (https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/30/us/navy-seals-brain-damage-suicide.html?campaign_).

Perhaps, then, this could at least be one of the reasons for my ex-husband's cruel behavior, I thought. Jim Jagoe, my ex-husband and daughter's father, whom, for the purpose of this narrative I will refer to with the neutral label J., was a U.S. Army veteran. He'd served in the Korean War. It's possible he suffered repeated blasts that permanently damaged his brain in that war. After reading these news reports, I became determined to investigate this possibility further.

J. spent his junior and senior years of high school – 1945 and 1946 – at the Staunton Military Academy, a private military school located in Staunton, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley region. This school was highly regarded for its academic and military programs, and many notable American political and military leaders graduated from it. According to the school's website (https://sma-alumni.org), "For decades, SMA was the most prestigious military preparatory school in the world."

I never learned why J. chose to go there from Bogota, his small, middle-class hometown near the city of Hackensack in northern New Jersey, or whether his parents, people of modest means, decided to send him there. Had he had dreams of becoming a soldier, a hero? This was at the end of the Second World War, when American soldiers were triumphant and glorified. Did he wish to share in that kind of glory one day?

Or, if his parents had sent him there, was it "to straighten him out" or "make a man out of him"? An ad for the school, which I found on Wikipedia, said Staunton was an "ideal school for manly boys," where the military training developed "obedience, health, and manly carriage" and where "all manly sports" were encouraged. Had he begun to show some effeminate characteristics in his early teens? Is this what prompted his parents' decision?

And what did he learn at Staunton, I wonder? How to fight? How to win? It was an all-white, all-male school in the Deep South, founded in 1884 in the wake of the Civil War by William H. Kable, a wounded former Confederate soldier, whose successors chose to

close the school's doors for good in 1976 rather than follow the country's new laws on full racial integration.

So, I wonder, *did J. also learn bigotry and racism there, in addition to learning how to confront and kill the "subhuman" enemy?* Was he permanently indoctrinated there in militarism, authoritarianism, and white supremacy during those impressionable teenage years?

He didn't speak to me about his service in Korea, but I could tell he was deeply scarred by it. He'd been a sergeant, I believe, in his early twenties, a recent college graduate, when that three-year war began in 1950. He did tell me, though, that his feet were always freezing in Korea's bitter-cold winters, and that the other American soldiers visited Korean brothels, but he never did because, he said, "that's *disgusting*."

He sometimes sat on our bed and sobbed while watching the TV news of the Vietnam war because the television images caused him flashbacks of the Korean War's horrors and the "bad things" he said he saw and did. Was this PTSD? At 20 I was too young to understand or empathize. I had never personally seen a grown man cry. I said and did nothing.

This was 1965, when the tide of protest changed for American college students from resolving issues involving civil rights and poverty at home to opposing the war in Vietnam. Although I was the same age as many of the anti-war demonstrators on college campuses we saw on TV, I had nothing else in common with them. I was a young suburban-New Jersey housewife, newly pregnant for the first time, married to a stranger nearly twice my age, who would fly into unaccountable, unprovoked rages, threatening to have me "put away" and take my baby away from me after I gave birth. The war raging on the other side of the world in Vietnam was not within my limited sphere of concerns.

He identified as a soldier. He was born in 1928, so his adolescence was dominated by the Second World War (1939 – 1945), when American soldiers returned home as victors, heroes. It seemed to me he longed to be a hero. He loved to strut and swagger, and observe "the little people," as he called all the people beneath him, look up to him.

He loved guns. He kept a gun collection in his big house, in a cabinet in the hallway near our bedroom. But he was not a sportsman. One of those many guns was a gold-plated pistol, which he once told me, when I'd asked where he'd got it, was a gift from "a friend in the mob" for doing him "a favor."

I recently read Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Halberstam's 800-page nonfiction tome, THE FIFTIES, because these would have been significant years in J.'s life, and I need to better understand now what he lived through then.

Halberstam's account of the Korean War, widely known as "the forgotten war," goes on for several chapters. "America tolerated the Korean War while it was on but could not wait to forget it once the war was over," Halberstam states. "It was a war that no one wanted, in a desolate, harsh land."

South Korea only became important to the U.S. after the North Korean Communists invaded the South in June 1950, crossing the dividing line, the 38th parallel. Then-president Harry Truman, Halberstam says, "made up his mind from the start: He would contest the Communists in Korea." As the self-proclaimed anti-Communist "policemen of the world," the U.S. jumped in. The Korean War had begun.

Reading Halberstam's account made me wonder what J. did in that war and how it affected him. Did he suffer from PTSD or permanent brain damage? Maybe this quest will provide me with some answers, as well as some compassion for him.

In my online newspaper research (https://www.newspapers.com) I saw in the October 1956 notice of J.'s engagement to his first wife, Sylvia, whom he'd met at Bethany College in West Virginia after graduating from the Staunton Military Academy, that J. served with the Field Artillery of the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. Infantries, I learned, are soldiers who are trained, armed and equipped to fight on foot, while the artillery is a branch of an army armed with weapons and firearms. It seems it's possible to be part of both, that one falls under the umbrella of the other.

According to Halberstam's book, on November 28,1950, "The heaviest burden fell on the 2nd Infantry Division," and, "In the final few days of November alone, the 2nd Division took some five thousand casualties, or roughly one-third of its men...." This

division suffered the worst fighting and the worst casualties of that war, Halberstam states. Did J. subsequently claim to have served with this division in order to paint his Korean War service in heroic terms because he yearned to be seen as a hero?

If indeed J. was part of that combat, then it's likely he may have been suffering from the aftereffects when I knew him. It's possible he was left brain damaged by that war experience and it caused his volatile behavior. Among the listed symptoms of traumatic brain injury that I observed in him in the short time we were married were: insomnia, anxiety, paranoia, depression, mood swings, aggression, and random eruptions of rage. His subsequent abduction of our daughter and years with her on the run, too, may have been driven by this earlier brain injury.

I've tried to verify his Korean War service with the National Archives, only to learn that these records were lost in a fire, termed "an unparalleled disaster," at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1973, the cause of which was never determined (https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973).

I found this seeming dead-end to be most discouraging. What I'd really like to know is whether J. experienced repeated artillery blasts that caused him brain injury. And did he in fact serve with the Field Artillery of the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea? He claimed he did, but maybe that, too, was a lie.

In the Fifties

From a distance, the decade of the 1950s appears to have been a boom time for the United States, a time considered by most to be a golden age. It was a period of economic growth and prosperity – especially for young, white, straight, smart, ambitious, politically conservative American men – the cohort J. strove to belong to.

Forgetting the seeming failure of the Korean War, "the forgotten war" – which ended in a stalemate in July 1953 with the signing of an armistice leaving the Korean Peninsula divided along the 38th parallel, exactly where it had been before that war began – the overall mood of the U.S. in the '50s was ebullient.

It was a new age of affluence and abundance, following years of Depression and wartime deprivation. As David Halberstam put it in THE FIFTIES, "the country was exploding, in terms of science, technology, and business and had assumed a new international role as the most powerful nation on earth."

This was the automobile era, when General Motors ruled the roads. GM cars were more than transportation, they became status symbols for the masses, their Cadillac reigning supreme.

This was when suburban tract housing sprang up like fields of sunny dandelions around gray urban areas, offering young couples – returning G.I.s and their wives especially – a piece of the American Dream: the chance to affordably buy their own homes and raise their families among likeminded middle class couples.

This was when two enterprising brothers in California, Dick and Mac McDonald began their first, now-ubiquitous hamburger franchise; when Holiday Inn became the first of the country's many motel chains; and when a $76 billion federal highway program in 1956 went a long way toward improving the nation's mobility.

So it became easier and quicker than ever for these young families to take road trips from their suburban enclaves into the greater country in their GM cars, stop to eat at kid-friendly fast-food restaurants, spend the night in clean new affordable motels, and shop in the newly built malls along the highways.

This was when a small, wood-framed black-and-white television set became a fixture in nearly every American living room, when TV personalities like Milton Berle, whom we all called “Uncle Milty,” the loveably antic Lucille Ball, and acerbic Ed Sullivan became members of everyone’s extended family.

And with the burgeoning television shows of the ‘50s came their sponsors and the advertising wizards, who brilliantly succeeded in capturing viewers’ attention and thinning their newly fattened wallets. This was when women’s magazines, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping,* and *Woman’s Day* – which were all run by men – published articles every month on how to be the perfect ‘50s housewife *(which my mother tried so hard to do)*, while ad men followed up with ads for products that would help make that happen.

(Photo: In front of our home in Hillsdale, NJ, summer 1950 – l.to r.:
my brother Rod, me, my mom Lee, and sister Pam)

I was only a shy, bookish grammar school student in the ‘50s, so I have scant memories of that time. But one ‘50s advertising jingle sticks in my mind: “Busy day, busy day, busy, busy, busy day!” was the way the Jello Instant Pudding people appealed to young housewives. No need to spend time baking pies or cakes from scratch anymore *(something my mother excelled at),* they said, you can whip up a pudding for dessert for your family in just minutes!

When my mother took the bait and bought the pudding mix and made it for us, I told her it tasted just like wall paper paste. I’d once tasted wall paper paste, so I wasn’t kidding.

Elsewhere in the country, beginning in the mid-‘50s, outside of my known, white, middle-class, suburban world, a young, charismatic Christian minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., who held a Ph.D. from Boston University, was leading his people in a hope-filled nonviolent civil rights movement in the South. But for all the relevance this news had on my life, they might as well have been marching on the moon.

So there were serious downsides to the ‘50s as well.

This was the infamous McCarthy era, when the bombastic, self-righteous, alcoholic – he died of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 48 in 1957 – Republican Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy went on a true witch hunt to unearth Communists and Communist sympathizers in America’s midst. As Halberstam puts it, “He [McCarthy] took people who were at the worst guilty of political naivete and accused them of treason.”

In the years since, the term McCarthyism has become a byword for defamation of character or reputation by means of widely publicized indiscriminate allegations, especially on the basis of unsubstantiated charges.

As if McCarthy had personally unleashed something foul throughout the land, an undercurrent of fear, distrust, suspicion, and judgmentalism grew toward those who didn’t conform to the then-socially acceptable “norm.” Clearly, not everyone in the ‘50s was made of the same sugary dough for which the new American cookie-cutter lifestyle was designed, and those who weren’t were ostracized. Or worse.

My father was one small example. A college and law school graduate, though he never practiced law, he had had high hopes for himself when he was young. *Perhaps,* he thought*, I could be another F. Scott Fitzgerald!* But he and my mother, who was one of his many worshipful girlfriends, were forced into marriage when she became pregnant with my older brother. So my father's youthful dreams quickly turned to ever-increasing anger and resentment.

He didn't want to be a married man. He wanted to be free to be himself – a handsome, dashing ladies' man. He didn't want children. Yet they kept coming. He didn't want to live in suburbia – *of all stultifying places* – nor work to support this unwanted family at a boring, uncreative nine-to-five middle-management office job and report to a boss he loathed.

He could have hit the road, of course, as other men might have. I often wished he did. Instead, he hit the bottle and became a raging alcoholic. When he was inebriated, which was often, he behaved like a wild animal in a small cage – mostly in the privacy of our suburban home. But sometimes even in public.

I felt our small-town's judgment of me as the eldest daughter of the town's drunk. Some of my school friends' mothers wouldn't allow them to play with me or come to my house after school. I was treated with distain, as if I would never amount to anything; "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," people would say. It was as if I had a disease their children might catch.

A turning point came for me in the mid-'50s when I was eleven and I began attending a Gospel church in a nearby town with a friend and her family. The people there were kind and generous to me. They invited me to their homes for Sunday dinner after church.

Their homes were calm, orderly, and peaceful, unlike mine. No one smoked or drank alcohol. (At home, my father smoked throughout dinner, leaving his ash tray on the dinner table, between his plate and mine, so I inhaled his cigarette smoke with every bite.) Smoking and drinking, as well as premarital sex, were verboten in this church. They told me I was a good girl who was meant to do good things.

In time I became a Christian and joined their church. I became a leader in their youth group. I became an honor student in school. I dreamed of having a peaceful, loving home of my own one day, and I couldn't wait for that day to arrive. I learned to ignore my small town's small-minded strain of McCarthyism. I held my head high and walked alone.

On a grander scale, many other Americans, mostly young people, began to rebel against the conventionality of narrow-minded middle-class suburban life. These pioneers of what was to be called the counterculture, protested the "norm's" blandness, conformity, and lack of serious social and cultural purpose. They rejected the country's rampant commercialism and materialism. They saw suburbia as a prison. Rebel author Jack Kerouac became their idol and his ON THE ROAD their bible.

There were countless American suburban housewives who believed they didn't belong and couldn't conform to the "norm" either. These women felt intellectually stifled and socially isolated in their suburban homes, overwhelmed by the unremitting solo burden of housework and childcare.

It was during this time that Betty Friedan, a suburban housewife and mother herself, started to challenge the fallacy of universal contentment among young suburban wives. So, gathering material over several years in the late '50s, Friedan began to write a groundbreaking book on what had happened to women in America. That book, THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE, sold millions of copies after it was published in the early '60s and became a handbook for the new feminist movement.

Homosexuals, too, were not only ostracized and treated like pariahs during this era, they were persecuted, hunted like animals, imprisoned, and institutionalized. Because in the '50s it was still a crime to be gay in the United States, millions of homosexuals were forced to live lies and in most cases double lives.

Many gay men married unsuspecting heterosexual women and had children with them, to give the appearance of "normalcy." The alternative – losing a job, losing a military pension, losing social standing by admitting to being what the mainstream society termed "deviant," "perverted," or "degenerate" – was too risky. In fear of being caught, they had to mask their true identity.

Few homosexuals could afford to be openly gay in the ‘50s. One such was the brilliant playwright Tennessee Williams, whose “A Streetcar Named Desire” made Marlon Brando a star. Brando himself “scorned the conventions of middle-class American life” (Halberstam). But such stars lived in a different stratosphere in those years, way out of the “normal” person’s reach.

Fragile, voluptuous Marilyn Monroe made the average American man-on-the-street ache for the unobtainable. And the fairytale life of beautiful, regal, Academy Award-winning actress Grace Kelly, who, at the age of 27 in 1956, married a prince many years her senior and moved to his country, Monaco, was the envy of American women – until, that is, her tragic death in an auto accident at the age of 52 in 1982.

And uber-talented, defiant, young Elvis Presley, whose swivel hips caused a frenzy among his hordes of female fans in the ‘50s, seemed to have been born to shake things up.

This was the ‘50s, when Dwight D. Eisenhower, known as “Ike,” who had been a five-star general during the Second World War and later president of Columbia University in New York, was President of the United States for seven of those ten years. Every adult in my then-known world, which is to say my parents and all the grownups in my hometown, seemed to like the Republican Ike – and wear the political “I Like Ike” buttons to prove it. Today Eisenhower is best known for his warning about the perils of “the military-industrial complex,” which he obviously had experienced first-hand.

After his military service in Korea, J. attended Seton Hall law school in New Jersey, no doubt paid for by the G.I. Bill, where he graduated in 1956. Soon after, he married a girl from a nearby town he’d met in college, Sylvia Kundig. When I asked him once, after he and I married, what had led to their divorce, he told me tersely that on their wedding night, when he’d found she was not a virgin, she became “a whore” in his eyes, and he lost all interest in her. Much later I learned from someone who knew her that she was “a very nice girl, a grammar school teacher.”

Their marriage, like ours, was short-lived.

It had been important to him that I was a virgin when we married in December 1964. Not taking my word for it, he took me to a doctor to be examined, which was the first time I'd had an internal gynecological examination. J. told me this was a common practice. I didn't question him. At that point, I was too young, naïve, and trusting to question him. I was guilty of innocence and ignorance.

To J., I came to learn, all women – excepting his mother, whom he revered – were either virgins (good) or whores (bad). There was no in-between.

The Cocktail Party

We'd met in the latter half of 1964, when I was working as the secretary to the president of a bank in Hackensack, New Jersey, my first job after graduating from the prestigious secretarial school, Katharine Gibbs, in nearby Montclair, which I'd attended on a full scholarship. J., a practicing lawyer by then, with his own law office in the upscale town of Ridgewood, NJ, began coming in on mortgage closings and started to observe me, then pursue me. He brought me bouquets of red roses for my desk in the bank's front lobby, and he asked me out on dates.

I was not attracted to him. He was a large, heavy-set man, much like my father – the type of big, imposing, fair-skinned, fair-haired man I'd always been fearful of. And I was flustered by his boldness. He bragged to me about his big house in Ridgewood and his big car – a Cadillac. But I wasn't impressed. I felt he was pushing me, and I've never liked being pushed.

He pressed me to go with him to an upcoming cocktail party. I told him I didn't drink. His aggressiveness frightened me. But when I went home after work and told my mother about all this, she swooned. "Ah, my beautiful Bonnie will be another Grace Kelly!"

By this time, my father and big brother had already left our home – my brother to join the Marine Corps right out of high school and my father to no one knew where – and my mother was struggling to support my two younger sisters and me on her secretary's salary.

"Go out with him, for God's sake!" my mother told me. "Live a little!"

I must have worn my favorite dress, a simple, navy blue sheath I'd made for myself a few years before from a Simplicity pattern to wear for my first airplane flight to spend the summer with my grandmother in Maine. I must have worn my hair in a French twist, which was considered elegant and sophisticated in those days. I must have worn makeup too, pressed by my mother as if for a role in a theater production in which I played an ingenue at her first cocktail party.

I remember I felt out of place and overwhelmed at the party. The people there – all stiff, middle-aged couples – seemed very old to me, more than twice my age, my parents'

age or older. I had nothing to say to them, so I said little. I just smiled and nodded at their words to me. I drank ginger ale.

J. led me around the room, steering me by the elbow, showing me off as if I were some kind of prize or a proof of some sort. He seemed anxious to impress these influential people, and I was part of his mask. The wives glared at me, looked me up and down, and sniffed. Their husbands bent closer to me and leered. I couldn't wait to leave.

Driving me home, J. stopped his car on a dark side street. I didn't know where we were or why he'd pulled over. I considered for a moment opening the Cadillac's front passenger door and running off, but in what direction? And how could I run fast enough in heels? I felt trapped.

I braced myself for a lunge from him. But he didn't touch me. He didn't even try to kiss me. Instead, he just turned from the steering wheel to face me. Then he spoke, as if from On High, as if he knew the future, already written: "I'm going to marry you."

I don't remember saying anything in response. And even if I had, would it have mattered? What I thought, though, was: Surely he'd had too much to drink at the cocktail party; and, like my father when he was under the influence, he didn't know what he was saying.

My mother, so excited for me, wanted to know all about my first real date when I got in. Did I have fun? "No." Did I have my first alcoholic drink? "No."

"He told me he's going to marry me," I reported.

"How wonderful!" my mother swooned. *"Grace Kelly!"*

I have no doubt that my mother loved me and wanted the best for me. And, like many mothers, I'm sure, part of her wanted to live through me, her first daughter. Her name was Lee, and she'd named me Bonnie Lee at birth, because, I'm assuming, she hoped I'd grow up to be a prettier version of herself. She never thought of herself as pretty.

Having survived the deprivations of the Depression and the Second World War, she was dazzled by wealth and its trappings. She was impressed by J.'s possessions and achievements. I think she would have wanted these things for herself.

Despite her life's difficulties and her husband's drunken abusiveness, she still thought men were superior beings, and she still had stars in her eyes. There was a fairytale quality in her thinking at times. She wanted me to be a princess and live in a castle with a good king, the kind of life she wished she'd had.

"If I had your face...," she would often say to me, and I would secretly wish she would finish the sentence. I think I disappointed her in that I had no interest in capitalizing on my external appearance. My serious, shy, bookish personality didn't match my outward looks, which made my mother roll her eyes and shake her head.

But my mother was my best friend, and I wanted to make her happy. So I kept going out with J. Besides, he kept asking me and wouldn't take no for an answer. He was a man with a plan, and, I've since learned, I was merely the means to that end.

(Photo: Me on diving board, Penobscot Bay, Maine, summer 1961)

[Excerpted from SOMEWHERE CHILD – Maine, 1961:]

Each morning at six-thirty Grandma came into my room with a cup of fresh black coffee to wake me. Hot-black-coffee-on-an-empty-stomach-first-thing-in-the-morning is the best thing for regularity, she said. And she was right, of course. Grandma was an expert on regularity.

After breakfast we would begin our work. Starting with the guest bathroom across the hall, we polished, mopped, or dusted everything on the second floor. Or rather, I did, and Grandma showed me how it should be done: Close the drain – dry the sink – don't let water mark remain; dust each rung along the stairs – lift each plant – moved each chair. Her instructions became a litany I sang to myself.

My room was the first door on the right at the top of the stairs. Grandma said I should be honored that the madam said I could stay in this room for the summer – after all, it was a guest room in their part of the house – and important people had stayed in the room – members of the royal family, famous musicians, beautiful actresses – But that was years ago, when the madam was young, Grandma said.

The bed in my room (I called it my room, though I knew it wasn't mine) didn't look like a bed. At the foot and the head it rose up and curved like a tulip and ended in a scroll. It made me feel like an ancient Egyptian princess – lying there surveying all the objects in the room, antiques and artifacts from around the world, worth thousands of dollars each, I was sure. I never touched them, except when I was cleaning with Grandma. It was as though I slept in a museum and everything in the room were encased in glass.

What I liked best was the view of the bay from my window and the sound that the waves made when they hit the stony shore below. The steady rhythm of the crashing waves kept me awake all night the day I arrived – and rocked me to sleep each night for the rest of the summer.

When the morning work was done, I would go down to the barnacle-covered shore and sit on a large flat rock and write letters to my mother and try to get some sun. (I tried to swim there once, but the water made my legs numb.)

Dearest Momma, I wrote, No, Grandma says, I am not to get an allowance. She says my air fare up here and back is to be my summer's pay. … I agree with her that this is a special vacation for me, but it would be awfully nice to have a little spending money when I go into town. …

My mother sent two dollars by return mail. That same day, I spent it on a boat trip around the bay. It was almost two by the time I walked to town, but I got to the dock in time. I was last in line, but I got on. As the boat bounced along the choppy waves, splashing spray in all of our faces, the captain pointed to places of historical interest along the shore. …

In the evening after supper, after we had turned down the madam's bed for the night (… fold the covers catty-corner like so – then fold them over again, and tuck in the side –

pound the pillows – fluff them up – smooth the top case – creases must not wrinkle her face …), Grandma and I would sometimes go for walks together in the cool, sea-sweet air, past the beds of purple-and-yellow pansies, the gardener's pride, along the winding road that cut through the neighboring golf course.

And she would tell me stories about her childhood in New York, and how her parents sent her to Germany to visit relatives the year she was thirteen, and how she met her husband at the dance, and how the barrel at the factory where he worked fell down and crushed his leg and made him lame, and how much she missed him since he'd died. Such-is-life-without-a-wife-and-worse-without-a-husband, she sighed. …

The story of the madam's life, or so Grandma said, could be summed up in her name: Mary Louise Curtis Bok Zimbalist. Her parents were the Curtises of the Curtis Publishing Company of Philadelphia. At the proper age she married Edward William Bok, and they had two sons. Years after Bok's death, she married again – the gifted violinist and composer Efrem Zimbalist, who was director of the Curtis Institute of Music, which she had founded and endowed. Mrs. Zimbalist was more than ten years older than he (he, mid-seventies and she, late-eighties), but they were very happy, Grandma said.

The first day I arrived I met the madam. Grandma brought me to her room, where she was sitting up in bed. She had white baby-hair and a bird's face. She held out her hand to me and I reached to take it. Did I touch it? I don't know. Her hand was a wisp that my rough hand went through.

My dear, she whispered to me, it is so nice to meet you. … Your grandmother speaks of you often, with such pride. … I hope you will enjoy your stay in Maine. … It is good of you to help your grandmother in this way. …

The week before I left I walked slowly into town, stopping along the way to take pictures of my favorite places. I didn't have a camera, so I stood for a long time in each place, trying to burn the images on my mind. I still have a clear picture of the sheep grazing in the valley beyond the broken split-rail fence, and of the strange, black-and-white Belted Galloway cows that were specially bred on the farm down the road, and one of a headstone in the old cemetery in the woods I used to cut through.

The headstone read: BABY SARAH JANE – BORN JUNE 1, 1825 – DIED OF THE GRIPPE, DECEMBER 10, SAME YEAR – THE LORD GIVETH AND THE LORD TAKETH AWAY.

And of course I took a picture of the dock with its lobster pots and salty old men. And I promised myself I'd come back again one day – with a camera.

Grandma pushed me through the music room door where Mr. Zimbalist stood facing the windows overlooking the bay. He was playing the violin and didn't hear me come in. Excuse me, sir, I said when I was just a few feet away. I've come to say good-bye. The little man – who was shorter than I – put his violin down, took my face in his hands, and kissed me on both cheeks.

And as I left the music room, I cried.

Rape and Rage

SOMEWHERE CHILD, published in 1981 when I was 36, tells the true story of my daughter's abduction by her father from my point of view. It begins with our small, hasty, ill-fated wedding on December 19, 1964, and my wish that I'd had the courage then to respond "I do" when the minister asked whether anyone knew any reason why these two should not be joined together.

But it had all happened so quickly, as I relate in that book. After a few dates, he pressed an engagement ring on me in early December. I suggested we wait until around Valentine's Day in February (my then-favorite holiday) to get married. But he, no doubt afraid I'd back out and run away, accelerated the timing, "for income tax purposes," he insisted. He made all of the rushed wedding plans, too, without consulting me.

My mother, worried about my extreme nervousness and weight loss, took me to our family doctor, who prescribed tranquilizers for me that were far too strong. As a result, I approached that wedding in an overmedicated fog.

In those few weeks leading up to the wedding, J. had told me repeatedly I was the answer to his prayers. "I've waited all my life for you," he'd say again and again. His words in this sense were embracing, but his actions were not. He didn't touch me, hold me, or kiss me. He didn't look at me lovingly. He didn't tell me he loved me.

Having had no romantic experience up to that point in my 19 years, I didn't know what to make of this. Was he afraid that such demonstrations of affection might lead to premarital sex? Was he showing restraint out of respect for my virginity? Was he, like me, waiting patiently for an idealized wedding night?

He made all the plans for our honeymoon in Hawaii over Christmas, with a first stop in San Francisco:

[Excerpted from SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

While Jim checked in, I read the hotel's literature at the front desk. "The New Fairmont Hotel and Tower, atop Nob Hill . . . For a spectacular view of downtown San Francisco and the

San Francisco bridges, with the Marin, Oakland, and Berkeley hills in the background, ride the outside elevator to the Crown Room 26 stories high in the sky . . .”

This was the farthest I’d ever been from home. I’d spent a summer with my grandmother in Maine and traveled with my mother through the southern states to visit my brother once in Florida, but that was all the traveling I’d done. Jim had traveled throughout the States, Europe, and Russia. He’d spent two years fighting in Korea. He told me we would see the world together. But as the Fairmont’s outside elevator ascended to take us to our room, I didn’t feel excited by San Francisco’s lights. I simply felt far from home.

I took a bath and dried my body slowly, studying myself in the mirror that stretched the length of the bathroom wall. My skin was blue-white under the fluorescent light, and my hair looked yellow-green. I had a small waist and a woman’s hips, but the arms and chest of an adolescent boy. The white peignoir friends gave me, with its deep-cut front, hung from my bony shoulders limply.

Jim was sitting on the edge of the white double bed wearing blue cotton pajamas when I finally entered the room. He looked at me and laughed. “Take that off,” he said, “and put on something else. You look like a fool in that thing.”

It was as if I weren’t there, or as if I were dreaming. I wished it were a dream that I could wake from, to find myself at home in my own bed.

Why doesn’t he kiss me? . . . Why isn’t he touching me? . . . Why is he swearing at me? . . Why doesn’t he speak to me? . . . Please get off of me, you’re too heavy. . . . Please get up, I can’t breathe. . . . Please don’t be so rough with me. . . . You’re hurting me. . . .

I wanted to scream, but I bit my lip.

“Where did you learn that?, he said angrily.

“What?”

“To move like that.”

“Move?”

“Only whores move like that.”

I stopped struggling.

“No,” I said to myself, softly, when it had ended.

“No, what?” he said, as he turned away from me. But before I could reply he was asleep.

From that point on, sex with J. remained the farthest thing from lovemaking. It was more like hate-filled rape. I had no idea why. My mother's only advice to me before the wedding was, "Never refuse your husband." *Refuse him what?* I wondered then.

Fortunately, this repeated marital rape didn't last long. Within weeks of our wedding I became pregnant and the sex ended there. After he learned I was pregnant, J. lost all interest in me sexually. He didn't approach me, didn't touch me. He said that for us to have sexual relations "might harm the unborn child" and that sex was "only for procreation anyway." He maintained that sex for any other reason was "dirty," "disgusting," and "vulgar."

J. was never physically abusive to me, as my father had been to my mother when he was drunk, but he was extremely verbally abusive. When J. went into his rages – not drunk, but not in his right mind either – he would tell me repeatedly I was mentally ill, he was going to have me "put away," and he'd give my baby to his mother to raise "as he had been raised."

When I would get upset by this and begin to cry, he'd push me in front of the nearest mirror and shout, "See that [tear-contorted] face? That's the face of a crazy woman!" Sometimes he'd invite a neighbor over to witness "one of her episodes," as he'd explain to them. He later tried to use their statements in court affidavits against me. This was all part of his carefully laid plans.

The morning after my father's drunken rages, he was always contrite, begging my mother's forgiveness for his abusive behavior the night before. J., on the other hand, never apologized. After his late-night rages, he would force me to take one of his sleeping pills then put me to bed. In the morning he would deny that anything had been amiss the night before. He was devoid of remorse.

I never understood Jim's strange attachment to his mother and why he so desperately wanted her to be the mother of his child. Perhaps, I thought, it was the guilt she'd laid on him: He'd told me his own birth was difficult for her, and she wasn't able to bear more children after he was born. She blamed him for this loss. Maybe he felt he had to make it up to her. Whatever the reason, she had a fierce hold on him. When I knew them, he was 36 years old, but she treated him as if he were a four-year-old and still under her wing.

Yes, this was worse than a nightmare. Someone from a “normal, happy family,” with a supportive, protective father or older brother in the picture might have had somewhere to turn for help, for a safe harbor. But I was stuck. I was also young, resilient, hopeful that things would change, trusting, naïve, and pregnant. I had nowhere to go, no one I felt I could turn to. I didn’t want to burden my mother, whose hands were already full. I wanted to believe things could only get better for J. and me. I had faith in God. I prayed a lot.

But even then I saw him as a tortured man. I couldn’t love him, but I didn’t hate him. I felt sorry for him, as I’d always felt sorry for my drunken father. Men who are not allowed by society to be who they truly are and are boxed in are pitiable, I’ve always felt.

Between rages, J. tried to play a role for the outside world of an all-knowing, all-powerful benevolent demigod. A hero. But I could see, from my close-up vantage point, he was nothing of the kind. I saw the emperor without his clothes.

Now that I’ve lived a full lifetime’s worth of years and I’m no longer young, naïve, and timid, I have nothing left to lose. I feel I must revisit the scene of this crime. Using investigative tools unavailable before, I must look closer, dig deeper, ask more questions, try to look at all sides.

What was this man made of? Why did he do what he did? Had he suffered permanent brain damage in that war, or was he just a born psychopath, as a small percentage of the population always is? Had he sold his soul somewhere along the way? Had his heart atrophied somehow? Or was he just a tortured person living a multitude of lies?

He'd lied to me to get me to marry him. (“I am a Christian too,” he’d said to me, deceivingly. “I believe the same things you do.”) He lied horribly about me in all of his court documents to try to win legal custody of our baby (which he failed to win). He lied to my daughter about me to make himself the hero and me the villain of this tragic story. He must have lied to himself in order to live with himself all those years on the run. His entire life as a masked man was a lie.

What kind of liar was he? There seems to be no clear distinction between “pathological lying” and “compulsive lying.” But this is what I’ve recently learned:

"Whether or not lying behaviors are classified as pathological, it's clear that mental health issues are part of the equation when a person consistently fails to tell the truth and doesn't feel safe to be their true self" (Newport Institute).

"When you try to deceive someone else," wrote David Brooks in a recent *New York Times* opinion piece, "even for your own protection, you end up becoming a deceiver deep in your nature. You end up losing the ability to make moral distinctions."

Yes, I believe this may have been true of J. Somewhere along the way, he lost his moral compass, if he ever had one. His whole life was built on lies.

I am not a psychologist nor psychotherapist, so I try not to apply labels. I can only share my observations and experiences: He pretended to the outside world to be a big, important, rich man – driving a big black Cadillac, living in a big Tudor house in a wealthy New Jersey town – but it was mostly a sham. He was living way beyond his means. His financial worries ate at him.

When he flew into rages and took his anger out on me, no doubt because I was a handy, easy target, who later became a scapegoat, I tried to tell myself it was due to the stress he was under at work. He took strong medication and smoked cigarettes incessantly. He slept badly. He seemed very old to me and in physical decline.

One of his medications, I recall, was Lithium, which I've since learned is prescribed for mental illness, manic depression or bipolar disorder, and to control out-of-control aggression. Who prescribed this for him? The V.A. doctors? How long was he on it? Did it do him any good? He still had wild mood swings when I lived with him – accusing *me* of being mentally ill and threatening to have me "put away." I knew even then he was projecting.

J. was a sick man – mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually ill. He tried his best to project his mental illness onto me. He tried to make a case against me, claiming I was a bad person from a bad family. He often repeated the foolish maxim, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," implying that because he felt my parents were bad people, I was a bad person too and I would be a bad influence on our child.

In his rages he called me "an abortion – the product of two miserable people!" I didn't argue with him. I just knew in my heart he was wrong.

Follow the Money

J. had his own law office in the center of town, Ridgewood, New Jersey, and employed two secretaries full time. His clients were mostly "little people," as he called them – simple, sheeplike people who looked up to him from whatever legal quagmire they were in as their savoir – a role he relished. For the most part, I believed at the time, he handled smallish cases, such as insurance claims and divorces, but perhaps he did much more.

Not all of his clients revered him, however. I learned later that more than a few had taken him before the Ethics Committee of the New Jersey Bar Association to try to have him disbarred. He was what one might call a "shady" lawyer. Very smart, very cunning, very shrewd. Ethics didn't matter to him. Winning did. He bragged to me that he'd "never lost a case."

And money. Money mattered a great deal to him. He was driven to create an image for himself of a successful attorney in this success-conscious, three-piece-suited, upper-middle-class town, one of the richest towns in New Jersey.

J. strove mightily to live the American Dream. Money equaled power, and power equaled obeisance, which he craved. He and countless other American men at that time believed that a rich man could get whatever he wanted.

He had been a child of the Depression from a modest background. His father was a hardware salesman until he retired, his mother an assembly-line worker in a garment factory. His older brother had joined the U.S. Navy after high school and left home. J. went to military prep school and college. After serving in the Korean War, he lived with his parents while attending law school. J. was the favored son, the big investment, the ticket.

He'd graduated from law school in 1956 and, after clerking for a while and partnering with another attorney briefly, he opened his own law practice in Ridgewood in January 1961. By the time we met in late 1964, he already owned considerable real estate holdings – several homes in Ridgewood and at least two apartment buildings in nearby towns. How, I wonder now, had he achieved the sudden wealth to afford all this?

J. sometimes mentioned "friends in the mob." Did he do work for them, I wonder? Did he represent minor Mafia members in New Jersey court cases? Clearly he was the type

of brilliant, unscrupulous attorney they would need from time to time. Had they paid him well for some legal work he'd successfully done for them, then kept him on a handsome monthly retainer? Could this be how he sold his soul to become rich?

Scott M. Deitche, in his excellent history of the Mafia in New Jersey, GARDEN STATE GANGLAND, explains how men get involved: Very smart, ambitious guys from humble beginnings, hungry for wealth and status, sell their souls and live their precarious lives on the dark side. Once in, there's no turning back.

Because of its proximity to New York and its long Atlantic coastline, New Jersey became a hub of gangland activity from the 1920s through the '60s, Deitche writes. During this time, when J. was a young man, gangster movies were popular. Movies such as "White Heat" starring James Cagney, "On the Waterfront" starring Marlon Brando, and "Al Capone" starring Rod Steiger romanticized the gangster life and no doubt left a romantic impression on impressionable young men.

Bergen County in northern New Jersey, where both J. and I were born and raised, was where some major mob members lived and ran their operations. In fact, J. told me, our elderly Italian next door neighbor in Ridgewood, whom I never met, was in the Mafia. J. frequently mentioned his "friends in the mob," such as the one who gave him the gold-plated hand gun, and he often used gangster language in everyday conversations. To impress me? To frighten me?

I now think it's more than likely he was connected with the New Jersey underworld in some way – not a member, but at least an abettor.

I've tried to confirm this suspicion, only to come up, as with his military records that were destroyed in a fire, empty-handed. Obviously, the clever heads of this dark and secretive underworld were careful not to leave public records or discernible footprints.

But why the crushing debt? Or was it more than that? Was he over-extended? Or living in fear of someone or something? He certainly seemed to be in over his head. I was kept in the dark, and I didn't question. I was merely a young, dumb, submissive, pregnant wife.

J.'s best friend Willy, a short, slightly built, timid man about J.'s age who spoke with a lisp and who owned his own small hardware business in town, was the one J. went to with his financial woes. I could hear J.'s half of their telephone conversations when they talked in the evening: J. would beg Willy nicely for a loan to cover a bank note coming due, and I'm assuming Willy never let J. down. The two men were devoted to each other. Willy seemed to idolize J.

But money problems – and perhaps other, unspoken problems – were always weighing heavily on him. They kept him awake at night. He sat up in bed chain-smoking while I slept. In the morning when I cleaned, I'd count more than 20 cigarette butts in the ash tray on his side of our king-size bed.

No, J. wasn't wealthy. His big, 18-room house with its three-car garage and a swimming pool in the back was a stage set. For me, it was a gilded cage, a prison cell. And he was the prison commandant.

After I gave birth to our daughter on October 21, 1965, J. showed me an insurance policy he'd taken out on my life to cover his indebtedness. He told me to get out and leave the baby behind – or he'd have me "put away." Was this gangland-talk for "killed"? I wondered. Would my death solve all his problems?

[Excerpted from Somewhere Child:]

Jim began having dinner with his parents or Willy every night. Not invited to join them, I stayed at home, alone with the baby. When he returned, at nine, ten, or eleven o'clock, he was invariably enraged. He behaved as if he were drunk, but he was always totally sober. The litany began: I should get out, go back to my mother's and leave the baby behind; if I didn't leave voluntarily, he'd have me "put away"; the house was his, and I didn't belong there, the baby was his, and he wanted his mother to raise her; I was no good, and he didn't want his child to know me – I was a religious fanatic, I was mentally ill.

He said it so often – "You're mentally ill" – that I began to think he might be right. Where was the honor student, the scholarship winner, the girl I had been quietly proud to call me? I looked for her in the mirror but didn't see her. "Look at that face," Jim said repeatedly, "it's the face of a crazy woman!" Perhaps so, I thought, but you'll never take my baby.

One evening Jim brought home with him an insurance policy on my life, equal to his total indebtedness of one hundred thousand dollars. I looked at the collection of guns in our bedroom, listened to the hatred in his voice, saw the malevolence in his eyes, and I became terrified.

Whenever his car drove up at night my whole body would shake uncontrollably. I couldn't shout, Man your battle stations, kids! And run giggling with my siblings for cover. Except for my newborn baby sleeping sweetly in her crib, I was all alone.

When the baby was awake and changed and fed, I'd sit with her in the rocking chair in her room and whisper softly, as if the question were a lullaby, "What should we do? What should we do?" and she would look at me contentedly and coo.

I lost interest in eating and became drawn and thin. I had difficulty sleeping in the same room with him. Sometimes in the night I would slip away and try to sleep in the smallest of the three spare bedrooms at the other end of the hall. The bed in this room was narrow and soft, and I'd try to hide there, safe and secure beneath the warm eiderdown, until the baby woke for her morning feeding. But every time I did this, Jim would come into the room, like a prison commandant in blue pajamas, and wake me from a sound sleep by shouting, "This is physical desertion! This is grounds for divorce!"

Our first anniversary, on December 19, passed without celebration. What was there to celebrate?

"Get out," Jim said.

"I have nowhere to go."

"Go back to your mother's."

"I won't do that."

"Just get out and leave the baby here."

"Never."

The week before Christmas Jim sold my car, removed all of the charge cards in my wallet, closed our joint checking account, and announced he would no longer give me money for the house or myself.

"Now what are you going to do?" he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Divorce you and take the baby."

Bond

He didn't know me. Looking back now, I'm sure he'd thought I'd be a pushover: He'd get what he wanted – a child of his own for his mother to raise – and then discard me easily. I'm sure he thought his threats and intimidation would scare me off and that I, like a beaten dog, would slink away, leaving my newborn "puppy" behind and have another down the road with someone else one day. I would have served my purpose for him, and he would be done with me.

This, I've come to learn, is what he'd "waited all his life for," this is how I'd "answered his prayers": He'd simply wanted his own child. But not just any type of child; he wanted a blond-haired, blue-eyed child, because in his mind white people, the whitest people, who had blond hair and blue eyes to prove it, were supreme – a view I've never shared. And that child had to be made of his own flesh and blood.

This was 1965. Surrogacy was not readily available to aspiring parents then; it was not an option for him. So he, being a "rich man" who could get whatever he wanted, came up with his own plan.

The problem was he chose the wrong girl. He didn't know me or what I was made of. He underestimated my emergent strength. Perhaps I, too, didn't know the extent of my own strength because I'd never been tested to this degree. "We never know how high we are," my favorite poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "till we are called to rise. And then, if we are true to plan, our statures touch the skies."

Up to this point I'd been docile, the way I'd thought at the time all good wives should be. When J. would go into his rages, I'd remain quiet and try to walk away. I'd learned from living with my alcoholic father that there's no point in reasoning with a person who's not in their right mind. I tried to blame his wild rages on his work, his immense professional stress.

As a wife over the previous ten months I'd spent my days cleaning J.'s big house (he said we couldn't afford household help), cooking meals, making curtains, knitting baby things, preparing the baby's room for her arrival, nesting. But after our baby was born on

October 21, my focus changed. My whole life changed. I became a new person. I became a mother.

[EXCERPTED FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD]

Perhaps it was because I was the eldest daughter at home and I remembered my sisters as infants and the care my mother took of them; or because I'd played with dolls until I was eleven, feeding, dressing, and caring for each one as if it were alive; or because I'd babysat for other people's children for years; or for all these reasons put together, motherhood came easily to me.

I never felt nervous or unsure in handling my baby. Just as I knew my hands were incapable of speed or dexterity, I knew they were supremely capable of handling my child securely and confidently. I'd never felt so confident about anything before. It was as if I'd been a mother all my life.

And I was blessed with a good baby. The hospital pediatrician who came to my room the day after Whitney was born told me she was "perfectly healthy." My diary entry for that day adds, "What a good eater she is." The adjective people used most often to describe her was "placid." She seldom cried or fidgeted or fussed. She was content to be held close, to be rocked and fed and sung to, to look around the room as far as her newborn eyes could see, to sleep and dream (if indeed babies do).

Her contentment flowed into me and mine into her, as if our bodies were still attached by a life-sustaining cord, only this cord was intangible, invisible, mystical, and by it we sustained each other equally.…

I was in love – with my newborn child, who taught me, wordlessly, the meaning of the word Love; with my new exalted position and its lifetime title of Mother; with Life, because I felt I'd played a part in making it.

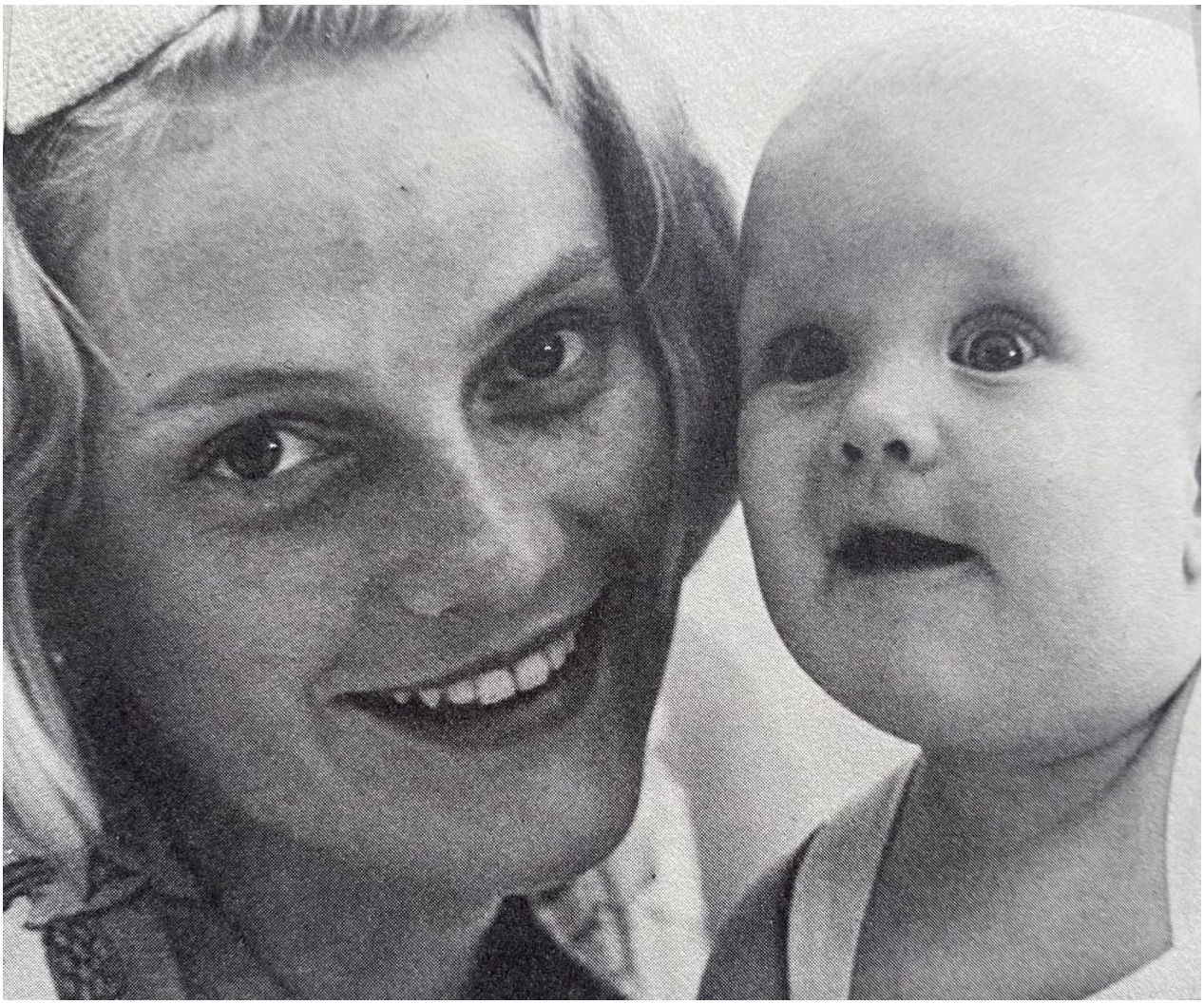
Some may think J. must have hated me a great deal – or I must have done something terrible to him or to the baby – for him to feel he had to abscond with her, to "protect" her from me, taking his parents with him. The truth was he hadn't hated me, and I hadn't done anything to provoke his vengeance. He'd had it all planned well in advance of meeting me. I was merely a means to an end for him. I was a tool, that's all, a blond-haired, blue-eyed unaware baby-making machine.

He neither loved me nor hated me. I was simply a useful thing to him. He was in the habit of using people, and I was the one he used to achieve his long-held wish to have a

child of his own, to create a person in his own image who would love him and, ultimately, take care of him in his old age. In this, he succeeded.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Yes, I left him – his cruelty and abusiveness – after a year. But I took my beloved two-month-old baby with me. That's when the war between J. and me really erupted. That's when he began to hate me because I'd had the grit to foil his plans.



(Photo: Me with baby Whitney Lee, 1966)

In trying to make a legal case against me to "prove" I was an unfit mother and he should be given custody of our baby, he claimed I was mentally ill, a religious fanatic. He

had nothing to go on – and that case in New Jersey never went to court, despite the many affidavits he'd carefully drawn up from neighbors whom he'd called in to witness my emotional upset after his rages – but what else could he accuse me of? Promiscuity? Drinking? Partying? Doing drugs?

I'd been a good kid, an honor student, who went to church and was the president of my church's youth group. I was also elected president of my class at Katharine Gibbs School. So J., in his twistedness, had to take that goodness to an extreme and call it "fanaticism." In his mind, I found, moral concepts seemed to flip: "good" became "bad"; and "bad," such as stealing his child, became "good" – even heroic.

J. and I had never discussed politics when I lived with him. I was devoid of political views at that time and in that place. The voting age was 21 then (it was lowered to 18 in 1971), and I was only 20. So I'd never voted nor given politics much thought. Of course I'm a different person now.

By today's standards J. would be a Republican on the Far Right – right up there with Donald Trump. In fact, to look at Trump is to see the person J. was – the same size, swagger, bluster, pomposity, twisted logic; the same savior complex, the lies. Oh, the lies.

Gone

J.'s accusations and supporting affidavits were replete with lies. From the time I left his big house and moved temporarily into my grandmother's apartment with my baby, until he finally dropped the custody case against me ten months later, it was nothing but a barrage of lies and constant harassment.

I'm sure he thought he could wear me down and I would give up. But he was wrong about that. Despite the fact that this was a kind of Davida-and-Goliath battle, I was determined this would be the first case this Goliath would lose.

Within days of my leaving J.'s, I was served with papers, pages and pages filled with lies. Here is just one small portion of his complaint:

> *The said mother of said child is morally unfit to be entrusted with the care, custody, education and maintenance of said child . . . for the following reasons: She has failed to maintain a proper home for said infant child; she has on occasions threatened to inflict forceful and serious physical injury upon herself and said infant child; she is emotionally unstable and unfit so as to be entrusted with the care and custody of said infant child; she has no means with which to adequately maintain and care for such child; she has and will place the child in unfit and unsavory environs wherein to raise said child; she has threatened to abscond with said child from the state and to thereafter forever conceal said child from Plaintiff.*

I found a lawyer who agreed to take my case. His first reaction was, "What's all this fuss over a baby? I don't get it." But then he reassured me with, "No judge would ever take your baby from you." I trusted his words. I had faith. I felt strong.

My maternal grandmother, with whom I'd spent a summer in Maine when I was 16, had recently retired from her job as a housekeeper for the Zimbalists and had taken a clean, sunny, roomy apartment in a small town near my mother's, only about a half hour from Ridgewood. Grandma was 78 at the time and in declining health after a series of heart attacks. She was mostly bedridden. I offered to care for her, in exchange for giving me and the baby a home until I "got on my feet." She agreed.

I was not in hiding from J. He'd phoned my mother at work, demanding to know my whereabouts, so she willingly gave him my grandmother's address and unlisted telephone number.

Thereafter, as part of his harassment campaign, J. arrived at my grandmother's apartment frequently, unannounced, and accompanied by policemen with their police lights blaring outside, demanding to see the baby. If the baby was sleeping, J. would wake her abruptly, which made her cry. In the middle of the night he would phone my grandmother's number – the only telephone in her apartment, he could see, was on her bedside table – repeatedly then hang up.

My reserved and very private grandmother became exhausted and horrified by all of this. She'd never experienced anything like it in her life, she told me, and she wanted no part of it. I could see it was harming her health.

As part of the legal proceedings, I was sent for a psychological examination, the ultimate report of which concluded with, "No psychiatric disorder." Later, a man from the Probation Department came to my grandmother's to interview me, see the baby – who sat on my lap contentedly throughout the hourlong interview – and inspect our living conditions. He was a kind, older man, who, after our interview, suggested I write a letter to his department expressing my views on why I felt I should be granted custody of my baby.

I spent days composing that letter, which came to seven, single-spaced, type-written pages, pouring my heart out to the powers-that-be, the men who would read it and decide my fate. I'd always been an A student in my English classes at school. This letter, I decided, would be the best essay I'd ever written.

The cold months of January through March 1966 passed in a bitter storm of legal papers: affidavits, accusations, answers, denials, points and counterpoints. J. continued to arrive at my grandmother's unannounced several times a week with others in tow, such as his elderly parents, his friend Willy, his new law partner, or a policeman or two, to visit the baby – pick her up, make her cry, put her down, then leave. My shy, bedridden grandmother, on view in her nightgown in her bedroom to all who passed her door, was understandably incensed.

J. paid no child support, preferring to "wait for the judge to rule." To earn money to support myself and my baby and to help my grandmother, I did typing at home for college students as well as for my mother's neighbor Alice, who owned her own publishing company and always needed hand-edited manuscripts retyped. I took Whitney with me when I babysat for a divorced friend's three children while my friend worked. I sold my diamond engagement ring.

When the probation report was submitted to the court, I received a copy and read it carefully. It was 58 pages long and painstakingly detailed. And there, at the end of it was my letter to the Probation Department, all seven single-spaced typed pages. Seven pages out of 58, one voice trying to be heard above the others.

Not long after the probation report was submitted, J. dropped the case, agreed to my having custody and him having liberal visitation rights. He then paid for a speedy Alabama divorce.

As a Katharine Gibbs graduate, it was easy for me to get a good, full-time secretarial job in the nearest city, Hackensack. I found a small but comfortable apartment on the second floor of a two-family house in my hometown. I bought a secondhand Volkswagen Beetle for my commute, and while I worked I left my ten-month-old baby in the care of my friend Wendy, who had a four-year-old boy of her own at home.

J.'s visitations were going smoothly. He always arrived for Whitney on time and returned punctually with her. And we managed to hand her back and forth peaceably. Since our divorce, we were making a greater effort to communicate amicably with each other. He seemed more subdued and reasonable than I'd known him to be. *Peace at last!* I thought. My prayers have been answered, thank God.

When we spoke on the phone mid-week, he reported that his law practice was thriving, all was going well. But each weekend when he came to pick up the baby and take her to his house for his visitations, I noticed he was losing weight and trembling. Cancer, perhaps? I thought. I began to worry for him.

Until one weekend in February 1967 when Whitney was 16 months old –they never returned.

[EXCERPTED FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

In February I bought Whitney a new, blue snowsuit.

"Show Daddy how cute you look," I said to her when Jim came at six on Thursday to take her for the weekend visitation. She went to him in her crisp blue snowsuit like a spaceman, weightless.

"Hi, Babe!" Jim babbled to the baby over and over. "Hi, Baby. Hi, Babe. Come to Da-da." He was the thinnest I had ever seen him, bent, and trembling. As Whitney toddled across the carpet to him, he kept his head bowed.

"Are you all right?" I asked him, worried. He looked too weak to lift her. His face, which couldn't seem to face me, seemed white-gray.

"Come to Da-da," he repeated to Whitney as if he hadn't heard me or I wasn't even there. He lifted her with difficulty, and I wondered how he was going to manage the stairs.

"Momm-ma-ma," Whitney said happily.

"Da-da," Jim said, patting her back with a nervous hand.

"Jim?" I said, but he didn't seem to hear me. "Here is her bag." He seemed unsteady on his feet. How will he carry –? "Would you like some help –?" He took the baby's overnight bag and turned quickly toward the stairs. He looks terribly ill, I thought. I wondered what was wrong.

"Bye, pumpkin," I said to Whitney as Jim carried her away. "See you Saturday."

"Mommm-ma-ma," she said as she waved to me by opening and closing her free hand.

I went through my usual routine while Whitney was away – cleaning house, preparing meals ahead to put in the freezer, reading in the evening, phoning my friend Steve in Florida. I kept busy. On Saturday morning I did my food shopping while my wash was at the laundromat.

By noon I was home, ironing the baby's just-washed dresses. As I ironed each one and put it on its small plastic hanger in the closet that we shared, I watched from the window for Jim's car. He was always on time. But that Saturday, the eighteenth of February, 1967, he was late.

I phoned my mother, who told me not to worry and to call her back in an hour, by which time she was sure Jim would have returned. I phoned my friend Kathy's husband, Carl, who was a policeman in another town. He told me soberly that it was possible they'd been in an accident; I should check with the local hospitals, phone the local police.

I went cold. My whole body shook with uncontrollable spasms as I made each call. I had trouble forming the questions, pronouncing Jim's name, forcing the words into the mouthpiece of the phone.

I followed Carl's instructions and phoned all of the hospitals in the area, plus all of the local police stations. I phoned Jim's home and office numbers again and again, but no one answered. I waited by the window, watching for each approaching car. I waited for what seemed like years, and as I waited, I prayed.

The last call I made, in the late afternoon, was to Florida. Steve must have hung up on me and phoned his mother in our hometown, because the next thing I knew, she was there. Tenderly, she wiped my face with a cold washcloth and gathered me up in her arms.

"They're gone," I said dully, from a dark and distant place in my mind, as Steve's mother drove me back to her home, "– gone –"

Somewhere

SOMEWHERE CHILD recounts all of these events in greater depth and detail, from my point of view. My purpose here is not to repeat or relive the anguish I felt during the many years my daughter was missing and what I did to find and reclaim her. This is not meant to be a "sob story" – which is what my daughter called SOMEWHERE CHILD sometime after that book found her. What I feel now or felt then no longer matters much. I have no more sobs left in me.

This is intended to be an investigation, a dig for deeper truths, a closer look at all the sides. What were J.'s motives? Why did he do what he did? Since I'm the only one alive who knows what really happened behind J.'s closed front doors when I lived there, I feel I must share what I know and learn, as clearly and matter-of-factly as I can, while I'm still alive. I'm nearly 80 years old, and the clock is ticking.

Only I know that J.'s accusations against me were baseless. But my daughter still believes them, and she is passing those beliefs down. Is there any hope that some of the truths I uncover might set her free from her dead father's psychological grip? I don't know. But I must hope against hope that it does.

Among my daughter's many long-held beliefs: I ruined her childhood by forcing her father to go on the run to protect her from me. If he had had his way, if I had not interfered, she once told me, she would have been raised by him in his big house in Ridgewood, New Jersey, gone to Ridgewood's good schools, made lasting friends. Instead, she had a childhood of instability, always running, moving from state to state every year. All because of me.

She had no choice, of course, but to believe her father's fabrications and justifications when she was a child. But she is no longer a child. She is a grown woman now, a devoted wife, mother, and even grandmother. She is a devout Catholic, too, because her father (who, like me, was never Catholic) put her in Catholic schools everywhere they lived, to evade being found through public records. And her teachers, the nuns in all those schools, she once told me, adored her, the pretty little fair-haired motherless child.

She is mature and strong enough now, I trust, to learn the truth; and that truth, perhaps, will help to heal some deep wounds.

After J. failed to return the baby that Saturday in February 1967 I learned from his new law partner that J. had bought him out and had liquidated all of his assets the previous summer – months before our October divorce. So J.'s claim in our weekly telephone calls that his law practice was "thriving" had been a lie. He'd been planning this perilous escape for many months, which likely caused his evident weight loss and trembling.

But who or what was he plotting to run from? Our baby was happy, healthy, dearly loved, clearly well cared for, and seemingly able to pass back and forth between her parents' two worlds with ease. He and I were interacting civilly. He was not yet wanted by the FBI. That would happen in April.

My lawyer, who had known J. and his reputation, was solicitous toward me when he learned of the abduction. He shook his head in disbelief. "Why'dya ever marry the guy?" he asked rhetorically. I had no answer for him. With a lit cigarette dangling from one side of his mouth, he told me sternly, "From now on, you've gotta live like a f*cking *nun*. He's gonna have you followed."

By whom? I thought. *And why?*

In March 1967 I went before the grand jury. Soon after, J. was indicted for kidnapping under New Jersey state law 2A:118-1. In April the county prosecutor gave the case to the FBI, who obtained a federal fugitive warrant for J.'s arrest for "fleeing to avoid prosecution."

I met with the FBI agent assigned to the case. He told me it was highly unusual for the FBI to get involved in such "family matters," but they'd do the best they could. In the many weeks and months that followed, I visited this agent frequently, never making an appointment, to beg for news. That is, until the day he made it clear to me I was "just a number in their files."

I changed jobs and moved apartments. I began taking evening courses at a local college after work – English, Art, Child Psychology. For my term paper in the Child Psychology course, I wrote about the effects of maternal deprivation on very young children.

I met a good man on a blind date who taught me the meaning of the word "lovemaking." George and I kept active – waterskiing in the summer, snow skiing in the winter, playing tennis at his club year round. He took me dancing, to Broadway shows, to dinner, for drinks. And every month, with the filling up of the moon, when my uncontrollable grief returned, he comforted me, telling me I was strong, his "Supergirl," rocking me in his arms like a child.

Then one afternoon, two years after my baby was stolen, I received a phone call from my lawyer at work telling me they'd been found. In Rhodesia. A country I'd never heard of.

"But there's a problem, Bonnie," he said. "The FBI can do nothing more now. There's no extradition with Rhodesia. It's out of our jurisdiction. You'll have to go there yourself. Do you think you can handle it?"

(Photo: March, 1969, at JFK Airport on my way to Rhodesia)

Within days I was flying alone to Rhodesia's capital, Salisbury, via London, believing I'd be returning to my job, my apartment, my friends and family, and my boyfriend George *soon* – with my baby, who was by then a three-and-a half-year-old, no longer a baby.

But that was not to be.

I was met at the airport in Salisbury by Frank Clarke, the senior partner of a law firm that had agreed to take my case pro bono. Driving back to his office in the city, Mr. Clarke broke the news to me:

"He's taking this to court. I don't want to upset you, but it's very bad. He says you are mentally ill – a religious fanatic. He says you beat your baby, that your mother had an affair with the judge who awarded you custody, that your brother committed incest with you…"

He turned from the steering wheel to study my reaction to this news. All I could say was, "When can I see my baby?"

"I'm making arrangements," he said.

The next day Mr. Clarke took me to the American consulate, where I learned how J. was found: He'd "made a mistake," I was told, "a slip of the tongue." He'd mentioned to someone there that the FBI was "after" him. They thought he was a "crackpot" but decided to inquire of Washington anyway. The answer came back in due time: Yes, indeed, he is wanted. *They didn't "find" him at all,* I realized. *J. tipped his hand*.

Mr. Clarke planned my life, paternally. He offered me work in his office to keep me busy. He offered to find me free accommodation for the duration of my stay. He promised to make me "as comfortable as possible here." I sank into his arms, figuratively.

Mr. Clarke's wife took me to my first visit to see Whitney at J.'s house in the Salisbury suburb of Highlands:

Outside, in the back yard, in a cotton sundress, is my baby. No, not a baby, a little girl. I walk slowly toward her on the lawn. She is pale and chubby. Her white-blond hair is cut short, like a boy's. Had they planned to run away again and disguise her as a boy? Whitney can be a boy's name as well as a girl's. Is that why he had chosen this name before she was born?

She cocks her head quizzically as I approach. Does she recognize me? Does she remember me?

"Hello," I hear myself say cheerfully.

"Heh-wow," she answers lightly, then scampers away.

"Would you like to play a game?" I call to her. "I know a lot of games."

She runs back to me.

"Do you know how to play hide-and-seek?" She shakes her head.

Like two small children, friends, we played outside for the full hour of my allotted visitation. We giggled and ran – hiding, counting, finding.

"I know where you are!" I called out to her. "You're behind that tree –"

I found you, honey. Thank God, I've found you.

Mr. Clarke arranged for me to check out of my hotel and move in with the family of one of the partners in his law firm, Winterton, Holmes and Hill, who offered to let me stay with them rent-free until my case went to court. From their home on Monday, March 31, I wrote to my mother of my second visit with Whitney:

[EXCERPT FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

Mom, my little girl is just precious! I bought her a teddy bear in London and promised it to her on Friday. When I brought it with me yesterday she said, "I has enough toys" (obviously a direct quote from you-know-who). But by the time I was about to leave (my hour was up), she was begging me to stay and have dinner with them. She also said, "Maybe I can stay with you some night?" and I assured her she will. I haven't told her yet that I am her Mommy; I thought at this point it would only upset her. …

She still has her happy, carefree personality, and I'm sure that the transition from one parent to the other will not cause her harm. She is very bright and cute (and seemingly well aware of both). Yesterday she snuggled up beside me on their living room sofa while I read to her from the story book I brought her. She seems to stare at me, as if to say, "You look like me!" … She is very warm, very affectionate, very responsive and outgoing. I'm sure that the overwhelming love which I feel for her is transmitted when we're together. …

Mr. Clarke tells me that J. is now trying to say that I was having an affair with the judge who gave me custody! At first, he said in his allegations (hideous things – 37 pages worth) that you, Mom, were having an affair with the judge, but after seeing what I look like

now, I guess he thought he could change it to me. (Who knows, maybe tomorrow he'll say we both were. Lucky judge!)

Mr. Clarke also said something to the effect that J's approach now is to make things so difficult for me (nothing new) that for either physical, emotional, or financial reasons I'll have to give up and go back home. Mom, I can't let that happen. … I don't care if I have to fight this out for the rest of my life, I must stay until it's over. …

Before J. flew to Johannesburg to engage an additional counsel, Mr. Clarke insisted on obtaining his passport as a safeguard against his fleeing the country with Whitney.

"Look at this," Mr. Clarke said to me after calling me into his office one afternoon. I studied the passport carefully and saw that between February 1967, when they left the United States, and March 1968, when they settled in Rhodesia, they had traveled to the Netherlands, France, Portugal, England, Jamaica, Colombia, Brazil, and Senegal.

I thought of Whitney as a baby, spending a whole year living in different cities, different countries – absorbing, breathing, tasting her father's and her grandparents' fear because they knew they were fugitives from justice, because Jim knew he was wanted by the FBI for fleeing to avoid prosecution.

And I thought – bitterly – of the FBI, who had assured me repeatedly they were "doing all they could." They told me they'd checked passports, but how could they have, I wondered, as I stared at Jim's passport in my shaking hands, when Jim took this one out in his own name, during the same month that he disappeared, holding the baby in the photograph, without a disguise, using his own handwriting?

"Where did he get that kind of money? And what would make a man go to such lengths?" Mr. Clarke asked me rhetorically. He knew I had no answers.

High Court

During the more than three years I lived in Salisbury, I wrote to my mother at least once a week – long, detailed letters telling her what was happening in my life to soothe her worries. She saved every one of those letters in chronological order in a box and returned them to me after I came back to the U.S. in 1972, emptyhanded.

It was from those letters, in addition to my daily journal entries which I'd also saved, and all of the High Court transcripts Mr. Clarke gave to me, that I was able to reconstruct events in Rhodesia for my memoir SOMEWHERE CHILD. I could not have relied on my memory alone. My years in Rhodesia represent a good half of that book. I wanted to take readers there, to experience what I experienced at that time and in that place.

Salisbury, Rhodesia – now Harare, Zimbabwe – the capital city, known when I knew it as "the City of Flowering Trees," was and likely still is a breathtakingly beautiful place, the most beautiful city I had ever seen. Granted, I hadn't traveled widely up to that point in my life, and I'd only visited a few major cities – New York, San Francisco, Honolulu, and then London, briefly. But to me Salisbury was unlike any of the others. It suited me.

It was smaller, slower, cleaner, brighter. Its temperate climate was like year-round springtime – my favorite season. Its daytime sky was nearly always my favorite color, cobalt blue. Its mountain air was sweet to breathe. Majestic flowering trees – jacarandas and flamboyants – lined the city's main boulevards, while colorful bougainvillea and flower gardens flourished everywhere.

And the night sky was always filled with more twinkling stars than I'd ever seen or even thought possible. Early on I pointed to the magnificently star-studded sky one night and remarked to a new Rhodesian friend, "People should pay admission to see this!" He replied, "Only an American would put it that way."

The people I met and got to know – Mr. Clarke and his family and the members of his law firm, the Pichanick family I lived with in the months before the first case went to court, and many others, both European (white) and African (black), were kind and generous to me. I felt cared for and embraced. I felt deeply thankful to be there. All my life, for various

reasons, I'd been drawn to the continent of Africa. Being there at last felt – deep, deep down – like a homecoming.

There was peace in Rhodesia then, but of course I would later realize this "peace" was just the stillness before a violent storm. Shortly after I left the country in early 1972, a vicious civil war broke out that lasted until 1980, when Rhodesia – named after the 19th century English colonialist Cecil Rhodes who founded the white-ruled country – became black-ruled Zimbabwe, and the capital Salisbury was renamed Harare.

White supremacist Ian Smith, prime minister of Rhodesia when I was there, had declared Rhodesia independent from Britain in 1965. His Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) led to United Nations sanctions and the severance of international ties. Rhodesia thereby became a pariah nation – which is why the American authorities were unable to step in to help me, why I had to pursue J. on my own. And why, no doubt, J. had chosen to live there: In Rhodesia he was safe from extradition. It's also likely he doubted I'd find or follow him there, on the other side of the globe.

Was there, I wonder now, a murky underground network of men who helped their fellows settle in this "haven" to evade the law? Was there a white-supremacists group for whom this type of government appealed? Did J. get help or guidance from such groups along the way? I'm afraid I'll never know.

Believing my stay in Rhodesia would be short – I'd reclaim my child and return to the U.S. within days – I'd packed only a few things. So I soon found I had to do some shopping for essentials. Due to UDI and the trade embargo placed on Rhodesia after its breakaway from Britain, many items previously imported were now produced locally. The "Made in Rhodesia" bras, for example, seemed to be made of cardboard. And the "Made in Rhodesia" pantyhose were as thick and lifeless as the support hose my grandmother used to wear.

Few of the younger European women, however, bothered with pantyhose. Their bare legs were honey-tan from hours spent outdoors, sunbathing or playing tennis. These women looked healthy, physically fit, and beautiful in a simple, unadorned, unselfconscious way; latest fashions be damned. I strove to emulate them.

Looking back, I remember that I and the people I met there then were, like most ordinary people on the ground everywhere in the world, going through our day-to-day lives oblivious of the prevailing government's machinations. I never witnessed cruelty nor even felt tension between the races. My European (white) friends, most of whom were born in the country and considered Rhodesia their only home, were not racists that I could tell, and my African friends did not appear to be angry or resentful toward the colonials.

On one occasion though, I recall now, at a social gathering in Salisbury, a tall, handsome, rugged Rhodesian man, trying to impress me with his bravado, I think, puffed up his chest and bragged to me about his tough treatment of his African farmhands, his "boys." I quickly crossed him off my list of potential friends and acquaintances. But such occasions were rare, in my experience there.

If distant African drumming and dancing were foretelling war, none of us were paying any attention. We were too busy enjoying life in this beautiful, sunny place. It was, as I think of it now, in many ways a fool's paradise, especially for whites.

But then, I was young, only 23 when I arrived, new to the country, politically uninformed and uninvolved, preoccupied by my High Court case, and becoming a reluctant celebrity. When the case finally went to court in June, it became daily front-page news for days, complete with photographs of me with Whitney. Little girls would stop me on the sidewalk in Salisbury and ask for my autograph.

One little girl, however, the one I had come to this country to reclaim, was being taught to hate me. As the weeks wore on, and the case was postponed at J.'s request because he claimed he needed "more time to prepare," my visitations with Whitney became increasingly difficult.

By mid-May, Whitney had become not only almost totally uncommunicative but also physically hostile toward me. She would slap me and push me away from her, shouting, "Why don't you leave me alone and go away? I want to stay with my daddy for ever and ever!" and "My daddy is going to court to keep you away from me because you are a nasty lady!" and "My daddy's going to burn your house down with you in it!"

At times I wondered why I was staying.

I wrote to George in desperation: “If it was a billion dollars we were fighting over, I’d gladly tell him to keep it all and I’d be on the next plane home. But what good is my life if I can’t live with myself? I must do all I can; I must.”

When during another visitation I tried to tell my daughter gently that I was her mommy, she informed me that she already had two mommies: “Na-na is my ma-ma and Hedda is my ma-ma,” she said. “You’re NOT my ma-ma! You tried to *KILL* my ma-ma! You *TRIED!”*

So his mother had become his child’s mother after all, as he’d long planned. And in the time he took “to prepare” for the upcoming trial, he’d charmed a sweet, unsuspecting, local young woman, a virginal spinster in her late twenties named Heather (“Hedda”), into becoming his fiancée. A prop. Now he was poisoning his child against me. *This man would stop at nothing*.

The trial began on Monday, June 16, 1969, in Salisbury’s grand, wood-paneled High Court courtroom before a bewigged judge and our respective lawyers, similarly dressed in black robes and white wigs. I stood in the witness box answering questions and giving my testimony for more than two days. I tried to stand tall and be strong, repeating to myself the Kipling poem, *“If you can keep your head when all about you … If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you … Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies…”*

J.’s advocate from Johannesburg tried his best to confuse and unnerve me with a barrage of twisted questions. And then he would pounce:

“Just answer yes or no, Mrs. Jagoe.”

“It’s impossible to answer your questions with a yes or a no, sir, because they are made up of part fact and part fiction twisted together –”

“Are you trying to evade the question?”

“No, sir, I’m trying to be honest.”

“Well, I submit that there will be witnesses called to this stand who will testify to the whole truth of these incidents.”

“That won’t make them true, sir.”

Jim's mother and father and fiancée Heather took their turns in the witness stand. Heather sweetly told the court of her close relationship with Whitney and said that Whitney "already calls me Mommy." J. also paid for his friend Willy to fly out from the U.S. to testify against me. As I sat in the courtroom beside Mr. Clarke, I wondered what would drive a man like Willy to come so far to tell such lies.

At one point during J.'s testimony he held up a large, black-and-white glossy photograph of Whitney when she was a baby, still in a diaper, with what were meant to look like bruises all over her body. *How did he do this?* I wondered. *With charcoal? With makeup? And when did he do it? Before he kidnapped her, while on a visitation with her, after he'd dropped the case in New Jersey, knowing he might need this black-and-white photo as "evidence" in a foreign court one day?* I was becoming inured to his horrors.

[Excerpt from SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

Look at him. Look. Standing up there thin and bent. Looking like his father, only taller. See how he's aged. Watch him shift his weight, squirm from side to side, answering meekly, haltingly. Now his head is bending down, too heavy for his neck, it seems. His ill-fitting suit, too, hangs heavily, like his head. His face is pathetic; it screams for pity. Your heart goes out to him, strangely. . . .

He says his wife was cruel, she beat the baby, bruising her, almost breaking her arm. He feared for the baby's life. What could he do? How sincere he is, how deeply felt his words ("I've waited all my life for you . . ."). He seems to be about to weep. Watch him wipe his eyes and chew his lower lip. His wife, he says, was not right in the head. She said she hated him and hated the child and wanted to kill it. He had no choice: He had to take the child and go. He had to sell his practice, leave the country, break the law. But what is the law when the life of an innocent baby is at stake? . . .

The judge interrupts: "Would you please refrain from making speeches?" The man in the stand mumbles something and hangs his head. Now your advocate is asking whether he ever planned to let the child's mother know where she was? Oh, yes, he says sincerely, when the child turned nineteen he planned to contact the mother – when the child was too old to be adversely affected by her. Oh, yes, he had it all planned; yes, that was part of his plan. . . . Poor man . . .

But wait! WAIT! You are forgetting something!

Judge, please look at me, look into my eyes. Would I have hurt my baby? If I hated her, would I be here now? Judge, I know he seems sincere. He thinks he is telling the truth.

He has convinced himself that he is right; no, more than right: righteous. Judge, Judge, how will you know? How will you be able to understand, when I was there in person, and I don't understand?

Deep breaths. Feet together. Fold your hands.

Look at him now, choking back his tears, saying he takes her to church every Sunday, sits with her in Sunday school, provides her with a home and a fenced-in yard to play in, loving grandparents who live with him. . . . Your whole body is shaking. ("I'm going to have you put away. . . . I'm going to take that baby away from you and give it to my mother.") Look at him. So humble and sincere, but not sorry. He truly believes he has done nothing wrong.

Poor man, I feel sorry for you. And, Judge, if you believe what he is saying, I will understand. I believed him once, too.

On Wednesday, June 25, I wrote to my mother: "The trial is now finished, and believe me, I feel finished as well. … After court yesterday I felt so drained I thought my legs wouldn't carry me. … Instead, I had to hold my head up and walk calmly out of the courtroom. … I'm afraid, Mom, I'm not the same girl who said good-bye to you at JFK on March 22. This experience has really taught me a lot, and I guess I've changed in the process. Whatever the outcome, I'll be grateful for the experience. … Whatever happens will be for the best."

The Sunday edition of Rhodesia's main newspaper, the *Rhodesia Herald*, had a large photo of Whitney and me on its front cover with a ten-inch article beneath the headline, "Blonde Bonnie Awaits High Court Verdict." The story began with, "As she hugged her three-year-old daughter last week, attractive blonde Mrs. Bonnie Lee Jagoe waited tensely to hear whether a frantic 9,000-mile flight from America and a seven-day Salisbury High Court battle for custody of her child had been successful. …"

The Proposal

On July 2, as the white people of Rhodesia read their morning newspaper and drank their first cup of freshly brewed tea brought to their bedroom on a breakfast tray by their "houseboy," 9,000 miles away my mother was receiving a phone call from my boyfriend George relaying the news he'd received in my cable: I had won the case, but as long as J. stayed in Rhodesia I had to remain there also.

The *Rhodesia Herald* report included portions of the judgement. "There was nothing in Mrs. Jagoe's past behaviour or in her present character," the judge ruled, "now that the strain of an unhappy marriage had been removed, to justify the view that she was incapable of being the custodian of the child." The judge was satisfied that Whitney's material welfare would be fully and adequately catered for in Rhodesia and that it was desirable that she should continue to have contact with her father and grandparents. Therefore, "the child must not be removed from this country."

For me, to remain in Rhodesia would not be a sacrifice. I was happy to stay in Africa's strong arms. But at that time, immediately after the judgment was given, when Whitney's whole being seemed at times to be flooded with anger, resentment, and hatred toward me, I could only feel the unutterable fear that although I'd won this case, I'd lost my child.

While looking for a place of our own, I saw an ad in the Rhodesia Herald for a "centrally located furnished flat, all utilities included, £20 per month." This flat was part of an old, sprawling, single-story house on the corner of Fife and Blakiston Avenues in Salisbury, across from a lovely creche (nursery school). I took it.

Then, without my even asking, my Rhodesian friends generously loaned me everything I needed to set up house: One woman let me borrow her old Singer sewing machine, another gave me linens; and my advocate's wife, Anne, brought over two big boxes of things – pots, pans, dishes, cups, saucers, spoons, forks, mixing bowls, sheets, blankets, pillows.

Two and a half years after my 16-month-old baby, in her new blue snowsuit, waved good-bye to me from her father's arms as they descended the stairs of the apartment in my

hometown in New Jersey that she and I shared, we were together, just the two of us, under one roof again. But this time in Africa.

To have a place, however humble, of our own; to be with Whitney after our unnatural two-year separation; to function as a mother again on a day-to-day basis, despite the obvious hurdles and handicaps that confronted us; to live where time was slower, pressures fewer, and friends friendlier made me happier than I had been in years. And my newfound happiness, I could see, infected Whitney.

While my attorney Mr. Clarke and J.'s attorneys negotiated agreements regarding the future – including my dropping the charges against J. so he might return to the States, which would allow me to follow – I spent all of my time with Whitney.

Knowing how much she loved to eat, I cooked her favorite foods on our flat's ancient, cast-iron Aga cooker, and we shared enjoyable meals. We explored the city's beautiful parks, including the children's park and aviary, every day together on foot. I tried to make each day an adventure, which wasn't hard to do because so much of the city was still new to me too.

Using the borrowed sewing machine, I made Whitney several jumpers from one simple pattern and good-quality fabric I bought on sale. I bought her three turtleneck pullovers, two pretty cotton blouses, several pairs of knee socks and filly panties – all in matching colors – to wear with the jumpers during the cooler weather. I told her we'd let her hair grow long, past her shoulders, like mine.

For the most part, Whitney seemed to enjoy her new life, her new partnership with me. On the whole, I found her adaptability remarkable. Between her scheduled visitations with J., she seldom mentioned him. She never mentioned her grandparents. She didn't seem to miss them.

But as he had when he returned Whitney to the Pichanicks' home after his visitations with her, J. didn't readily release her to me at our new apartment. He held her tightly while she cried hysterically, "Daddy, don't leave me!" and he repeated, "There, there, be a brave soldier…" It was impossible for me to reason with him. He just stood woodenly in the doorway clutching her, sadly repeating in her ear, "…brave soldier … brave soldier." On

several occasions she was so emotionally overwrought she became physically ill and vomited.

Listening to the Voice of America give details of the Apollo moon landing on July 20, 1969, I felt as if I were living on another sphere, farther than the moon from the planet earth. From that distance I saw the United States as a man much like J.: a large, white, middle-aged businessman with close-cropped hair, wearing a dark suit; a powerful man, more interested in profits than people, who was prepared to go to any lengths – even the moon – to get his own way. Africa, on the other hand, seemed to me to be a large, old black woman, simple, guileless, and warm, who loved her pale foster children as much as she loved her own. It was then that I began to love the life there. Apart from the problems I had with J., it was a sunny, leisurely, stress-free life, conducive to health and well-being.

At a meeting in Mr. Clarke's office, J.'s lawyer said to me, "Don't you think you should bury the hatchet now? ... Be big about this. Forget the past and forgive." I looked at Mr. Clarke, who was looking away, and then at J., who reminded me of Jackie Gleason's "Poor Soul" character. But I knew the only ones in the room who were familiar with Gleason's famous act were J. and me.

"You just have to sign these letters we've prepared," his lawyer went on, "addressed to your county judge and prosecutor back in the States, requesting them to drop charges against Jim now that you've got your daughter back and all is well –"

I signed the papers dropping charges against J., not because I had forgiven him or I could ever forget what he'd done, but because I felt I had no other choice, and at that point I wanted to be able to go home again – some day.

After more weeks of legal wrangling regarding visitation and child support in the U.S., J. and his parents suddenly, without warning, left Rhodesia. On Friday afternoon, August 29, Mr. Clarke told me they'd left the country that morning. J. had obviously broken his engagement with Heather because he no longer needed her as a prop. He'd left without saying good-bye to Whitney. He assumed, I felt sure, that Whitney and I would soon follow. But at that moment, I confess, I'd have sooner followed the devil to hell.

When I told Mr. Clarke I'd decided not to return to America right away, we had words. "You are a very stubborn girl, Bonnie," he said.

"If I wasn't so stubborn," I told him, "I would never have come to Rhodesia in the first place – I wouldn't be sitting in this chair talking to you right now."

He seemed shocked by my impudence. "I think you're headed for trouble," he said sternly.

"Perhaps I am," I said, "but I have to take a chance. … Besides, that man will give me trouble wherever I am."

If Whitney had appeared to miss J., if she'd pined for him, cried to see him, even asked for him, I would have set aside all other considerations and returned to the States at once. But, as I wrote to George on September 8, "Not once has she even mentioned his name! It's as though he's just completely faded out of the picture and she's relieved to be rid of the strain. … She's beginning to act like a normal child now. … We have a lovely time together…."

One evening in early September I invited J.'s ex-fiancée Heather to join Whitney and me for dinner at our Fife Avenue flat. When she arrived she was timid at first, understandably wary. Her pretty hands played nervously in her lap. She spoke to Whitney longingly and lovingly, as one of the women Whitney had also called Mommy.

After we put Whitney to bed, I tried to console her. "You're very lucky," I told her. "You know his mother would never have allowed your marriage to work…."

Heather stayed and we talked for three more hours. She told me what life was like at Jim's home – how J.'s mother openly and flagrantly indoctrinated Whitney against me. "She used to shake her finger in Whitney's face," Heather said, "and scold her, saying, 'You are not allowed to kiss that woman!' 'You are not to listen to that woman!' 'You mustn't go swimming with that woman, or she will *drown* you!' . . ."

Heather told me that during the trial, every evening in Jim's house, Jim, his parents, and Jerry discussed strategy and rehearsed their testimony to make sure the details coincided. She told me Jerry's wife had threatened to leave him if he agreed to go to

Rhodesia and testify against me. *(Was she suspecting,* I wondered, *as was I, that J.'s and Willy's devotion to each other was more than platonic?)*

"Did she leave him?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe she did."

"You're lucky, Heather – you have no idea how lucky."

[EXCERPT FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

In mid-September I wrote to my mother:

I've decided to stay in Rhodesia for a little while to give myself time to think this whole thing out. Last Monday I started a job as a market researcher for commercial television, which will last until mid-October. While I work (about 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.), Whitney goes to the nursery school (crèche) diagonally across the street from where we live. It's large, clean, and well run. She has her own African nanny, named Ina, who cares for her all day. Since she's been only with adults for so much of her life with J., I think being with children all day now is the best thing for her. She seems to enjoy it very much, too; she's acting like a real little girl now, jumping up and down, making noise, and getting into mischief. And the nursery school costs only £1.16 a week – approximately $4! . . .

I saw Mr. Clarke briefly yesterday and he said it wouldn't be a criminal offense if I stayed here, but it would be a civil one. After what J.'s ex-fiancée told me when she came to dinner here a few weeks ago, Mr. Clarke understands my reasons for keeping Whitney from those crazy people. Mr. Clarke is NOT encouraging me to stay. He's a very ethical man, and I think he thinks I'm being unethical, but at least he sees my point of view and realizes it's my life.

Whitney Lee is very happy and healthy now. I can't bear the thought of taking her back to those people so that they can continue to confuse and upset and threaten her. I just need more time to cement our relationship so that they can't destroy it again. Please understand, Mommy dear, as I'm sure you do. It's not my intention to shirk my responsibilities. I really want to do what's best, and I think it's best to stay here for a while longer now that he's gone. What a relief it is to have him at the other end of the world!

In October George came out to Salisbury to see me and, to my surprise, propose. George had just turned thirty, time to settle down and marry.

George was the child of Armenian immigrants, and, as a first-generation American, he was a striver. He believed in the American Dream. He was the first in his family to attend college and graduate school. He held a responsible, good-paying job. He was going places.

(Photo by George of me with Whitney Lee, outside of our first flat in Salisbury)

George chose a romantic weekend for us, at Rhodesia's famous tourist attractions, Victoria Falls and the Wankie Game Reserve, while Whitney stayed with the Pichanicks. In the privacy of our thatched hut at Wankie, surrounded by the primordial sounds of nocturnal Africa, George asked me to marry him and return with him to the U.S.

He described what he envisioned as our future together: a comfortable home in the New Jersey suburbs not far from his family and mine, two cars, a dog and cat, children of our own, plus Whitney, of course; he would adopt Whitney.

The one proviso, though, was that I had to guarantee J. would never bother us. George wanted our life to be free of J. and his harassment. George was an idealist, and he wanted the best for us.

As night birds cried in the outlying bush and crickets droned in the distance, my heart heard Africa whisper, *Stay with me.* I saw the scene that George described as if it were the lion's cage at a zoo.

I couldn't accept George's proposal. I knew I couldn't possibly give him the guarantee he was asking for.

George took my rejection well, though. He told me calmly that in his view I had only three choices: either remarry as soon as possible, run away with Whitney – "change your name, dye your hair…," or give her back to J.

"I can't run away, George," I told him, "and I can't return with you, and I won't give her up. I feel I must wait here a while, and see…"

George left Salisbury after a pleasant stay. Not long after his return to the States, he married his secretary.

A Happy Time

Looking back, I can say that the two years I had with Whitney – from the time J. suddenly left with his parents for the States and the time he returned and took her again and disappeared – were, despite all, the happiest years of my life.

I was a mother again, doing my best to repair the damage J. had done. I'd found full-time work that I loved, as a copy editor and layout artist at a weekly farming magazine, *The Rhodesian Farmer*, in Salisbury, while Whitney was well cared for and enjoying her new little friends at the crèche. I'd found a nice-size, furnished, one-bedroom apartment for Whitney and me in a nearby block of flats, on Montagu Avenue. I had a maid, Margaret, who came every weekday morning to help with the household chores. I'd fallen in love with a sweet Englishman, an artist, named Melvyn, who loved both Whitney and me. Whitney had a darling friend, Gigi, who lived next door and became like a big sister to her; the two played endlessly and happily together.

We were like a happy, make-believe family, Mel and I playing the parents of both Whitney and Gigi. On weekends the four of us went everywhere together, and our outings were always filled with good food, swimming, sunshine, and laughter.

If, as we drove along in Mel's car, Whitney suddenly became angry with me, as she did from time to time for no apparent reason, Mel and Gigi quickly made a game of it, which never failed to break Whitney's dark mood.

When, for example, Whitney shouted at me, "My daddy's going to shoot you with his gun!" Gigi added teasingly, "And my daddy's a lion tamer and he's going to hit Bonnie with his whip!" and Mel chimed in, "Yeah, and *my* daddy's a police chief and he's going to lock her up and throw away the key!" I pretended to cry, rubbing my eyes with balled-up fists, and then we all laughed – including Whitney and me – and went on to another game.

Or when Whitney said, "My daddy's going to buy me my own white horse when he takes me back to America with him!" Gigi began a new game to help heal Whitney's confusion: "And I'm going to eat green cheese when I land on the moon!" Gigi said. "And I'm going to ride a kangaroo when I get to Australia!" Mel said. "And I'm going to wear glass

slippers to the queen's ball," I said. And the game went on until all of our imaginations went dry.

Looking back, I can see this was the closest I've ever come to having my own happy family.

On my 25th birthday, May 18, 1970, I counted my blessings – my much-loved job, our new homey flat, Margaret's household help, Mel's stabilizing love and presence, Gigi's joy and friendship, Whitney's growing sense of security and happiness, our many friends, our good health, my hope for the future. In spite of the hardships, in almost every respect, my life was richer than it had ever been.

While he was away, J. paid no child support. So I had to find other ways to supplement my modest editorial assistant salary in order to support myself and Whitney. I was asked to be the hostess on one of Rhodesia Television's weekly game shows; and, as the art director of one of Salisbury's leading advertising agencies, Mel was able to offer me freelance modeling jobs. Mel joined us for dinner every night (never spending the night – he had his own apartment in town), and he gave me $25 each month toward groceries.

Not surprisingly, J. returned to Rhodesia and started another custody suit. Desperate for ammunition, he used all of this against me. He accused me of having three simultaneous careers – my magazine job, modeling, and television – "in preference to motherhood." He claimed I traveled in a fast, "swinging" crowd, "the RTV [Rhodesia Television] crowd"; that I was leading an "immoral" life because I had a boyfriend, and that Whitney had "gone downhill" in the time he'd been gone.

Once again J. and I spoke through interpreters, our attorneys. We never spoke to each other. J. resumed his former visitation schedule, taking Whitney three afternoons a week and overnight on weekends, and once again Whitney returned from these visits emotionally distraught and torn. But his tactics toward me became more ruthless than ever.

He had African detectives follow me and spy on me. One morning as I walked to work, I realized an African man was walking close behind me. I walked faster; so did he. I stopped to take a pebble from my shoe; he stopped too. I turned quickly and crossed the

street; he followed me. I felt naked, exposed, vulnerable: *What does this man want with me?*

The Africans I'd met in Salisbury were gentle, polite, peace-loving people; I'd never felt afraid. Yet this man, I knew, was after me. *What was he going to do?* I took a circuitous route to work, scanning the city streets for signs of a police car. I walked faster, and still he kept up. I looked quickly over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of his sneer. My heart was pounding crazily. I started to cry. Then I saw a police car and waved for the driver to stop. The officer asked to see the man's I.D. The man was, in fact, a detective, hired by J.

Soon after, Joseph, one of the two caretakers at the block of flats where Whitney and I were living, told me he'd been approached by more of J.'s detectives and asked to spy on me. They offered to pay him well to tell them what I did, where I went, how I lived, whom I saw, whether I had male visitors. Joseph said he'd refused their offer. I thanked him for telling me and I paid him for his loyalty.

"What is this I hear about a boyfriend?" Mr. Clarke said after J.'s new allegations arrived.

"I do have a boyfriend," I told him.

"Have you in fact slept with him?"

"Yes," I said, with neither shame nor guilt.

"I'm washing my hands of your case, Bonnie. I'll let one of our junior partners handle it. I can't help you anymore."

Fine, I thought defiantly. *You can keep your antiquated morality, Mr. Clarke. I bought it once, and where did it get me? Marital sex with Jim was worse than rape. You may not understand this, Mr. Clarke, but I'll never be raped again.*

In late July, when J. and I went to court a second time, this time for a five-day High Court case that also garnered front-page news, the ironies of my life could be summed up in one issue of the morning Rhodesia Herald: FATHER CLAIMS CUSTODY OF DAUGHTER, the front-page headline read. Several pages in, my smiling made-up model-face could be seen advertising Mayfair coffee. And in the TV section at the back, there was a listing of my

newest weekly quiz show, “The Anagram Game.” I observed myself in the media as if I were someone else. *That’s not,* I said to myself*, the real me.*

Mel had rented a television set for us so we could all watch my pre-taped Monday evening quiz programs together. At the time, RTV had only one channel, in black-and-white. Whitney sat on Mel’s lap, with her arm around his neck. She adored him.

One day as we walked home from the crèche, Whitney was particularly pensive. I asked her what was wrong.

“Are you going to get married?” she asked me soberly.

“Someday I’ll get married again,” I said.

“When?”

“Oh, when I’m a big girl,” I joked.

She looked up at me seriously. “Who will you marry when you get married again? Melvyn?”

“Mel and I are planning to get married –”

“No,” she said sternly, “you can’t marry Melvyn. He’s mine!”

“All right,” I laughed. “He’s yours.”

SOMEWHERE CHILD recounts the details of this sordid second custody case, including 15 pages of actual verbatim testimony from the trial. Many of my Rhodesian friends took time from their jobs to come to court to testify in my behalf. The last person to take the stand was Mel.

[EXCERPT FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

As I wrote to my mother:

Mel has been wonderful throughout this whole ordeal, and he’s really proven his love for Whitney and me. He was so nervous and worried about testifying in court that he could hardly eat the whole week. But when he stood up there in the witness box on the last day of the trial, I felt so proud of him – so handsome and polite and honest.

We both admitted to being intimate (the judge would surely have seen through a lie), but both of us stressed that Whitney had never been aware of anything. Fortunately, Mel is

very good-natured and doesn't seem to care what narrow-minded people might think. We're certainly not ashamed of our relationship.

The day after Mel testified, the [Rhodesia Herald's] front-page headlines read: ARTIST GIVES EVIDENCE IN CUSTODY CASE, and the article took up several columns. I cried the whole day, to think that Mel, sweetheart that he is, should suffer this humiliation because of me. He only laughed and said, "I've finally been recognized as an artist!"

I wasn't in court when the judgment was given. I was at work busy meeting deadlines when my lawyer phoned and told me the news: J. had lost. The judge said a separation from her father would be in Whitney's interest. The judgment went on:

"Whitney needs an undisturbed environment in which the maternal link can properly develop, and circumstances have not allowed this to occur. . . . It seems that [her father's] love for her tends to be of a possessive character and this certainly has dangers for the future of the child. All this and much that I have not mentioned casts a grave doubt on [his] suitability for the role of custodian parent and his fitness to bring the child up as a healthy-minded, balanced and integrated personality . . .

"It has become clear in these proceedings that it is desirable that the occasions of access should be substantially reduced and that a moratorium from further dispute should now obtain in which the child will be free of the unsettling effects of the conflict between the parties which has dogged it since its infancy. In my view, the respondent should not see the child for more than one reasonable period a year for the next few years. ..."

J.'s application to the court to take custody of Whitney away from me was denied; his visitations were to be confined to one, four-week Rhodesian school holiday a year, in Rhodesia, during which time he would be required to surrender his passport to the registrar of the court prior to such period, and to let me know where he and Whitney would be; he would not be allowed to see her *at all* until August of the following year.

Not surprisingly, J. appealed this decision.

That appeal, which took place in October, was conducted in another courtroom, in which three wigged and robed judges presided. J.'s advocate renewed the fight for J.'s claim

to Whitney's custody, filling the small room with venomous statements about my "misconduct," "immorality," "illicit relationship."

Mel sat beside me, handsome and erect in his dark business suit, holding my hand. And with every one of J.'s advocate's blows I squeezed Mel's hand harder, as if I were in labor.

J. sat smugly on the other side of the room alone, listening to his advocate's pleas the way a playwright might enjoy seeing and hearing his words enacted. I wanted to run to the front of the room and scream, *What is morality?! Is stealing a child and poisoning her mind moral? Is loving a man who is gentle and kind, who would never hurt anyone or anything, immoral? What is moral, Mr. Advocate?! Taking money to fight for a monster who is determined to take his child away from her mother? Tell me about morality, sir! I don't know what it is anymore.*

But I didn't get up or say a word. I sat silently, stiffly, beside Mel, squeezing his hand.

[EXCERPTED FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

Tuesday night, October 13, 1970

Dearest Mom,

. . . Judgment on J.'s appeal was given this afternoon at 2:15 by the Chief Justice of Rhodesia, Sir Hugh Beadle. . . . Thank God, the judges saw through J.'s filth, and he lost again and will have to pay everything ($). . . .

I nearly cried when the judge stressed how cruel it was that J. took a 16-month-old baby away from her mother for two whole years, etc., etc. He said that any man who would do a thing like that is merely obsessed with getting custody of the child and has no regard for the child's welfare. He also said that it was terribly wrong for J. to question Whitney on whether or not I slept with Mel and then to make a tape recording of it for the court. The three judges agreed with everything that the High Court judge decided, and they didn't change a thing from the last judgment.

I think perhaps J. will leave Rhodesia now and return to his parents and his practice. But of course he'll be back here again next year to have Whitney for his once-a-year, four-week visit. . . .

Mel has been wonderful. Whitney, of course, hasn't been aware of what's been happening. She's perfectly happy without J., and she never asks for him. . . .

I love you dearly,
Bon

After he lost the appeal and left Rhodesia, for the ten months J. was away, we were happy. It wasn't perfect – nothing is perfect – but we were happy.

On Saturday afternoons Mel, Whitney, Gigi and I went to Lake McIlwaine, where Mel and his friend Robin kept the outboard-motorboat they shared. While Gigi and Whitney stayed at the yacht club, of which Gigi's father was commodore – playing on the trampoline and swings and swimming in the shallow cement pool under Gigi's mother's and two older sisters' supervision – Mel and I went waterskiing or fishing.

Whitney was afraid of the boat; she refused ever to come into it with me. I felt at the time it was because J.'s mother had instilled the idea, as Heather had reported to me, that I was going to drown her.

Afterward, the four of us would often drive slowly through the game reserve that bordered the lake, observing the baboons, ostriches, giraffes, zebra, impala, and other wild animals in their natural environment casually observing us, their uninvited guests. Seeing the game became commonplace for us, like watching squirrels in city parks scamper up trees.

Sundays were spent with friends at their homes in the suburbs, swimming in their pools, playing tennis on their private courts. One friend frequently held open-house parties on Sunday afternoons to which all of his friends were invited. Everyone who came – couples with children, singles with dates, older people, young people – brought an offering of food or drink and spent the day enjoying good exercise, good food, good friendship, good fun – including Whitney and Gigi.

It was on these Sundays in particular that I saw the clearest evidence of positive changes in Whitney's attitude. She played happily with the other children, spoke politely to adults, seemed proud to be with me. Sometimes she even came up to wherever I was sitting or standing and put her arm around me. Once again my hopes rose. Time, which I had begged the High Court for in the second custody case, was at last eroding the barrier between us. The months of promised peace, I thought at the time, are working miracles after all.

I wrote to J. regularly to report on Whitney's welfare and to ask for child support. "As you know," I wrote in one of those letters, "Whitney starts school soon. The cost of outfitting her with school uniforms, jerseys, blazers, shoes, and so on, will certainly far exceed my budget allowance. I should think that if you really cared about her welfare (regardless of where she lives), you would take these matters into consideration and would send the monthly maintenance cheques for her without fail."

But he didn't respond. He sent no child support. He made no effort to communicate with Whitney either, though he certainly knew our mailing address.

She didn't ask about him. For the most part, except for the occasional angry eruptions that seemed to come out of nowhere, she was happy.

Financially, it was a struggle for me, but I knew I could manage. I'd always worked to support myself. I'd learned from my mother how to get by.

And when I sent my mother clips from the newspaper or fashion magazines of my freelance modeling jobs, I knew it would make her happy. To her, I was finally using my face for good.

Whitney and I lived in peace, which was the main thing, and that made me unspeakably happy.

(Photo: a professional photographer's photo of Whitney and me, 1970)

The Boat

On Friday the thirteenth of August,1971, Mel and I left our respective offices at noon to pick up Whitney from school. “See you in September!” her teacher called, as the children scampered out, clutching their school bags with one hand and their school hats with the other.

I gave Whitney a bath and dressed her in her favorite light-blue dress, white knee socks, and her best shoes, which Mel had freshly polished. I brushed her baby-fine blond hair and sprayed it lightly to keep it in place, then I dabbed my favorite perfume behind her ears. “You look beautiful,” I told her, and Mel concurred.

I packed a small suitcase with her best clothes, which Margaret had freshly laundered, ironed, and folded. And there was room for her dolls, Dale and Dawn, and their clothes too.

“You’re all set,” I said, trying to be cheerful. “When you come home, you must tell me about all the things you saw and did on your holiday. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“I will, Mommy,” she said.

When J. arrived promptly at two, Whitney’s first words to him were, “Dad, do you know I go to big school now?”

J. gave me an itinerary of their trip, which included Victoria Falls and Lake Kariba, along the Zambezi River at Rhodesia’s northern border. He babbled a few garbled words to Whitney and said nothing to Mel or me.

Mel and I and some close friends spent the weekend at a remote cottage in the Chimanimani Mountains, on the country's southeastern border, five hours' drive from Salisbury. We all felt we needed to get away.

The cottage, originally built by pioneers, was now owned by a colleague of one of those friends, a professor at the University of Rhodesia. It was 24 miles away from the closest town and high up in beautiful green pine forests. There were no signs of civilization anywhere – nothing except pure beauty, mountain air, mountain springs, wild flowers, the perfume of pines, the music of rushing streams and singing birds. We six spent the weekend hiking, sunbathing, and soaking up nature.

That Monday morning when I arrived back at work, a bit late, as usual, my beloved boss Dudley met me with, "There's a message on your desk. Your lawyer phoned. Says it's urgent."

As I listened to my lawyer's voice, my heart and mind went numb. It was like a trans-Atlantic call, broken by static in my mind. I picked up pieces: J. had kidnapped Whitney. (My brain inserted "again.") Had stolen a boat at Lake Kariba. Crossed into Zambia on the weekend. Was apprehended. Taken to the capital, Lusaka. Put in jail. Whitney was there. Being cared for by the Prisoners' Aid Society.

I tried to picture the boat and their crossing: *Was it a motorboat? A rowboat? Was it a long crossing? Was the lake choppy? Was she warm enough? Was she frightened? What lies did he tell her to calm her? That she would be rewarded with a white horse when they reached their final destination?*

And then I thought: *But he was caught! He didn't get away with it this time! They'll return Whitney. The Rhodesian court will change its order. He'll never be able to see her again*. I asked my lawyer to confirm this for me.

He said: "No, don't be so hasty. We're contacting the American consul in Lusaka. Don't say or do anything until you hear further from me." Like a patient in an emergency ward, I was not in control of my life or my destiny. I was at other people's mercy.

The next day, news of the kidnapping was front-page headlines in the Rhodesia Herald: FATHER IN GAOL AFTER LAKE DRAMA. When Margaret arrived, I was sitting on my

bed, numb. She picked up the newspaper from the floor where I had left it and approached me slowly. She spoke tenderly: “All of the mothers in Highfields [her African township] are crying for you, madam,” she said.

On the front page of Wednesday’s paper, a Lusaka journalist quoted J.: “I shall never take my daughter back to Rhodesia. . . . I’ve lost $1 million fighting this case. But now I’ve got Whitney with me and she’s going to stay with me. . . . I planned the whole thing very carefully. . . . Rhodesia does not exist under international law, so I have done nothing wrong.”

The long news story ended with: “As far as Mr. Jagoe is concerned, the battle for custody of his daughter is now over. ‘Look,’ he said, pointing to his daughter, ‘you can see how happy she is with me.’”

That afternoon, my lawyer called me: The American consulate in Zambia would not help me. No one would return Whitney to me. If I wanted her back, I’d have to go there myself and do as I’d done when I came to Rhodesia, take the matter to court for a judge to decide who should have custody.

My lawyer advised against this. “Zambia is very hostile towards Rhodesia,” he told me. “They’re not cooperating with us now, Bonnie, how do you think it will be for you – as a woman – on your own up there? No, it would be too dangerous, extremely costly, and perhaps futile. But it’s up to you.”

I told him I needed time to think.

J. knew I had no money. He knew from my multiple requests for child support that my finances were strained. Even if I’d felt it safe or wise to chase after him into Zambia, I would not have had enough money for as much as a one-way plane ticket. And there wasn’t enough time to borrow from friends or family as much money as I would have needed for more litigation in another foreign land.

J. must have known the American embassy in Lusaka would refuse to do anything to help me. Their attitude was the same as that of the U.S. consulate in Salisbury when I arrived in Rhodesia expecting to retrieve my daughter and return to the States within days.

It was a hands-off attitude, a we-can't-take-sides-in-this-family-matter attitude, a we-don't-want-go-get-involved attitude.

He knew how dangerous it would have been for me, a young white woman with "Rhodesia" stamped in her passport, to travel on her own to Zambia, a country at that time hostile to Rhodesia. He knew I would be strongly advised not to go, especially alone.

J. had heard my testimony. He'd heard me say repeatedly in court the previous year that it was my deep conviction that the fighting should cease, that Whitney should be with one or the other of us and not split between two.

And I knew that even if I did go to Zambia, start a new case, and win it, there would be no guarantee that J. wouldn't kidnap Whitney a third time, take her to yet another state or country, and start all over again. I knew, and J. knew, too, that I couldn't and wouldn't let that happen.

During that first week, Gigi came to my flat when I got home from work to keep me company. We sat close together, sometimes saying nothing to each other for long stretches. Then, in a burst, unanswerable questions tumbled out of her: "Why did he take her, Bonnie? . . . Why did he do it? . . . Where are they going? . . . What will happen to Whitney now? . . ." I'd never seen this happy, carefree child so serious and sad.

How could I explain what I, too, didn't understand? "I don't know," I said, sickened by the impotence of the statement. "All I know," I said, groping, "is that God allowed it to happen, and He will take care of her." *Don't ask me what kind of God would allow this to happen, Gigi dear. Please don't ask me.*

Throughout the week, African mothers who worked in the neighborhood came to my door, knocking softly. When I opened it, each would bow her head, pressing her hands together in a prayerful gesture, and repeat, "Sorry, madam; sorry, madam," and walk away.

Mel came to dinner every evening as usual, but it wasn't the same. There were no little girls to greet him with adoring affection. There was no three-course gourmet meal ready and waiting. There was no longer any family feeling.

Mel sat in his favorite chair, where he and Whitney used to sit and watch TV together. But now he was alone in that chair, sullen and withdrawn. I felt I was freefalling, and I ached for him to catch me and hold me. But he couldn't seem to do this.

In my selfishness I was blind to Mel's grief. I tried to cause arguments, accusing him of being cold, unfeeling, unsympathetic, *"so British!"*

"You'd think she was your child, the way you are behaving!" I snapped at him over a hastily prepared supper of scrambled eggs and toast. "She's my daughter – mine! MY child was taken, and you can't even comfort me. Not even a pat on the hand – or a hug – or a sweet word – NOTHING! Why do you even bother coming over here? Is it just a habit? Or is it to make my life more miserable than it already is –?"

In all the time we'd been together – nearly two years – Mel and I had never had harsh words. We accepted each other whole, we liked each other, we were friends. Until Whitney was taken, we were in harmony.

Mel paid no attention to my angry outburst. He refused to argue. He spoke softly, as if to himself or to the eggs on his plate: "I feel as if she were my child . . . I feel as if she were mine. . . ."

Everywhere I went, people stopped me on the street to ask for news of Whitney. And I knew, just as I'd known four years before when the people of my church, salt of the earth, had burned my open wounds with well-meaning inquiries about the whereabouts of my baby, that I had to leave.

I couldn't leave immediately, however. I had no money. So I booked to leave by ship the following April, by which time, I calculated, I would have enough saved. I saw no point in chasing after J. I wouldn't have known where to begin. My mother reported in a letter that he was no longer at his former address. Once again, he had disappeared.

"What I would like to do," I wrote to my mother, "is give Whitney some time with him now, and then when I get home I'll try to find her, talk with her, and see how she feels. If she doesn't like living with him and wants to come back with me, I'll do everything and anything to get her back. But on the other hand, if she still resents me and believes her father's

horrible lies, I'll leave things as they are and keep in touch with her so she knows where I am if ever she changes her mind (and eventually she will)."

It had been so still here. Peace, like an heirloom patchwork quilt, snugly covered the slumbering country in smug security. For most of the whites, Rhodesia was a haven from the outside world, a clean and sunny sanctuary, with a high standard of living and a low crime rate. An enviable, tranquil place to live.

But now, more and more, the words "trouble," "danger," and "war" entered into everyday conversation. Young men of draft age who had come to the country in the course of wider travels muttered among themselves to the effect that Rhodesia was a nice place to spend some time but they wouldn't want to fight and die there.

Others, born in Rhodesia, dug in their heels and maintained they would stay to the end – whether that end came in the form of natural death or a terrorist's bullet. As more people woke to the sound of war's rumblings, tension filled the air like heavy rain.

All at once, the three years I'd spent in Rhodesia seemed ominously placid in retrospect. It had been a period, quite literally, of stillness before a storm. But before that storm broke, I'd be gone.

My boss Dudley arranged a farewell party for me at work. All of my colleagues had chipped in to buy me a gold bracelet, which I still have and wear, inscribed inside with my name and R.N.F.U. (Rhodesia National Farmers Union), April 1972. When I got home I found a florist's bouquet at my apartment doorstep with a note on it that read in part, "It's been one of my great experiences to know (and adore) you. – Dudley."

Mel drove me to the boat in Durban, South Africa – a two-day drive from Salisbury. At night we held each other close and talked softly in the dark.

"I'm afraid to go back home, Melvy," I whispered. "I don't want to go. Is it too late to change my mind and stay? We could get married, have a child, live a norm---"

"You must go," he said. "You know you'll never have any peace of mind unless you try to find Whitney." (I knew he would not consider coming with me. He'd told me once he could never live in the U.S. because "it's full of bloody Americans.")

"But how will I be able to find her? And what will happen when I do?"

"Take it one step at a time, love. First, get home, then see what you can do from there. You can't do anything more in Africa."

"Except forget."

"No one in Salisbury will let you do that. You're too well known."

"In America I am a cipher. Nobody knows or cares."

It is hard to leave Africa once she has held you. I'd been her foster child for three years, and when it came time to go I had to leave her gently, slowly, by ship. If I had flown away, the break would have been too sharp, too painful.

I stood at the ship's railing and watched the landscape of Durban slowly shrink, then disappear. I watched Mel standing on the dock, and I waved to him until he became a speck on the receding horizon. *Don't leave me, Melvy!* My heart cried. *Please don't leave me!* But it was I who was leaving him.

The Book

Now that I am old, I can look back on these events with drier eyes. I can take the time to quietly ask more probing questions. I seem to have no more tears, but I still have many questions.

What kind of man would do such a thing? Steal a small boat to cross a treacherous body of water in Africa to abduct a child, a five-year-old girl, from her mother? To risk their lives by heading into a hostile country at a dangerous time, without a passport – because it had been kept by the authorities in Salisbury to prevent him from absconding – and with the wrong color skin? To land in jail in Zambia, then profess he'd done "nothing wrong" because Rhodesia's laws didn't matter? To brag he'd spent a million dollars to claim his daughter and therefore she was now his possession and his alone? To be deported by Zambia and sent back to his own country, no doubt laughing all the way?

Yes, he'd planned the whole thing very carefully. Yes, in his mind, he'd done nothing wrong.

What kind of man? One answer might be: a privileged, obsessed, white American man with sufficient money and no conscience.

But where did he get the money to do all this? He and his elderly, dependent parents had traveled the world with Whitney when she was a baby. He'd had to pay for all of the custody cases he'd initiated in Rhodesia. He hadn't practiced law in at least five years. I don't yet have the answer to this question.

Many years later, after SOMEWHERE CHILD found her, my daughter told me repeatedly that her father had "sacrificed his life" for her, to protect her from me. He was in life, and still is, long after his death, her hero.

How can this be? I tell myself she had no choice but to believe his fabrications. *She had no choice*. She was his possession. She was utterly dependent on him. "He was both a mother and a father to me," she told me defiantly. "He was always there for me, and you were not. I never needed you. I never missed you."

"Did he tell you I was dead?" I once asked her.

"No," she said. "He knew you were in New York. He told me you were living in Harlem with a nigger, a junkie." This was the person she was brought up to believe was her mother: someone not worth knowing.

The truth was that at that time I was living alone on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in a small studio apartment on Riverside Drive and 103rd Street, working part time in an editorial position at the John Wiley publishing company downtown to pay my rent, and attending Columbia University on 116th and Broadway full time on full scholarships from the Helena Rubenstein Foundation to complete my bachelor of arts degree.

I was in Columbia's writing program, quietly determined to write a book, an open letter to my missing daughter, in the wild and desperate hope that she might read it and find me. All I had left in me were silent words destined for paper.

Up to that point I had done all I could, within my limited power, to find Whitney, without success. I'd made phone calls, checked records, asked help from friends, sought professional advice. But every avenue I took came to a dead end.

In my desperation I even visited a fortune teller once. The gypsy woman took my hand and studied my palm. "People tend to be jealous of you," she told me, "because they just see the outside and think you have everything. But you don't have everything. You are missing something, and it makes you hurt on the inside…"

I sometimes tried to tell myself Whitney might be happy, settled somewhere in one place, one school, making lasting friends. But the doubt of that, the fears and worries, churned inside me like chunks of broken glass, which ultimately cut into my intestines. At thirty, I became very ill. I required emergency major surgery, was hospitalized for three weeks, and endured a long recovery.

I wrote in my journal: "Some day, some way, all that has happened may make sense, might fall into place. … In the meantime, I must do something to make my life worthwhile." I resolved to rise above: If I couldn't find Whiney, I'd try my best to make it easier for her to find me.

I loved Columbia – the old buildings with their marble staircases worn down by countless students' shoes, the professors with their esoteric specialties and their messianic drive to share their knowledge, my earnest classmates discussing the protagonists of novels the way doctors might discuss their best cases. But I also often felt ill-equipped and overawed. Sometimes I felt like an interloper, a gate-crasher at a highbrow cocktail party.

It was only in my creative writing classes that I felt I belonged. There, sitting in dimly lit classrooms at conference tables where we offered up our lives like sacraments on platters of white bond, my classmates and I were comrades, bound by the same neurotic need to write.

In one of my first writing classes at Columbia, we were given the assignment "Why I Write," so I wrote:

". . . I want to live a normal life, but find I can't. Someone shot me in the back of the soul and made me a cripple from here, down. The dead legs of my heart dangle from the wheelchair, lifeless – See? I can no longer dance or make love. Only the hands of my heart can move. They move along the smooth paper, dragging a pencil, leaving a trail of jagged marks that spell: I AM STILL HERE...."

One morning I read in the *New York Times* about a new, national, nonprofit organization formed "to combat the crime of child-snatching." That day, while reading the newspaper and drinking my morning coffee, I learned I was not alone.

To fulfill a street-reporting assignment for my Columbia journalism course, I went to one of this organization's meetings as a reporter. There, pretending to be an objective observer, a recorder, a conduit for information – hiding behind a dispassionate disguise – I met other victims, talked with them and took notes. I noted their words, so much like my own:

"I am going to school at night, taking courses to keep my mind occupied . . ."

"I mustn't fall apart, for the sake of my child . . ."

"The authorities won't help me. They say, 'Sorry, lady, but you married the guy – you shoulda known better' . . ."

"I can't afford more private detectives . . ."

"I don't know what more I can do . . ."

I noted their faces and eyes: trying to be brave, blinking back tears.

I wrote the story, and when it was returned I saw that my journalism professor had scribbled across the top: "Excellent – I wasn't aware –" At that point, I knew what I had to do.

By some miracle, soon after my graduation from Columbia in January 1979, a major New York book publisher agreed to publish my proposed book, and with their generous advance I was able to spend the next year writing SOMEWHERE CHILD full time. The last chapter of that book is indeed an open letter to my daughter, written from my heart in the hopes that it would somehow find her:

[EXCERPTED FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

New York
April 1980

Dear Whitney,

In all the years since I've been back from Africa, I've wanted to write to you, but I haven't known your address. I've tried to find you, but without success. I even tried to forget you, but I could never do that.

It's been almost a decade since I last saw you, and in that time I've passed through several stages. My grief at losing you at first took the form of rage. I screamed at God, shook my fist in His face, and demanded an answer to my questions, "Why–?" I hated my country for not helping me to find you. I hated myself for being so helpless and powerless, for not knowing what I could do.

When the fire of my rage burned away, I became depressed. I swallowed my tears and got ulcers. I crawled alone in a dark place and prayed for death.

Now, it seems, I've reached a new plateau, and it is from this place that I write to you. In a sense, I have lived to write this story for you. For years I kept it locked inside, carrying it with me like a great weight, subconsciously waiting for the right time, when you'd be old enough to understand, when I'd be far enough away from the past to write about it without bitterness, hatred, or self-pity.

Whitney, it may not be important for you to know me, but I believe it is important for you to know the truth about your earliest years because truth makes us free. It is important, too, that you know something about my side of the family, and about me. I think you should know that I've never let you go.

For your sake especially I've tried to be strong. Professionally, I became a writer. Academically, I earned a degree. But writing to you, I found, required more than these credentials. It required a healthy frame of mind, a change of heart. God, whom I had shouted at for years, took care of this.... I learned I would be able to write to you even though I didn't have your address.

Since then I have been writing this, alone in a small room. I've begun each day in prayer, begging God for the strength to remember all of the memories I've tried to forget, for the grace to forgive your father and to write about him without bitterness, for the right words with which to reach you.

Whitney, I confess, I have not written only to you, but to all the other Whitneys who go by other names, who have been taken from one parent by the other without reason. I used to think you and I were alone in this, but I recently learned there are thousands of others, children who are being deprived of their mothers' or fathers' love, and parents who don't know where their children are. I am writing also for those parents who don't know their children's addresses.

Now that my story is almost ended, I realize I've written it also for myself. Not for exoneration, but for exorcism. The unspeakable memories, like fierce dragons from which I'd tried for years to flee, have been faced, and in a sense, slain. All of the words that could never seem to leave my lips are out now on this paper. I no longer feel so heavy.

Over the years I've tried to keep in touch with our old friends. I wrote to Margaret for a while, in care of Edwin at Barclays Bank. Edwin replied on behalf of Margaret, because she can't write in English, giving me her news and reports of their son, Gregory, and asking me whether I'd found "the piccanin madam" yet.

I still write to Gigi. She is twenty now and says she hoped to come to America next year to visit me. Sue Pichanick and her daughter Jenny were here last summer for a holiday. I played tour guide and showed them the city. Mrs. Clarke wrote recently and said everyone there still remembers us. George phones occasionally to ask how I am. Once in a while we have dinner. I saw Mel last year in England. He is married now and has an infant son. Everyone asks about you.

My Gibbs roommate Kathy and her husband Carl will celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary next month. They have two children, are happily married and still in love.

My mother is well, still living in the house where I grew up. She is studying oil painting in preparation for her retirement. She is a gifted artist. We are close friends. The rest of our family is spread throughout the country. My brother is married and has two grown children;

one sister is married and has two teenagers; and my other sister is married and has three children. Both of my sisters went back to school to earn their degrees at thirty. My father phoned me from somewhere in the Midwest a few years ago, but I've lost touch with him since.

This week Rhodesia became the new, independent country of Zimbabwe. The civil war that began the year I left is now over. There will be peace there, we all hope, at last.

Life goes on, and with it, hope. "Never give up hope," Goethe said and I keep repeating to myself, "because hope is half of life." I hope you are well and happy. I hope we shall meet again someday; I long to hear your story. In the meantime, I hope these words will take on a life of their own, that they as my emissary will seek you and find you and reintroduce you to me.

Now, Whitney, I must go on with my life, as you must yours. Run. Pray. Think. Write. Dance. Read. Work. Sing. Strive. Stretch. Play. Grow. Love.

The Reunion

The Afterword that appeared in the January 1983 Bantam paperback edition of SOMEWHERE CHILD told the story of how Whitney was found. It reads in part:

New York, July 1982:

Hope – the blindest kind, that gropes in the darkness of unfamiliar rooms searching for a source of light – led me to write my story and share it in a book; hope that in this groping I might find my missing child somewhere, hope that through this effort I might help or touch others who were lost or seeking too, hope that in the process I might heal myself. Since the publication by Viking Press of the hardcover edition of Somewhere Child in 1981, all of these hopes have been fulfilled; and it is with great joy that I now recount their unfolding.

In all the years that Whitney was missing, Kathy, my Gibbs roommate, who is a legal secretary, combed the annual law directories for Jim's name. In the spring of last year she found his name listed for the first time – at an address in the Midwest. I contacted a private detective, the same man who had handled my case between 1967 and 1969 when he was an agent for the FBI. However, he asked for a retainer that amounted to more money than I had. I felt constrained to wait.

Then last summer I received a letter, forwarded to me by Viking Press, from Gloria Yerkovich, executive director of Child Find, Inc., in New Paltz, New York, a new, nonprofit, international network for locating missing children, of which I was unaware. "Just this moment," Gloria wrote, "I completed reading Somewhere Child. Never in my life have I wanted to meet someone as much as I want to meet you. I read your story, and it was my story. ... For six years I've wanted to write the book you have written – to publish an open letter to my daughter Joanna in the hope she would happen upon it. I am overwhelmed with relief that you have written Somewhere Child. ... Please contact me."

Our lives, we learned in subsequent sisterly conversations, had taken nearly parallel courses. We had had similar childhoods, had been similar in our trustfulness and naivete when we were young, had had similar encounters with older, powerful men, had experienced similar feelings of helplessness and frustration when our daughters were

stolen, and were similar in our growth and our determination not to remain helpless. Gloria had founded Child Find in 1980, when I had been writing Somewhere Child; we were both in our mid-thirties.

"Do you have any idea where Whitney might be?" Gloria asked me.

I told her I did have a lead.

"I know a private detective who specializes in finding missing children. He is a miracle worker. Let me talk to him for you."

Days later, I took the train to Great Neck, NY, where I was met by Joe Brandine of EMH Investigation Services. Sitting in Joe's small, cluttered, wood-paneled office, my body trembling uncontrollably, I told him my story briefly.

"Do you want your daughter back?" he asked.

"I want to know where she is and how she is," I said.

"Do you want her back with you?" he pressed.

I tried to explain she might not want that, that she is an adult now, an individual with a will of her own. Joe called me a pessimist. I gave him a copy of my book and told him that after he had read it he would understand my fear, nervousness, and, yes, pessimism. I stressed that I preferred to proceed cautiously; I wanted to protect Whitney from further upset and trauma and to avoid, at all costs, an ugly confrontation with my ex-husband. Joe told me to phone him in two days.

When I called Joe on Thursday afternoon, August 13, 1981 – exactly ten years to the day since I had last seen Whitney – he reported that he'd located Jim. Joe had traced Kathy's lead – already grown cold – to a suburb of an East Coast city. He was not sure Whitney was living there. He told me to phone him the next day.

August 14, 1981 – I called Joe at noon from a phone booth at 85th and Lex. Joe: "I'm pretty sure Whitney's there. What do you want to do?" Me: "I'd like proof, preferably photos, before going further." Joe: "Photos could take about a week. Call me next Monday."

On Monday, August 24, I went to Joe's office to see a videotape he had made. From a distance he had videotaped Jim and Whitney outside the garden apartment they'd recently

moved into. Jim, immensely overweight and looking unwell, was sitting slumped in a lawn chair, motionless. Whitney, full-grown and shapely in jeans and a white T-shirt, emerged from the kitchen and handed him a beer.

As I watched I sipped from the glass of red wine Joe had given me to steady my nerves. Whitney's white-blond hair was long, to her shoulders; she walked and moved like me. When she sat down in the lawn chair across from Jim, I could see that her profile was mine. She sat rigidly and seemed to be listening. Was she happy? Was he happy to be constantly reminded of me? They appeared to converse for a while, but he never lifted his head to look directly at her. Then she got up, helped him out of his chair, led him to his car, and opened the passenger-side door for him; she got behind the wheel (she was only fifteen), and they drove away.

Joe had other, out-of-town work to do in the next few weeks, other missing children to find. After seeking counsel from friends and a psychologist, I decided we would go together to see Whitney in mid-September, during her first week at school.

> *September 17, 1981, 5 a.m. – I almost can't think about the possible events of this coming morning – what might happen, what could happen, good or bad. Joe is completely optimistic, totally sure all will go smoothly. I have the knowledge and experience of the past sixteen years to temper my elation. How tightly is she bound to him? How open could she – will she – be to me? Here we are, eleven miles from their home, waiting to turn her world upside down, and I sit drinking black tea, trying to express the inexpressible. Am I prepared to be rejected by my only child again? I cannot think of it.*

"Why did you try to abort me?! … Why did you beat me and give me bruises when I was a baby?!" We stare into each other's eyes, which are the same shade of blue, and I shake my head slowly: "That isn't true," I say softly, hoping she can read my mind and heart through my eyes. "That just isn't true."

"My father would never lie to me," she says vehemently.

Strangers, with an undeniable, unmistakable resemblance, we sit alone, across from each other in her high school guidance counselor's office. (The Catholic school officials became most cooperative when they saw that Jim had written my name as Whitney's mother in her school records but after it, "deceased.") Whitney is in a uniform: white blouse, blue jumper, blue knee socks, blue-and-white saddle shoes.

She is full grown, fully developed, nearly sixteen, almost a woman. She is beautiful, self-assured, mature. She tells me she has had to grow up fast; she and her father and grandfather (Jim apparently never remarried; Jim's mother died in 1972) have traveled a great deal, in his effort to "protect" her from me; she has been to a different Catholic school in a different state almost every year for the past ten years. He has changed her religion, as well as her name.

"What would you like me to call you? I say awkwardly, when I realize the name on her birth certificate – Whitney Lee – is as foreign to her as her new name is to me.

She is quick, poised, polite, controlled: "You can call me Whitney."

When I tell her that her friend Gigi is arriving in New York the following week to visit me and ask whether she would care to see her, Whitney says she has no memory of ever having had a friend named Gigi. What "memories" she has of our two years together in Rhodesia turn out not to be true memories at all, but rather her father's subsequent indoctrination.

She "remembers," for example, my making love with Mel, in her presence; my buying a motorboat for Mel with the money her father had sent to me in Rhodesia for her support; my leaving her in the care of black male African servants, who "violated" her.

"Oh, no" rises from my chest and throat like a moan.

She studies my face, looking, I presume, for signs of guilt.

I search for clear, sure words. "I knew if I ever found you, you would have questions. I knew that in a short space of time I couldn't adequately answer all of your questions or explain what happened from my point of view –"

Our eyes are locked. She listens politely.

" – So I spent a year writing it all out for you. That's what this represents –" I give her a copy of my book. "I am a writer," I say, as if in introduction or justification.

"Oh?" she says, "is this your first book?" I nod. "Well, that's quite an accomplishment. … I'm going to be a great lawyer like my father."

Our conversation lasts for two and a half hours. I tell her how I found her. I tell her we are not alone. There are an estimated 100,000 cases of parental child-stealing in the United States each year, and fewer than 10 percent of these stolen children are ever found. I tap the jacket of my book lightly. "Our story is much larger than you and me," I say.

At various times she paces, looks out of the window, sits and shakes her head, stares at the ceiling. She paces like me, holds her head the way I do, her voice is just like mine.

"Whew, … I don't know what to make of this," she says as she sits down again.

I wish I could take her hand, sit close beside her, put my arm around her shoulder; but she keeps her distance, coolly. She sits two yards away. "I didn't come here to upset you," I tell her. "I just came to tell you that I've been looking for you for ten years, and now I've found you." I hope my simple words will somehow hug her. "I wanted you to know that I love you, I've always loved you, and I will always love you."

She listens earnestly. "I need time," she says at last.

"I know," I say. I know about Time.

I leave the school without her, after promising to respect her request for space and time. I said weakly, "But I don't want us to lose each other again –" and she replied firmly, "I know how to reach you now, if I ever want to."

The Tour

With the publication of SOMEWHERE CHILD, I unwittingly became a nationally known spokesperson for a cause, that cause being child abduction.

Viking Press sent me on a generous national book tour, where I was interviewed by print journalists as well as radio and television news program hosts in most of the major U.S. cities, beginning with my then-current hometown, New York City, and on to Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, and back to the East Coast.

I'd seriously worried before leaving on this weeks-long odyssey that I might become the first, live, televised nervous breakdown. But I ultimately found a way to rise to the challenge. Instead of only talking about my personal pain and loss, I tried to focus on the bigger issue.

My story in SOMEWHERE CHILD, I explained to whomever was interviewing me, was only one of many – far too many – such stories. There were an estimated 100,000 cases of parental child-stealing in the United States each year, I told the interviewer; something had to be done about child snatching.

(Photo: from back jacket of SOMEWHERE CHILD, Viking Press, 1981)

On several of these television appearances on the East Coast, I shared the stage with my new sisterly friend Gloria Yerkovich, who'd founded the nonprofit organization dedicated to locating missing children, Child Find, in New Paltz, New York, the year before SOMEWHERE CHILD's publication.

Gloria's five-year-old daughter, Joanna, had been abducted by Gloria's ex-husband in 1974, and she, like me, was on a burning mission to raise awareness about the issue. At that time, there were no national or state resources for locating missing children, and little was understood about parental abduction or the psychological effects that abduction has on a child.

Gloria's organization has had a lasting national impact. The awareness raised by Gloria and other of us child advocates of the time led to the 1982 Omnibus Victims Protection Act and the 1984 Missing Children's Assistance Act. Child Find became a prototype for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which was created in 1984 (https://www.missingkids.org/home), and contributed to the establishment of National Missing Children's Day on May 25th.

And, I've recently learned, Child Find continues its work to this day more than forty years later. According to their website https://childfindofamerica.org, "In 2023 Child Find assisted in the location/return of 264 children."

There are two forms of child theft – parental child abduction, by far the most common form, and abduction or kidnapping by strangers. At the time of SOMEWHERE CHILD's publication in 1981, missing child cases of both types garnered a great deal of news media attention in the U.S. One of the most famous cases of stranger abduction was that of six-year-old Etan Patz.

On the morning of May 25, 1979, Etan left his SoHo apartment at 113 Prince Street in New York by himself for the first time, planning to walk two blocks to board his school bus at West Broadway. He never got on the bus.

The extensive media attention attracted by Etan's disappearance at that time also increased public awareness of the problem of child abduction. Since then, fewer parents

allow their children to walk to school, photos of missing children have been more widely distributed (for example, on milk cartons in the ’80s and ’90s), and the concept of “stranger danger” has been promoted.

In February 2017, more than forty years after Etan disappeared, a former bodega stock clerk who confessed to luring the six-year-old into a basement and attacking him, was found guilty of murdering and kidnapping the boy. This, reported *The New York Times*, was “a long-awaited step toward closure in a case that bedeviled investigators for decades and changed forever the way parents watched over their children.” (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/nyregion/etan-patz-pedro-hernandez-guilty.html)

Knowing that my book SOMEWHERE CHILD could play a role in raising consciousness about child abduction in the United States and that it was part of a confluence of events that helped to enact laws and create organizations destined to make a positive difference for other victims, gave me quiet, healing joy.

For many months after SOMEWHERE CHILD’s publication, I received letters from readers – mailed to Viking Press and then forwarded to my address on the Upper West Side – mostly from young mothers telling me I’d written *their* story and thanking me with all their hearts. Without realizing it, without intending to, I found I’d become a voice for the voiceless.

Vows

My daughter invited me to her wedding in September 1987, where I saw her father again for the first time since he absconded with her from Rhodesia in August 1971.

The wedding was held in a small, white, clapboard Catholic church in the groom's hometown. His nine brothers and two sisters – all tall and handsome successful professionals – and their young children filled the pews with hope and joy.

I'd arrived with my dear friend Maureen for moral support. My heart was racing. My hands were cold. When the wedding processional began and I turned and glimpsed J., walking slowly – no, shuffling – down the aisle beside the lovely 22-year-old bride, my beautiful daughter, with her seemingly holding him up, I was aghast. At only 59, he was an old, stooped, broken-looking, gray-haired man, after years and years of chain-smoking and living on the run to "protect" her from me.

Since his parents had died years before, it had fallen to his daughter to do the household chores – cooking, cleaning, laundry – and the caretaking of him that a good wife, one who had stayed with him "'til death do us part," would have done. But my daughter had been raised to believe I'd walked out on him; I'd broken his heart. Marriage is a blessed sacrament, he'd taught her, and I'd broken my sacred vows; he could never bring himself to marry again; he had sacrificed his entire life for her, so she owed it to him to care for him in his old, frail age. This she did, until his death, two years after her wedding.

Looking back, it's no wonder that her anger and resentment toward me at times has known no bounds.

At the wedding the people in the pews looked at J. pityingly, as if thinking, *poor man, poor soul*. Everyone, that is, except my friend Maureen and me. He was so bent and broken he didn't even notice me sitting there, in a center row on the right. Immediately after the wedding ceremony, my daughter's mother-in-law wisely suggested that one of her children take J. back to her house "to rest." I never saw him again.

After her father's death, from emphysema, I believe, and the birth of her first child, my daughter invited me to be part of their lives. She wanted her beloved son, and later, her darling daughter too, to receive as much love as possible from every quarter.

(Photo: Me with my grandson and newborn granddaughter, 1991)

I visited as often as I could on weekends, taking the train from New York. For the most part, our visits were pleasant, and the children were a joy. I sensed that my daughter was striving mightily to be a good Catholic and forgive me for all the bad things she still believed I'd done to her father and to her when she was a baby.

She wouldn't allow me to refute. She made me vow that I wouldn't talk about her father, her "hero," or bring up the subject of the past. She insisted that she and I could only function together in the present tense, if we were to have a relationship at all.

Yet there were times when the past broke through, such as the time, early on, when I asked her about one of her fingers, the tip of which looked permanently bent.

"How did that happen, honey?" I asked.

"You *know*," she said.

"No, I don't know, which is why I'm asking."

"That's when you slammed my fingers in a door to punish me when I was a baby."

"No, honey, that never happened."

"My father would never lie to me!" she insisted. And this was how these brief conversations always ended, like a trunk hood coming down on the back of an old car with a decidedly loud thud.

In her home she'd built a small altar to the memory of her father, including a large photo of him with several votive candles in the front. I found I could not compete with this deified man, and it was futile to even try.

Back in New York, I sought professional help. One therapist strongly advised me not to push. She explained that my daughter had built a fragile "house of cards" in her mind, and if I pushed, it would all come tumbling down. I understood this to mean "nervous breakdown."

Another psychologist told me, "You have to be willing to be the bad guy. She can't blame her father for what she's been through. She has no reason to blame herself. So that leaves you…"

I tried that. But there were times when the strain of her psychological conflict – trying her best to square the person she could see in front of her with the terrible person she was raised to believe I was – was so great she couldn't contain it. Just as she'd done when she was a little girl in Rhodesia, she would at times blow up at me bitterly, which sent me home to my studio apartment in New York in tears.

After nearly ten years of this, at the age of fifty, I decided to join the Peace Corps and serve as a volunteer in Africa. I wanted to work with women and children. The Peace Corps does thorough background checks in order to be accepted for this important service. I was still attempting to prove to my daughter I was never a bad person, I was never a child abuser. And, too, I longed to be back in Africa's arms. I'd been happy once in Africa. I wanted to be happy again.

Back to Africa

Call it a midlife crisis. Call it what you will. But I was at a point where, for a myriad of reasons, I needed a big change. At the time, I think I would have joined the Foreign Legion if that had been an option. Instead, I decided to join the Peace Corps.

But I need to back up a bit…

I'd become a writer in order to find my missing daughter by writing an open letter to her. Written words were the only currency I had then in my search for her. After writing SOMEWHERE CHILD, however, I felt I'd depleted that currency. The well-paying corporate writing-editing position I held after my book came out was unfulfilling to me. I needed something more meaningful. I turned to cooking.

After my mother died of brain cancer in 1984, I used some of the inheritance she left me to attend La Varenne, a well-known cooking school then in Paris, as the first step in becoming a food professional in New York. My mother had been a wonderful cook, and I, as her eldest daughter, her helper and disciple, had learned how to cook at her side. I saw that my cooking always made her happy, especially when I cooked for her when I visited her on weekends during her last two years, when cancer cells slowly destroyed her brain and ultimately took her life. I knew she would approve of this risky career change, this potentially gratifying use of her gift.

So the following year I became a self-employed chef and caterer in New York City, making memorable dinner parties for others, pretending I was cooking for a family of my own. Cooking, I found, was all-absorbing and healing. Cooking – and writing about cooking – became my life in New York.

Then, in 1995 at the age of fifty, after ten years of physically exhausting catering work, I decided to shut down my catering business and return to Africa, where I'd felt happy and at home for a time many years before. I needed to go back to Africa, as if it were my Motherland.

As a means to this end, I joined the Peace Corps.

This is how it unfolded…

One morning, as I was drinking coffee and reading *The New York Times* in my studio apartment on the Upper West Side, I saw an ad that caught my attention. The ad was an appeal for Peace Corps volunteers to serve in far-off places, to learn foreign languages, to do good in the world. The ad's tagline read, "The toughest job you'll ever love." So, on a whim, I made an appointment with the New York recruiter to learn more.

In the meantime, I asked my daughter what she thought of the idea. Her reaction was positive. "Go for it," I remember her saying. By that point, her two children were in school and busy with their friends and activities on weekends, and my daughter was about to embark on a master's degree. Everyone was busy. And, too, perhaps my daughter felt as I did, that some distance between us would lessen the growing strain.

Sitting in the recruiter's office in downtown Manhattan, I made my case as plain as possible: I would give the Peace Corps two years of my life if they would give me what I wanted. And what I wanted was to get back to Africa, but this time Francophone Africa, work with mothers and children, and teach health and nutrition.

It had been more than twenty years since I had left Mother Earth Africa, and in all that time I'd felt homesick for her. The French have a specific expression for this condition. They call it *nostalgie d'Afrique* (homesickness for Africa). Anyone who has lived in Africa – close enough to her earth, long enough for her heartbeat to penetrate – will know this feeling.

The Peace Corps was good enough to give me what I wanted. Within a year, in July 1996, I was on my way to French-speaking Gabon, to serve as a health and nutrition volunteer at a mother-infant clinic in the rain-forested interior of that central African country.

In early September, after our ten-week training in the capital, Libreville, our group of trainees took a trip deep into Gabon's interior, and what I saw made my heart sink. Unlike the Rhodesia I'd known, whose beauty was preserved, Edenlike, in my memory, what I saw of Gabon from the window of our minivan looked like a scene from a film of the apocalypse.

It was the dry season, and the people had slashed and burned great swaths of land, in anticipation of a new planting season. What should have been lush and green was black

and charred. Charred tree skeletons rose up like desperate, black, stick-hands out of a roiling sea of charred underbrush. It looked to me like the aftermath of a nuclear disaster.

Africa, I had to remind myself, is not one homogeneous country but rather an immense, complicated continent comprised of 54 U.S.-state-size, separate nations thoughtlessly carved out by self-interested European powers in the late 19th century. Britain had grabbed the bulk of southern Africa, including the mostly picturesque, softly rolling high savannah they named Rhodesia, after its "discoverer," Cecil Rhodes. (Renamed Zimbabwe after its independence from Britain in 1980). The French took most of the bulge of western Africa, including tiny, oil-rich Gabon, on the equator, hugging the Atlantic coast. (Gabon gained its independence from France in 1960.) Zimbabwe boasts a gentle, temperate, agreeable climate, especially at its higher elevations. Gabon, in contrast, is mostly dense rainforest, inhumanly hot and nearly always dripping wet.

But underneath it all, I wanted to think, beneath the wildly disparate surface differences, there was one Mother Earth Africa, with one universal soul, one drumming heartbeat. No, this was not the Africa of my fondest memories, I had to admit. But it was Africa nonetheless. It was a new (to me) Africa, a new challenge, a new mountain to climb. *And isn't life, after all*, I told myself, *one long mountain range we're required to hike, mostly alone?* I decided to think of my experience in the Peace Corps as another in a series of endurance tests I was determined to pass.

I wrote to my daughter and her family every week to send my love, share my news, and ask about the family, in the hopes that she would respond and remain connected. I wrote regularly to my grandson's Catholic school class as part of the Peace Corps' World Wise Schools program, designed to help U.S. schoolchildren better understand and appreciate the diverse cultures and issues of the world.

From the little town where I was posted, Lastoursville, on the banks of the great Ogooué River and a ten-hour train trip to or from the capital, Libreville, I wrote to my grandson's class on October 11, 1996:

[EXCERPTED FROM HOW TO COOK A CROCODILE: A Memoir with Recipes:]

Dear Class,

Hello again to my favorite fourth-graders! This is the letter I promised to write when the rainy season began. Well, it has begun. My-my-my, how it rains here when it rains! It's like an angel in heaven has turned on a big faucet in the sky and the water just pours straight down. And what a noise it makes! It's very exciting. I love it.

Now the roads that had been so dusty during the dry season are all mud. Walking along them is like walking through an inch or two of snow – only snow is a whole lot cleaner! Of course, everyone's shoes get all mucky and muddy, so people leave their shoes outside when they go indoors. Even at work people walk around barefooted.

I've started working at the hospital a couple of hours every weekday morning, and I like it very much. So far I'm just observing – seeing how they do things, what the needs are, what the problems are, etc. Last week I observed the mommies and babies at the mother-infant clinic; all of these babies were chubby, adorable, and healthy. Their moms were just bringing them in for checkups and to be weighed. ...

Next month, when I begin my work of actually teaching, I hope to teach the mothers how they might prevent illnesses (like malaria) occurring to their children. Like all mothers everywhere in the world, these mothers love their babies very much and don't want them to become sick.

I've been here almost four weeks now, and I am liking it more and more and more. The doctors and nurses at the hospital are extremely intelligent, hard-working, and dedicated; the people I meet in town are kind, warm, generous-of-spirit, and polite. Everyone greets me as I walk down the street with "Bonjour, madame," or "Bonjour, ma soeur" (my sister), or, in the case of the tiny little old women with huge heavy baskets on their backs, "Bonjour, ma petite" (my little one). This is funny to me, because I am twice as tall as these little old African ladies.

Most of the people are very poor, in terms of material things. But I feel they are rich in their hearts; they seem to understand the most important things in life – family, friends, love, joy, peace. They take care of one another. There are no beggars on the streets.

Out in the villages the people lead even humbler lives than they do here in town. They live in mud huts and cook on open, outdoor fires, balancing their cook pots on three equal-size stones. Two weeks ago I visited some villages with an African friend who has a car, and we actually stopped at a village of pygmies! They all were very short, slightly built people, that's true. But otherwise, they looked and dressed just like everyone else.

Every day is an adventure here. For example, sometimes all of the electric power in town shuts down. No lights. Soooo, we light up the candles. Often, the water shuts down. This is the case right now, as a matter of fact. There is no water coming out of any faucet, or pump or pipe anywhere in Lastoursville. So what do you do? You take a bucket and walk to the nearest stream and scoop some water there to take home.

I just did this about an hour ago. I walked down the muddy slope with a yellow bucket in my hand, and when I got almost to the bottom and hesitated because it was getting treacherous, a little girl about your age took the bucket from me, waded into the stream, filled my bucket with water and carried the heavy thing back up to me. Without being asked to help me, without being paid to help me, she just automatically helped me. That's the way these beautiful people are.

I know you are interested in wild animals, so I've been keeping my eyes open for them. So far, no luck (except for some squished snakes in the street)… I'm assured there are wild animals out there in the forests, but they obviously don't come into town (unless a hunter brings one home for dinner).

I will close now and walk to the Post Office about a mile away and mail this letter to you. I'll write again as soon as I can.

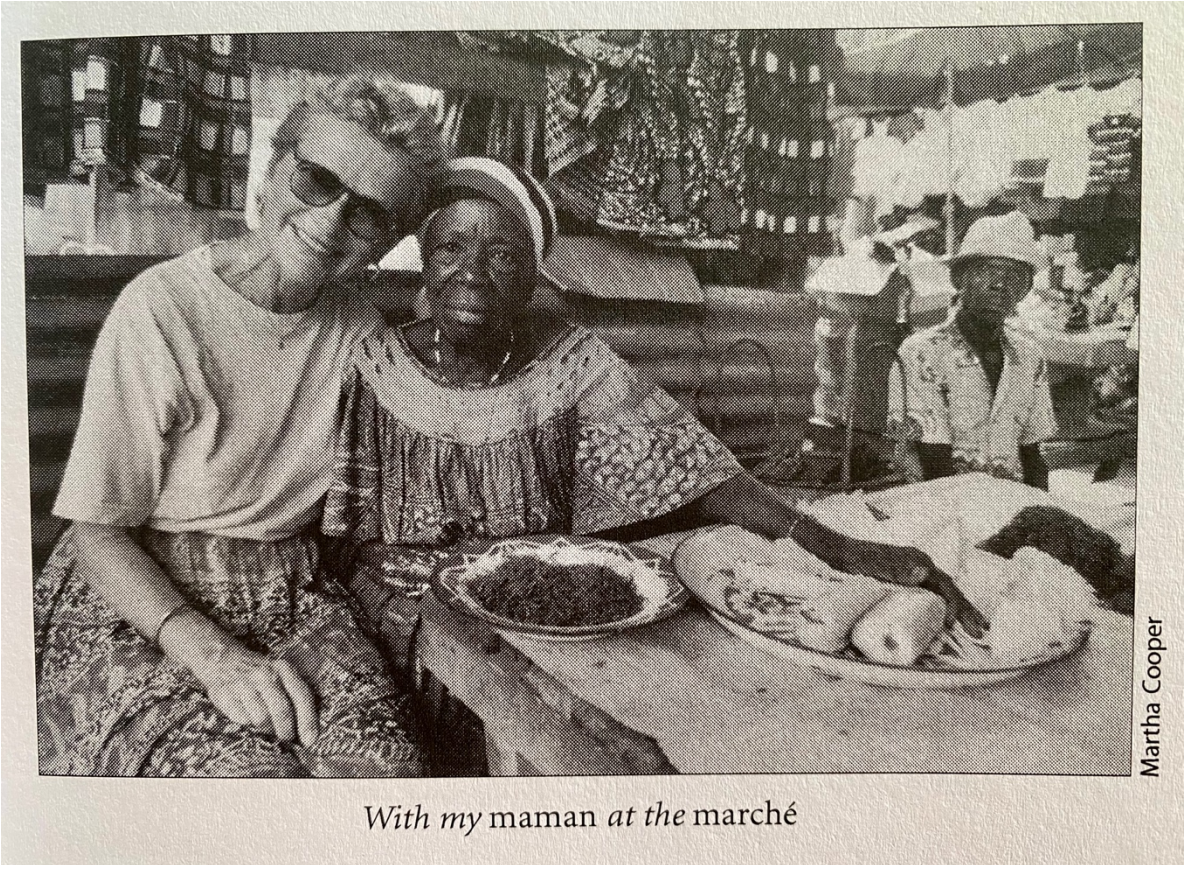
Your Classmate Thomas's Grandmother,

"Nonnie"

My two-year Peace Corps service in Gabon was purposeful, enriching, and dramatic – so much so that I count joining the Peace Corps as one of the best decisions I've made in my life. Like so many Peace Corps volunteers before me, I emerged from this experience a changed person. Also like other returned Peace Corps volunteers, I wrote about my

experience in a memoir, hoping to take readers to a place they'd likely never been, on the other side of the world, so they might experience it with me.

Unlike other Peace Corp authors, however, I told my tale in a new way – as interconnecting true stories with accompanying illustrative *recipes* – plus many vivid photos taken by my photographer friend Martha Cooper, who'd come all the way out from New York to visit me at my Lastoursville post in the middle of rain-forested Gabon.



(Photo: one of the many photos by Martha Cooper in HOW TO COOK A CROCODILE)

The stories themselves in HOW TO COOK A CROCODILE: A Memoir with Recipes (Peace Corps Writers, 2010) constitute a recipe, my personal recipe for survival. The main ingredients in this recipe are good food, safe shelter, meaningful work, and unexpected love. HOW TO COOK A CROCODILE was written not only to share with but also to inspire others to search for their own crocodiles – and cook them too.

Yes, I returned to writing, believing deeply that writers *must* write. It is our responsibility, our reason for being. It takes courage and audacity, but some truths need to be told and retold in order that the untrue stories don't outlive them. Sometimes written words, carefully crafted and deeply felt, have the power to endure beyond the writer's lifespan. Sometimes a writer's voice lives on.

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In August 2013 I participated in a Pecha Kucha food-themed event in Taos, New Mexico, and spoke about my Peace Corps experience teaching cooking in the African rainforest. Here is the six-minute YouTube video of that presentation: http://youtu.be/YrwQUssWGfM.

In the Wilderness

> **"...But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness."**
>
> **– Leviticus 16:10**

Toward the end of my Peace Corps service in Gabon in 1998, when I was grappling with the decisions what to do and where to go next in my life, I met a sweet man from Mali who told me about his homeland. Youssef spoke softly in French, the only language we had in common, a second language for both of us, about how tolerant the people of Mali are, how creative, resourceful, resilient, and proud.

"You would love Mali," he said to me, "and the people of Mali would love you and your creative ideas." He went on to tell me that tolerance, especially, was an integral part of Mali's national ethos. "In Mali people of all colors and all religions live together in peace," he said. "And older people are revered. Age is wisdom. Age is a plus."

One thing had become clear to me up to that point in Gabon: I could not return to my previous life in Manhattan. I could not live alone again in a tiny studio apartment, struggling to survive in that gray, cold, soulless city. I could not reestablish my gratifying but physically exhausting catering business. I'd often felt that catering was akin to ballet dancing, meant for the young and nimble, neither of which, at 53, I was.

And I could not compete in the shark-infested freelance-writing waters of New York; I knew I couldn't swim fast enough. I couldn't imagine starting over elsewhere in the States, either, as a single, self-supporting woman in her fifties, feeling sidelined by America's youth culture.

In numerous letters to my best friend and neighbor in New York, photographer Martha (Marty) Cooper, who was managing the sublet of my studio apartment while I was away, I tried to share my reasons and solicit her always rational thoughts.

"I would like to live where my low-tech talents can be best put to good use," I wrote to her some months before my scheduled Peace Corps close of service. "That just about narrows the globe to the Third World. And of all the places in the Third World, Africa

interests me the most. … The world is big, and I don't want to be confined to one room in it anymore." Marty agreed.

Looking back now, I realize I also didn't want to return to being my daughter's deified-father's scapegoat, being blamed for all the bad things he'd raised her to believe I'd done to him and to her. The weight of all those terrible, unmerited "sins" – and not being permitted to defend myself with her – had been harmful to my health and wellbeing for long enough. It was not her fault. I didn't blame her. But she had not answered any of my letters from Gabon, so I read into that a disinterest. Like the goat in the Biblical scapegoat story, I felt I was let go.

I realize now, too, that in order to become her hero, which he clearly desperately craved, he'd had to make me the villain. In order to live with himself, he'd had to believe his own lies. As with the goat in the Bible story, he'd conveniently laid all blame on me as a psychological defense mechanism to protect himself from his own guilt.

So at that point, at that pivotal juncture in Gabon, I felt there was nothing more I could do for my daughter but to stay in touch from a healthy distance and to continue to strive to heal.

For me, Africa had always been a healing place. It is, arguably, the most down-to-earth continent on the face of this earth. It is, inarguably, the birthplace of the human race. It's about as real as real can be – and just as elemental. And African people, in my experience, are admirably, in fact enviably to me, rich in strength, resilience, kindness and generosity. They've all known hardship and heartache in their lives; these are givens. Life in Africa can be harsh. Those who survive to middle- or old age, are immeasurably strong. All the weak ones have died.

Unlike too many Americans, in my experience, everyday Africans don't judge others harshly. Their interpersonal attitude is one of live-and-let-live. They lift each other up, instead of putting others down to push ahead. They practice a philosophy commonly known as *ubuntu*, meaning "I am because we are," the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.

I'd left Africa once and was homesick for her for twenty years afterward. I didn't want to leave her again. So when my Peace Corps service in Gabon came to a close, Youssef and I traveled to Mali together so I could investigate the possibilities there.

We stayed with his extended family for a while in the historic, exotic, ancient city of Ségou, Mali's second-largest city after the capital, Bamako. His large family welcomed Youssef, their long-lost travel-adventurer cousin and nephew, and me, his American recent-Peace Corps volunteer friend, warmly. I fell in love with Mali almost instantly.

In the first days after our arrival, Youssef and I explored Ségou together, and I stopped to paint small watercolors of the sights that most captivated me: the vast, smooth, serene expanse of the Niger River that ran alongside the city center; a gigantic baobab tree at the water's edge, almost as wide as a house at its base, which must have been alive when Ségou was the capital of the Bambara Kingdom in the 19th century; the haunting red-mud Muslim mosques; the former-French colonial administrative buildings built in the neo-Sudanese style, flanked by towering palms; the men in their hand-built, outdoor looms weaving long, thin strips of colorful cotton cloth, the way it's no doubt been done for centuries; the textile booths in the *marché* displaying mountain ranges of lively African-print cotton fabric manufactured right there in Ségou.

Monday, when all of *centreville* transformed into an open-air marketplace (*marché*), became my favorite day of the week, as I suspected it was for countless others over hundreds of years. I saw that this weekly extravaganza was more than a marketplace; it was more like a family-of-man reunion:

At dawn every Monday farmers and craftspeople from outlying areas make the journey into town on slow-moving donkey carts or long, low-lying boats bearing their fresh-caught fish or fresh-picked produce and handcrafted wares. Then, in designated areas, they set up their makeshift stands, offering their sturdy functional pottery, glistening red pyramids of Italian plum tomatoes, fluffy mounds of pale-green lettuces, white cumulous clouds of raw cotton, hand-woven baskets and bed rolls and prayer mats, handmade traditional furniture fashioned of wooden slats tied with cowhide, and even more mountains of cotton-print fabric in every color and design.

This is theater, I thought, as I walked among these tall, regal, resourceful Malians for hours on Mondays, taking it all in – the sights and smells, the colors and cacophony of voices in the local language, Bambara. *This is the timeless drama of the bazaar, where people come to offer up the fruits of their labors and others come to get the goods they need. It's a give-and-take as old as hunger. This is a meeting place for people for whom social ties are beyond price. This is where the people reinforce their deep bonds. This is where they learn their news – not from newspapers or television but from face-to-face communication*.

Despite the crush of people filling the narrow labyrinthine streets, the mood, I found, was friendly and festive. I saw no pushing or shoving or sales pressure, no hawking or haggling. No one was in a hurry, it seemed. Everyone was too busy enjoying the colorful human spectacle.

Above all of this, it was the mountains of colorful African cotton fabric that kept me in Mali for three years. Long after Youssef had left Ségou to resume his destiny as an itinerant photographer and traveler-adventurer throughout Africa, I stayed on to teach at a women's sewing center and to create an economic development effort I christened The Patchwork Project.

It all began as a small request from the *directrice* of the women's center. Could I teach them how to do *this*, she asked, pointing to an amateurish wall quilt in my living room in Ségou that I'd pieced together, willy-nilly, all by hand, while in Gabon? Why, yes, I said with faux confidence, realizing I first had to teach myself how to do it correctly.

I taught my lessons in French (Mali being a Francophone country, like Gabon) to the center's core group of sewing instructors. These women, who were mostly in their forties, had had some schooling and spoke and read French as imperfectly as I. These instructors then in turn taught the younger women students in Bambara, everyone's first language, the lessons I'd taught them.

My work with these women was a joy. I felt as though I were in my element: an artisan among artisans, a mature woman among other mature women who still danced to life's drumbeat. "If there's any hope at all for this poor, poor continent," I wrote in my

journal, “it’s in the women. I love working with them, feeling one with them, in our individual and collective struggles to make something worthwhile.”

Some years later, I wrote about this life-altering experience in another memoir, titled HOW TO MAKE AN AFRICAN QUILT: The Story of the Patchwork Project of Segou, Mali (Nighthawk Press 2013). In it I recount how the Patchwork Project came to be, and I share the personal stories of the Malian women I got to know well while sitting together at the long quilting frame I’d fashioned of bamboo and set up in my living room. And interspersed within this nonfiction narrative, I include fiction: my imagined story of the life of a slave woman named Jeneba who’d been kidnapped from Mali as a young girl and whose task became quilt-maker for “the big house” on a South Carolina Plantation over the years 1822 to1860.

Mali is not a wilderness, of course; but it was not to be my home, either. When my work permit – issued by the German government, not my own, because the Americans were not interested in my sewing project – expired, I had to leave Mali, and, by a process of elimination, return to the U.S. *But where?*

Throughout my adult life I’ve had a recurrent anxiety dream of being lost and trying desperately to find the place where I belong, the place where I’m supposed to be. I’ve always woken from these dreams before finding that place. So it’s fitting, I think, that I identify with that scapegoat in the Bible story, let go to wander in wildernesses, alone.

The Other Goat

(Photo: My little Nigerian Dwarf goat Shirley, in Dixon, NM)

There were two young goats in the Leviticus Chapter 16 story. The first was slaughtered as an offering to the Lord. The second was sent to live alone in the wilderness as a scapegoat, laden with the people's sins. I identify with the second goat, but I'd prefer to have been the first. I've often thought: *If only J. had killed me. That would have been so much better for everyone*.

It's not at all uncommon for husbands to kill their wives. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, 34 percent of the women killed in the U.S. in 2021 died at the hands of an intimate partner, a husband or boyfriend. J. could have done this and even gotten away with it.

He was very smart. If there was anything I'd found at all attractive or intriguing about him when I first met him, it was his superior intelligence. He seemed to me to know everything about everything, even though I never saw him so much as pick up a book. He always had all the answers. He could have easily figured out how to murder me and get away with it. He had a penchant for evading the law, as his life on the run attests.

He could have had me "put away" by one of his New Jersey "friends in the mob," as he used to threaten. *Imagine:* They might have had me fitted with cement shoes and taken me, bound and gagged, on a boat ride up the Hudson. Fast, bloodless, untraceable.

He could have collected on the insurance policy he took out on my life. This windfall would surely have eased his financial worries. He would have slept better at night.

He wouldn't have suffered any guilt because he was devoid of a conscience. After all, this was war, and I, by fighting him for custody, had become the enemy. He had been used to getting his own way, and I had stood in his way.

He had been an American soldier, trained from military school to win at all costs. Aren't soldiers indoctrinated into believing that the enemy is subhuman? J. had killed many in Korea. What's one more? And a woman? Grown women, other than his mother, didn't matter to him; they might as well have been subhuman.

He could have raised my daughter to believe her mother – "*Tsk, tsk*... pretty, young thing" – had died in a terrible auto accident. "So sad," he might have lied to our daughter. "Your dear mother had so much to live for. ... But I can't talk about it, dear. It's too upsetting for me...." This way she would not have grown up believing her mother was a bad person, a child abuser. *Imagine thinking your mother was someone you had to be protected from. I can't even imagine it.* This way she would not have been permanently poisoned.

And I? I would have been spared a lifetime's worth of unremitting pain and heartache, praying nearly every morning to my God, the Great Spirit, to take me home,

praying for that Sweet Chariot to swoop me up. But that prayer has yet to be answered. *Soon*, I tell myself, *soon*.

"Children are the anchors that hold a mother to life," Sophocles said. In taking my child, J. took my anchor and left me unmoored and in silent, private, hidden pain. When I was younger, people only saw my "pretty" outward appearance, and many behaved enviously toward me. *If I were in a wheelchair,* I often thought*, no one would envy me.*

This is the kind of hidden, psychic pain, I think, that drives some people to suicide, because suicide appears to be the most appealing option, the best solution in that moment. No one who has *not* known this level of private pain could possibly understand.

Just look at the quintessential swashbuckler and culinary explorer Anthony Bourdain: In the 2021 documentary about Bourdain's life and death by suicide in June 2018, "Road Runner," director Michael Steed said, "I think Tony, at the end, felt alone, and felt he couldn't talk to anybody about the pain that was going on inside of him."

Frank Bruni, in his memoir THE BEAUTY OF DUSK (2022), writing about Bourdain's suicide, admits that he himself, like others "had no idea, no intimation, that he [Bourdain] was vulnerable to such intense pain. We were too busy wishing that we possessed a fraction of his talent, an iota of his outward confidence."

Just look at the statistics for what is called "deaths of despair," especially in the U.S., where more and more people, white men in particular, are dying from drugs, alcohol, and suicide. Deaths of despair are said to account for more than 100,000 preventable deaths a year and rank as the seventh-likeliest cause of death.

In the years my daughter was missing, when I lived in the United States – 12 years in all – I often considered suicide. There exists a heartlessness and soullessness, I've found, in the American way of life (which does *not* exist in Africa, in my experience), a compassionless tendency to blame the victim. If you have a problem, somehow you must have brought it on yourself: It's *your* fault. "Hey, lady, you married the guy!" the law enforcement officers said to me after my baby was abducted by her father the first time, in New Jersey. "You know what they say in the Russian marines? 'Tough shitsky.'"

It's as if "happiness" is the designated "norm" in the U.S., and if you're not happy – or if you're not wearing a happy-face mask or taking strong happy pills – there's something wrong with *you* (rather than the system). This prevalent attitude isolates the sufferer more and compounds the despair.

In New York I sometimes leaned out of my high-rise apartment window, imagining what it would be like to fall: like a water balloon, exploding with a *POP!* on the sidewalk below. Quick and sure. But then I'd think of my mother and how upset she would be, crying, "My beautiful Bonnie – WHY?! *WHY?!*" And I'd think of the dreadful wet mess it would make on the pavement that others would have to clean up, and I couldn't do it.

Then I considered the subway, perhaps a better idea. At Columbus Circle, where the IRT turns a corner before it comes to a stop at the platform. There with the unseeing, uncaring crowd, I'd stand close to the edge… It would look like an accident. Accidents in the NYC subway system happen all the time.

When I shared my suicidal thoughts at that time with my dear friend Maureen, she looked at me with deep concern.

"Death seems so peaceful to me," I told her. "No more memories, no more tears. It has to be – I know it must be – better than this –"

"Have you read the poem 'The Suicide' by Edna St. Vincent Millay?" Maureen responded. I told her I hadn't.

"You must read it," Maureen said. "It's about a woman who decides to take her life because she can't bear living anymore, and when she gets to heaven she's happy until she finds there's nothing there for her to do. So she goes to God and asks Him for a task similar to what the others are doing.

"But God tells her she can't have one because she never finished the job she was meant to do on earth. The last line goes something like this: 'Thou hadst thy task and laidst it by, He said.'

"You are a person of faith, Bonnie. You mustn't give up now. You must believe God has a job for you to do and you must stay alive and do it."

Maureen pulled me from the brink of self-destruction that day, and I've been deeply grateful to her ever since. But I've continued to pray every day for that Sweet Chariot to arrive and take me home.

In Gabon I had a serious burn accident and might have died had my Malian friend Youssef not come to my rescue. At one point, before I was evacuated by the Peace Corps to Libreville for my medical care, I was in such physical pain I told Youssef I wanted to die. "No," he said to me as if speaking on behalf of God, "you can't go yet. You have more work to do here. You will get better."

In his old age the Scottish novelist and playwright James Matthew Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*, whom I researched in depth and wrote about in my historical novel JAMIE'S MUSE, referred to death as "a great adventure" which he looked forward to. I could completely understand.

Unlike most people I've known, I've never feared death nor run from it. I can trace this stance to early childhood, when my best friend Ruthie died of leukemia, and my mother, who was never a religious person, explained to me that Ruthie was "better off now." For better or worse, this sense of a better place on the other side of this life has never left me, and I've never stopped thinking about "lucky Ruthie."

[EXCERPTED FROM SOMEWHERE CHILD:]

When I was four and my world reached as far as the wild blackberry bushes at the other end of the woods, I had a friend named Ruthie. Ruthie lived in the white farmhouse across the county road, and every day after she came home from school I would carefully cross the road by myself to visit her. She was my first best friend.

Ruthie was two years older than I, tall and thin. She had a thin, delicate face, thin arms and hands, thin spindly legs. She looked as if she seldom ate. The only thing large about her body was her hair, which stood out from her head in feather-soft ringlets, surrounding her face like a honey-colored halo. She cried every time her mother tried to comb through it.

Ruthie was born when her parents were already old and her sister and brothers fully grown. She was more than special to her parents; her mother said she was "sent from heaven." Indeed, Ruthie was an angel.

“Be a good girl like Ruthie,” my mother used to say to me, and I tried. I watched Ruthie, I listened to her, I learned from her, I idolized her. On warm days we would sit on the wide wooden porch in front of her house, and she would read to me with a voice so soft it seemed to be coming from far away. Or she would show me how to sew: We made cloth clothes for our paper dolls. Or she would sing to me or teach me what she had learned in Catholic school that day.

“If you want to pray to God, you go like this,” she said, tightly folding her thin fingers together until bony knuckles showed through her transparent skin. “Or you can go like this,” she said, pressing her hands flat with her fingers pointing to the sky. “God will listen to you either way.” I looked up at Ruthie’s God. He was a large white cloud with big ears….

A year later, Ruthie became ill. One day my mother told me Ruthie had been taken to the hospital in an ambulance. Ruthie wrote to me, funny letters, in big, clear printing, which my mother read to me. She wrote that she would soon be home again – the doctors and nurses were taking good care of her – and we would soon be sitting on her front porch together.

Ruthie didn’t come home. I overheard my mother say Ruthie had “loo-key-mee-ah,” and when I asked what that meant, she said Ruthie was very very sick. Ruthie died.

“What does died mean, Mommy?” I said. I had never known anyone who had died.

“God has taken Ruthie to his home,” my mother said. I had heard my mother use the word God before, but never in this way. Never as though God were a person who had a place to live.

“Why did God take Ruthie?”

My mother explained that God loved Ruthie very much because she was such a good girl, and he hated to see her so sick. So he took her to heaven to be with him. “Ruthie’s very happy now,” my mother said. “She’ll never be sick again.”

I pictured God’s home as a palace, immense and golden as the sun, protected by pretty, winged angels like the ones on our Christmas tree, and filled with healthy, happy, special people. I saw Ruthie there, laughing and singing, and I thought: Lucky Ruthie, lucky Ruthie.

Dixon

My youngest sister was the first to suggest New Mexico to me. When I was wondering where to go next after Mali, she wrote, “You seem to like Third World countries, Bon. Why not try New Mexico? New Mexico is like a Third World country.”

So in the summer of 2000, when I flew from Mali, West Africa, back to the States, first for a visit with my daughter and her family, and then visit with my sister and hers to celebrate my sister’s 50th birthday, my sister let me borrow her car to drive from her home in Colorado due south to New Mexico.

What I saw of northern New Mexico was bewitching: big cerulean blue skies, broad high-desert landscapes, adobe architecture dotting the land, tumbleweed blowing in the summer wind, cacti here and there. There was even an arching rainbow over the highway at one point, like a portal to a magic kingdom, and I was driving directly into it. I took that rainbow as a sign.

And I took the cacti as a sign too. I wrongly assumed that northern New Mexico had the kind of year-round warm climate I prefer. Silly me. I later learned how wrong I was, how knee-deep the snow can be in winter. But by that time it was too late. By that time, I was hooked.

Jobs were hard to come by there then, so I had to try to reinvent myself. I’d heard that northern New Mexico had a serious drug problem – the highest per capita heroin overdose death rate in the nation, I read – due to the influx of black tar heroin that seeped through the state, up from neighboring Mexico and on up into Midwestern states. At the time, New Mexico desperately needed more qualified alcohol and drug abuse counselors. This job paid well for New Mexico ($16 an hour), and the one-year training for it at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque was subsidized by the state.

So I pursued this new career path, traveling down to Albuquerque for one full weekend a month of classes, and earning a certificate at the end. I learned a great deal – how to listen more empathetically, how to acknowledge others’ pain without judgement, how to better understand the way drugs and alcohol can creep up on a person and take them down.

Of course, I had my alcoholic father in mind in my studies. I was at a point in my life, in my mid-fifties, where I wanted to better understand him, and I think I did that. “First the man takes a drink,” as they say in treatment circles, “then the drink takes a drink. Then the drink takes the man.”

As a counsellor-in-training at a residential treatment center where I worked for a time, I saw the other side, the *underbelly,* of New Mexico. In the private sessions I had with clients, I heard hair-curling stories, some hard to believe. Such as the old man who confessed to me he’d robbed a bank on the day Kennedy was assassinated, which meant law enforcement was slow to pursue him; the country was temporarily paralyzed.

And another ex-convict who bragged to me about his sex life with the prison doctor where he was incarcerated, and how no one questioned his frequent feigned illnesses and requests to go to her infirmary. And the young resident who confided in me that the first thing he planned to do when he was released from “this 30-day hell hole” was to shoot up.

My group sessions with the women there were particularly heart-wrenching. Woman after woman told of being sexually abused by her “Tio Juan,” or a friend of the family, from the time she was a little girl until puberty, always threatened with great harm if she told anyone. These girls, believing they themselves were “bad,” then fell into the wrong crowds in high school, where they soon had access to street drugs that blunted their pain and shame and crippled their lives.

Another familiar theme among the women, I found, was due to the prescription opioid Oxycontin. These formerly ordinary, everyday young women had suffered severe injuries, in auto or skiing accidents, for example, and were prescribed Oxycontin by their doctors for their pain. In time, after they could no longer renew their prescriptions, their craving for this painkiller took over their lives. They became people they would not have recognized in the mirror. They became desperate, conniving addicts.

For me, the worst aspect of this short-lived career was the strong resentment I felt from my colleagues, all ex-addicts and recovering alcoholics themselves, who had been grandfathered into their positions as alcohol and drug abuse counsellors. They loudly belittled me for never having been an addict and not having track marks on my arms. “What

do *you* know?!" they'd jeer. "You only have *book-learnin'*--" I tried to ignore them and focus on my clients.

This treatment center was close to the charming village of Dixon, a small farming community in a lush valley south of Taos, where I bought a small A-frame cabin on an acre of land bordered by ancient apple trees. I took classes in sustainable gardening and went a little wild planting in the wide-openness in front of my house: a large organic (of course) vegetable garden, a long raspberry patch, a 40 x 20 ft. lavender field, and dots of peach trees here and there. If Dixon had given a prize for the most impressive compost pile, I like to think mine would have won. Privately, I crowned myself Compost Queen.

I did this all by hand, myself, loving every dirt-encrusted minute. I made these earthy efforts – shoveling, planting, weeding, watering, mulching, staking, picking – stubbornly, manically, as if my life depended on it. I called it "garden therapy."

I was lucky, I was told, to have a place along an irrigation ditch, what the locals called the "acequia." This acequia system was part of an ancient method of irrigation in this region, first devised by the indigenous Pueblo people and continued by the early Hispanic settlers. Ingeniously, these farmers guided the high mountain snowmelt in winding, dugout pathways down into their waiting thirsty fields, knowing the rains in the high desert could not be relied on to keep their crops alive. I felt lucky, too, that spindly little wild plum trees grew along my acequia, the entire length of the field.

I got chickens and ducks and made big pens for them on one side of my house with chain-link fencing. I got a little goat and named her Shirley; she lived on a neighbor's property because my neighbor had a barn and another goat. When I was home, I let my chickens and ducks out to roam free and "work" with me in my garden. The Rhode Island Reds, fat and glistening like polished copper in the sunshine, were especially tame and adorable; and the ducks followed me around like, well, ducklings. To me, these little farm creatures, along with my indoor, half-Siamese cat, Blue, whom I brought home from a local animal shelter, were my happy family.

My daughter and I spoke on the phone for about an hour every Sunday afternoon, keeping our conversations light and current, catching up on each other's news. But the

strain – and the barriers – between us remained. Maintaining a healthy distance, it seemed to me, was the only answer for us then.

I considered this my Annie Oakley phase – living in the wild Southwest, driving a pickup truck (better for transporting garden supplies and animal feed), dressed in a jeans jacket, baggy jeans, and sturdy leather boots. And I was obviously going through a farmgirl phase too, a belated "back-to-the-land" urge, needing to unearth a hidden side of myself. This was my new life back in the U.S., living in what my New York friend Davida dubbed my "farmette."

Most of my neighbors, who were not so near, were wizened Hispanics whose families had been farming in this fertile valley for hundreds of years, ever since their Spanish ancestors trudged up from central Mexico in the 17th century – as well as gray-haired, pony-tailed, skinny old hippies who'd followed their own back-to-the-land impulses decades before me. These old hippies still lived in the backwoods shacks they'd built by hand in the '70s out of old planks, discarded windows, corrugated metal, and bailing wire.

Few of these neighbors seemed to know what to make of me, though – a single, older woman, originally from the East Coast, who lived alone, half in the woods, and kept pretty much to herself. Whenever we crossed paths at the Post Office – the only official building in this small village – most scooted away from me without a word. My droll sister in Colorado quipped that they likely suspected I was in the Witness Protection Program.

Sometimes friends from the East or West Coast came to visit me and marveled at my bucolic transformation. In early September 2006, for example, my dear friend Ron, who had been my sous chef in New York when I had my catering business, Bonnie Fare Catering, and had since moved back to his hometown, Los Angeles, came to visit with his then-partner, now-husband, Glenn. I don't remember what I cooked for us for lunch that day, but I do remember the dessert I proudly served to great applause: a plum galette, made from the plump purple plums on my wild trees bordering the acequia.

Then one summer – when all of my lavender plants were in full fragrant bloom, and the first of my peach trees was about to bear fruit, and the raspberry bushes showed countless greenish-white, not-yet-ripe berries, and my raw carrots and peas tasted like candy – in the middle of one night, when the moon was nowhere to be seen and the stars, too, were hidden behind black clouds, I heard terrible, terrifying noises coming from both the chickens' and the ducks' pens. The ruckus woke me. *What was making them scream like this? A bear? A coyote?*

I jumped out of bed, turned on the front porch light, and ran out onto my deck with a copper pot in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other, banging wildly, knowing none of my neighbors lived near enough to be disturbed. I'd read somewhere that bears are frightened by such noise. I didn't go any farther because I couldn't see beyond the deck. I wasn't carrying a flashlight. I didn't own a gun. The commotion had ended. I went back to bed.

In the morning, though, I saw the carnage, the senseless slaughter. Slithering, stealthy weasels had burrowed beneath the chain-link fences of both pens and killed every one of my beloved chickens and ducks by biting into their necks and leaving their blood-soaked bodies strewn everywhere.

I was paralyzed. I couldn't speak for three days. Who was there to speak to? *Who would understand?*

I was a failure. I'd failed to protect my babies from the weasels. In creating my little "farmette paradise," I'd forgotten about the weasels of this world. Surely, I, of all people, should have known better.

Not long after this incident, I left my counselling job, sold my cabin and its property, and moved a half-hour north, to a small condo in the town of Taos. This one-bedroom Taos condo had a tiny outdoor patio, about the size of a walk-in closet. No compost. No gardens. No farmyard animals. I had to reinvent myself again.

[The following braided essay about my life in Dixon was published in the "Red Mesa Review," Vol. 18, 2015-2016:]

Requiem for a Field of Lavender

by Bonnie Lee Black

When I looked out over my lavender field, I mourned. How could all of the plants, all 90 of them, have died? I'd been waiting since the beginning of that spring for signs of life, but there were no signs in any of them. I'd spent hours trimming each plant with hand clippers, like a military barber fashioning crew cuts on new recruits' heads. I'd pulled every weed in the field, irrigated from the acequia, and searched anxiously every day. Still, no new growth, no green beneath the woody bark on any of the lower stems. The plants, all of them, were lifelessly brittle and deathly brown. They looked like neatly arranged, carefully tended rows of low, rounded, spiky tombstones in a 40 x 20 ft. graveyard. I mourned alone.

In May 2004, I had planted this lavender field myself, with these two hands, alone. It was a dream-come-true for me – to own a small piece of Planet Earth, a little over an acre of land in the country, in a state that was new to me, New Mexico, and to plant myself here, literally and metaphorically, with long-longed-for-firsts: a vegetable garden, raspberry patch, and lavender field. I'd seen great, gorgeous swaths of lavender fields in the South of France in my travels, and I wanted to recreate the same kind of beauty for myself in northern New Mexico, where I planned to stay.

I hadn't thought about the commercial aspect. When someone asked what I planned to DO with all the lavender these plants would produce (Sell it? If so, where? In what form?), I was unprepared to answer. I hadn't thought that far. All I wanted was to watch the field of lavender thrive and grow; admire its rippling, pale-purple beauty when the flowers eventually appeared; breath its perfume as it filled the air by my home; and pretend, fleetingly, that I was living in Provence.

In April 2004, I prepared the field for planting. Operating on instinct and intuition, because I couldn't find specifics in reference books or online, I conscripted a neighbor with a plow to till the section I'd staked out – a spot that received strong, Provencal-like sun all

day. I then dug shovel-head-deep holes at legs'-pace-spacing (just under 3 ft.), added a couple of handfuls of mature homemade compost to every hole, then covered each mound with original soil and placed a stick as a marker for May's planting. I had to be patient, a local farmer advised, and wait until May, closer to final frost date, to avoid possible freezing of the leaves and roots. This was the lower Rockies, after all, the High Sierras (the altitude in my village was 6,000 ft.), where spring temperatures can drop to freezing at night, even, occasionally in June. "Around Mother's Day would be a good time," the farmer told me.

Naturally, I jumped the gun. On Saturday, May 1st, I planted the first 30 of the small, healthy plants I'd ordered from a reputable supplier. They were Grosso, the same lavender grown in the Mediterranean region, the kind that loves full sun and little water, just what New Mexico's summers have to offer. By sunset on Monday, May 3rd, all of the plants were in.

The next morning I wrote in my journal: "Yesterday I finished planting my lavender field. It's beautiful already – even though they're still little baby plants, only a couple inches high. I also bought a peach tree … and planted it at the tail end of the lavender field, to catch the acequia water runoff. … There was a fat, full moon last night, so bright it made the night look like early evening. …" Perhaps it's just an old wives' tale, but I'd heard somewhere it's propitious to plant at the full moon.

By Mother's Day, Sunday May 9, 2004, I was like a new mother with a newborn, only these were 90 tiny babies I fluttered and fretted over. I spent the day bent over them, splashing them with water flowing slowly from the irrigation ditch, reinforcing each mound, tossing each rock, yanking every weed. It was good therapy.

In the news that week the world had learned the ugly truth about U.S. military abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and I'd felt sickened by it and ashamed to be an American. I'd spent the week wishing my Scottish forefathers and foremothers had emigrated to France (specifically, the South of France) instead of the United States in the early years of the last century. Why couldn't you have sailed to Nice instead of New Jersey? I argued with their ghosts. But – admiring my newly planted lavender field that sunny, New Mexico Mother's Day – I had to concede: I am here now, planted and growing roots.

On the local news that evening I learned of a terrible tragedy that took place that very morning in a village not far from mine. A young couple, both 37, and the wife's 13-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, had died in a house fire. This Mother's Day tragedy was shrouded in mystery, the TV reporter intimated. But the young wife's name wasn't a mystery to me: I had known her. We had worked together for a while at a treatment center.

Stunned and saddened by this news, memories of my former colleague at the nearby treatment center, Eileen, flooded back to me. She was born in 1966, just one year after my daughter, my only child; and she was what my slender mother would have termed "a big girl." Eileen must have been at least 5'10" tall and I'd guess over 200 pounds; she had big, wavy, black hair, a big, confident stride; and a big, commanding voice. "Hey, what're you tryin' to DO!" she yelled at me once, after our cars nearly collided in the parking lot at work, "you tryin' to KILL me?!" Then she laughed her big laugh.

Local weekly newspapers quickly featured the tragedy on their front pages. "Three Dead in Peñasco Fire" was the headline in the Rio Grande Sun for Thursday, May 13. "Peñasco Struck with 3 Deaths" was the lead story on the front page of The Taos News of the same date. Their reporter pinpointed domestic violence as the cause.

According to officials, the fire started in the bedroom where Eileen and her daughter were found. David Esquibel was found just 10 ft. inside the front door. Relatives first on the scene dragged him into the front yard.

Preliminary autopsy reports began to unravel the shocking chain of events that occurred inside the house that day. Eileen Esquibel and her daughter died of blunt force trauma. David Esquibel was overcome by smoke from the fire, but had stab wounds on his body that were potentially fatal, according to police officials (Taos News, A14, 5/13-19, 2004).

In the days that followed, I could think of little else. I tried to find solace in gardening, but that was no escape. Bending over my fragile, young lavender plants, coaxing them into health and long life, the blood rushed to my head and my mind filled with thoughts of these deaths. I knew that somehow these two events – this awful news and my new lavender field – were becoming entwined in my mind, and there was nothing I could do but allow it to

happen. As my hands worked in the soil, and the embracing New Mexican sun stroked my bare arms and legs, my mind traveled back in time.

I had met Eileen's daughter, Andronica, once, when she was eleven. Physically, she was a miniature replica of her mother, but, unlike her mother, she was soft-spoken and shy. "She's a good girl," Eileen bragged, standing in her office, where framed photos of Andronica – one on a pony as a little girl, another in a bridelike confirmation dress – sat on her desk. Eileen wrapped her big arm around her daughter's shoulder. "And she's a good student too – not like me."

At work, Eileen's written reports were grammatical disasters, but she managed to overcompensate for what she'd missed in high school English with her big voice. "Get your skinny ass in my office, NOW!" was her way of summoning subordinates. She got things done.

I met Eileen's mother once, too. She was about my age, but frail and in ill health. She asked me where I was from and how I liked New Mexico. She told me she was born and raised in Peñasco and that her Spanish forebears had settled in this region centuries ago. I told her about my plans for starting a garden and planting a lavender field. "Lavender loves New Mexico," she told me encouragingly. Within months, she had died of heart failure.

I never met Eileen's husband, David, but I had often pictured him in my mind. I imagined him to be darkly handsome, rugged, smart, funny, and charming. Why else would she have fallen for him, despite the fact that he was an ex-addict and ex-con? I had thought he must be shorter and more slightly built than she, thinking Eileen would never choose a man who could overpower her physically. But I was wrong about that. In the end, he found the power to smash her skull.

At a gift shop in Taos in mid-May, I bought an irresistible birthday present for myself, called THE LAVENDER GARDEN, a coffee table book filled with beautiful, evocative photos of what my lavender field might one day look like, as well as lavender facts, concoctions, and folklore. In it, author Robert Kourik writes:

"The unique scent of this quintessential woody shrub is almost universally recognized, and lavender has been planted, tended, used, and cherished almost from the

beginning of recorded civilization. … Throughout history the herb has been employed as a general mind or mood 'tonic' … and even as an ingredient in witchcraft."

Was it maternal concern that made me fret over the welfare of these spindly little beings and worry about their adjustment to their new life here – or was I, I wondered, becoming bewitched by my lavender field? Every day I was drawn into it, pulled by some seemingly supernatural force, needing to study each plant in every row, looking at their long, thin, pale-green leaves, as though they were tealeaves at the bottom of a cup, for answers to my haunting questions:

How did this tragedy happen?

What caused Eileen to stab her husband six times on Mother's Day morning in their bedroom? Had she kept a sharp knife by her bedside table "just in case"? Did David keep a crowbar within easy reach?

Had they fought, almost to the death, before?

What does it feel like when your skull shatters like glass?

Did Andronica hear the screams and run to help her mother on that Mother's Day – only to be bludgeoned herself?

What was David thinking? Was he drunk – or high on drugs – that early on a Sunday morning? Did he stagger to the garage for gasoline or barbecue lighter fluid to douse his wife's and stepdaughter's bleeding, broken bodies lying together on that Mother's Day morning on the bedroom floor?

Did he hope, before collapsing from smoke inhalation just four paces from their home's front door, that the gas-fueled blaze would melt all evidence of his murders?

Did he think he could charm his way out of this one too, after his stab wounds healed?

As a young child, I often saw my father come home drunk, fight with my mother who was half his weight, knock her down in a rage, and kick her repeatedly in the head. If she had died at this hands, I think I might then have gone after him with a knife. (Ah, was that, in fact, what happened? Did Andronica, hearing her mother's cries for help, run to the kitchen for a chef's knife, and then stab David in an effort to make him stop?) Instead, I phoned our

hometown police, who came and took my father away. My mother died three decades later of brain cancer.

Over time, I've concluded that it's far better, at least for me, to live alone – to avoid all risk of domestic violence – and to choose as life companions small animals and green plants. Studying my tiny lavender plants' green leaves that May only confirmed these truths for me.

In mid-June, I emailed a gardening friend. "Quick note to share my good news that my newly planted lavender field seems to be doing well. All 90 of the little plants look healthy and happy and slightly bigger/taller/fuller than when I planted them a little over a month ago. I began by watering them daily (from the acequia ditch), but I've since cut down to every-other-day irrigation. What do you think?"

By September, when the deciduous trees on the hills surrounding this verdant valley were beginning to turn New Mexico-gold, my lavender plants, with their feathery, silvery-green leaves, had fluffed out to over a foot wide and nearly as tall. They seemed to like the sunny spot I'd chosen for them. All of them were healthy, and, it appeared, thriving. I felt blessed.

I'm not a scientific gardener. I like to allow what I plant to surprise me. I like to learn life lessons in this trial-and-error process, such as patience, tolerance, respect, and wonder. According to the experts, lavender plants can take up to two years to establish a good root system and begin to bloom; but wonder-of-wonders, my field bloomed after the first year. As they might exclaim in the South of France, "Mon dieu! Quelle recolte!" What a harvest, indeed. It was like a scene from "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," an immense overabundance. It was more lavender, frankly, than I ever anticipated, more than I even knew what to do with.

From late May 2005, and throughout that summer, mornings and evenings, in all phases of light, I took pictures of my lavender field in full bloom. None of these photos, however, managed to capture the flowers' delicate pale-purpose hue. Had I been a plein-aire painter, with an artist's easel stationed near the field, I'm sure I could have preserved my lavender's color forever. I wish I had.

The field was filled with flowers, with hardly room for me to stand. Each dome-shaped plant had sent out countless flower-covered stalks that reached in all directions, forming a solid purple hedge that rippled in the New Mexico wind and broadcast an intoxicating perfume for yards. I almost couldn't believe my nose, or eyes. Could I take credit for this? The tiny plants I'd babied just the year before had each grown to nearly 3 ft. in diameter in size.

By August, it was time to harvest, and the truth of the Chinese proverb, "Beware of what you wish for," hit home. What would I, could I, DO with all this lavender? Each plant produced at least five "bouquets" of long-stemmed, flower-packed stalks, with roughly 100 stalks to a bunch, which I tied with elastic bands and hung upside-down on a clothesline to dry. But this cutting-to-drying process took time, more time than I could spare.

When I bumped into locals at the Post Office, I tried to share my largesse. "I have lots of lavender," I enthused to whomever. "Please come with clippers and take as much as you'd like!" To my surprise, only one person took me up on my offer. Perhaps, in this tight-knit, deep-rooted farming community, they saw me – the newcomer, an "Anglo" divorcee from the East Coast who lived alone, down a long country road – as suspect.

At first I found a few creative uses for my lavender. I sewed, of course, lavender sachets for my linen cupboard and underwear drawer. I filled a number of large jars with lavender bath salts. I made many bottles of lavender vinegar. I proudly put vases and baskets displaying my lovely dried lavender on nearly every surface in my small house. The smell of lavender became overpowering, too much of a good thing.

I then became more assertive in my giving. I mailed large manila envelopes containing lavender bouquets to my daughter, my sister, and friends far and wide. I included photos of the whole field, sometimes with a brief note: "Look! Touch! Smell! You'll think I've moved to the South of France!"

This could not go on forever. I knew I had to come up with a plan for marketing and selling this glorious, natural, God-given product in the future. I had to do research. I had to force myself to move beyond pure aesthetics and venture into the cold realm of commerce.

Maybe my lavender could help increase my income. God knew I could certainly use the money.

When you are one of the 46 million Americans who don't have health insurance (because, in your case, a person with your skills in the part of the country where you've chosen to live can only find part-time or freelance work, and you can barely pay for weekly groceries, much less costly monthly health insurance payments), you strive to take particularly good care of your health. You know unquestioningly that the state of your body is your own responsibility. You simply can't afford to be ill or infirm.

So you devise a feasible health regimen, and you stick to it like religious orders. You eat moderately, and only fresh, wholesome food; you take vitamins, drink lots of water, get sufficient sleep, pray, and exercise every day of your life. It's not vanity nor a quest for longer longevity that drives you to maintain this discipline, it's practicality. You're in this alone. Who else will take care of you if not you? As your mother always said, "An ounce of prevention…"

With a rake and a hoe, I carved a running track around my property, where I ran a mile every morning. As I ran, rounding the lavender field with each lap, I breathed extra-deeply, euphorically. The lavender-flower fragrance filled me, buoyed me, grounded me, and transported me all at once. I had just turned 60, and there I was, running laps on my still-strong legs, on my own patch of Earth, my own acre in the sun. What could be more healthy?

But whenever I worked in the lavender field – irrigating or weeding, cutting wands or chasing insect predators away – I thought of Eileen. It was as if she were standing there with me, as if she'd used lavender-scented shampoo, and I had to brush past her big hair to get to the work at hand. As the water from the irrigation ditch flowed down the arteries of the field, my mind would be flooded again with memories of her tragic death that fateful Mother's Day morning. It haunted me.

Of course, I had had high hopes for my lovely field of lavender. And I'd assumed as perennial plants, they would outlast me. I thought, too, that the lavender field would be a selling point when it came time for my daughter to inherit – and then, in turn, sell – this

property. Again, I was filled with questions, but this time I couldn't look to the green lavender leaves for answers.

Why did my lavender plants die so young? Am I, the stubbornly intuitive, groping gardener, to blame? Did I do something wrong – or fail to do something right? Was it northern New Mexico's overly long, dry, snow-less winter that year? Or had the ubiquitous, burrowing neighborhood gophers made a fine, springtime meal of all the roots?

Perhaps the answer is as simple as this: Grosso prefers the year-round warmth of the South of France. I understand, and I empathize. Northern New Mexico's winters can be killers.

What could I do? Pull those plants, toss them and forget them, then replant in the fall? No. I left them as I saw them, as tombstones. Reminders. In my mournfulness I felt inspired to write a hymn – to the ephemerality of life, the delicate, hard-to-capture color of lavender, the haunting fragrance of its perfume.

Taos

I remember it clearly: The day I drove down my long, muddy driveway in Dixon for the last time, I didn't look back – not at my A-frame cabin, nor the acre of field in front of it, nor the ancient apple trees surrounding and towering over it, nor the still small peach trees I'd planted here and there. I put it all behind me.

With Blue in his cat carrier (and unhappy about it) on the seat beside me in the cab of my old, white Toyota pickup, and most of my boxed belongings secured under tarp in the back bed, I drove up to Taos, through the winding mountainous roads that hugged the Rio Grande, to begin a new chapter.

Dixon, New Mexico (population at that time about 1,000), is indeed a charming old farming village. But I learned I didn't belong there. Perhaps it's since changed, but I found it to be a tight-knit, closed, mostly Hispanic community then, and rather unwelcoming to newcomers. Family ties were paramount, and I wasn't family. I was a single, middle-aged "Anglo" woman living alone far from her place of origin, the East Coast, and I had no family in or near Dixon. I remained a stranger, an outsider to the locals.

This fact became clearest to me when I fell ill with pneumonia one winter. I reached out to my neighbors by phone for help because I was so sick and immobile I could barely make it to my bathroom, but no one came. It was as if they wanted me to leave. So I took the hint.

Also, in fairness, looking back, I wasn't terribly outgoing. As an unapologetic introvert, I was happy to spend all my waking hours either gardening, working, or studying. Yes, in anticipation of an inevitable move, I'd begun to pave a new career path: I was pursuing a master's degree in Creative Writing through the low-residency program at Antioch University in Los Angeles that would qualify me to teach at the college level at the University of New Mexico branch in Taos.

This Antioch MFA program required that I attend classes and seminars in L.A. for ten-day intensives twice a year for two years, then continue with reading and writing assignments with a mentor through the mail in the months between. While in L.A., I stayed

with my friends Ron and Glenn and their young family in their lovely home in the Hollywood Hills. They took loving care of me.

In my new life in Taos I resolved to make more friends so these friends would become part of my cherished "friend-family," since my blood-family ties were so tenuous. My granddaughter visited me once briefly when I was in Dixon; we went white-water rafting on the Rio Grande and horseback-riding in the mountains. And my grandson came to Taos for a short visit a few years later; he bought a pair of genuine cowboy boots in town and we toured Taos Pueblo together. Both visits were wonderful and memorable. But for the most part, my daughter and her family remained far from me in every sense. Everyone had busy lives, and I was not a part of them.

My daughter and I continued to talk on the phone for about an hour every Sunday afternoon. We tried to find common, incontrovertible ground, avoiding such provocative subjects as politics, religion, and race, on which we held disparate views.

Her father had told her, for example, that I'd left her with the two young African caretakers at the flat where she and I had lived in Salisbury, Rhodesia, when she was a little girl; and these two men had "violated" her. This was just one of the many heinous lies she still believed and I was not allowed to refute – otherwise she would have closed down our conversation with the usual, "My father would never lie to me!" This particular lie had utterly poisoned her views on race.

One pleasant topic for us, though, was cooking. We both loved to cook. So we shared recipes and recent culinary successes. And when her children were near the telephone, she allowed me to say hello to them. She was the gatekeeper, and I the supplicant, knocking.

I lived in Taos, New Mexico, until 2015, when I turned 70 and retired to "Old" Mexico. And in all that time, I never tired of admiring Taos's breathtaking landscapes. I often thought that people living in places like suburban New Jersey, where I originate, would likely only see such dazzling natural beauty on their two-week vacation once a year. I, on the other hand, saw it every day that I lived there.

On the drive north from Dixon, for example, as you approach Taos in the far distance, when, after a bend in the highway the view ahead opens onto a huge mesa with an enormous gorge, the Rio Grande Gorge, cut into it, your breath literally catches. [See Geraint Smith's cover photo.] Ten miles straight ahead are the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains, one of the biggest of these being the sacred Taos Mountain. At its foot lies Taos Pueblo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, said to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the U.S. And neighboring the Pueblo, about 3 miles to the south, is the Town of Taos (population then about 5,000), spread out like glittering jewels in the sunshine.

(Photo: one of the back roads leading into Taos, with sacred Taos Mountain in the distance)

It's no wonder that Taos's natural beauty has long attracted artists and writers from elsewhere in the U.S. as well as Europe. In the early decades of the last century, Taos became something of a mecca for American modernist painters and an alternative to Europe. To this day, the cultural scene in Taos thrives, with more than 80 art galleries, three

art museums, several performing arts venues, and a robust literary community spearheaded by the nonprofit organization SOMOS – the Society of the Muse of the Southwest.

Taos's original Native American inhabitants have lived there for over a thousand years and still adhere to their proud traditions. The Hispanic population in the region can trace their roots to the 17th century, when their forebears came up from what is now central Mexico. "Anglos," as white people are called in Taos, are still considered newcomers because New Mexico only became a U.S. state in 1912. As I saw it and experienced it, these three cultures formed a colorful braid, maintaining their respective identities but clearly intertwined, peaceably for the most part.

I was an adjunct instructor for ten years at UNM in Taos, a community college, where I taught Freshman English, Creative Nonfiction Writing, and Culinary Arts. All together in those years I had about a thousand students, who were primarily Hispanic and Native American. These young people were, for the most part, the first in their families to attend college. After having seen the sad "underbelly" of northern New Mexico at the alcohol and drug abuse treatment center where I'd worked for a time, I saw these students as the other side, the flip side, the proud hope for the future.

Every new semester, though, in my Freshman English classes, with fresh faces looking at me dubiously, I encountered challenges. I came to understand that Anglos were generally regarded as untrustworthy, and blondes were considered "dumb." So, being both Anglo and blonde, one of my first mini lectures had to do with the issue of stereotyping – what it is, how it's expressed, the harm it can do, and how it's remedied. Education, of course, was the answer.

I recalled how inspiring my Columbia professors had been to me, how they opened my mind to concepts I'd never even dreamed of considering, how they broadened my world and lifted me up, nearly off my chair, in every class. So, as a newbie college instructor, I tried to emulate them. And, too, I was the first of my siblings to go to university, thanks to full scholarships at Columbia, so I could relate to my students' aspirations.

I arranged my students' chairs in a large circle in our classroom, and I walked around inside of it, asking questions, seeking responses. One of my favorite subjects was "critical thinking":

"What does the 'critical' in 'critical thinking' mean?" I'd ask at the beginning of each semester. Then, after a pause, I'd follow that question with another. "Does it mean being critical of everything? Fault-finding?

"No. This 'critical' means *extremely important*, as in, 'It's critical that we find ways to clean up the world's oceans of plastic and garbage.' Critical thinking is the act of evaluating an issue in order to form an intelligent, informed judgment.

"This act isn't easy. It requires hard work – *thinking!* – and wide reading, the kind of reading assigned in college courses that you'd be unlikely to do on your own just for fun."

These words were not met with cheers or smiles, I could plainly see as I walked around studying faces.

"Look," I'd go on, "it's not my job to tell you *what* to think, but it is my job to teach you *how to learn to think* – and we do that by reading. In college – especially in college English classes – reading, writing, and discussing are requirements for learning. This is the *purpose* of higher learning – to teach critical thinking that will guide you throughout life."

Another of my favorite subjects was "purpose." Knowing that most of my Freshman English students had never traveled much beyond New Mexico, I would draw a huge circle on the front board and announce, "This is the world!"

"And these – " I quickly marked lots of short, horizontal dashes inside the circle "– are problems in the world. Negatives. As I see it, our job as individuals – our personal purpose – is to seek out one of the world's negatives and turn it into a positive, using all the intelligence, talents, heart and soul we've been given."

Again, I scanned the students' faces for reactions. Their faces looked blank – what we call "subway faces" in New York – registering nothing, neither acceptance nor rejection, neither positive nor negative.

"Maybe you're wondering what all this –" I patted the circle on the board "– has to do with English 101?" I knew that for many of these students English had never been their favorite subject in school.

"To succeed in life, as human beings and responsible citizens of the world, to fulfill our purpose and reach our personal goals, I strongly believe, we must first become educated. We must learn how to *think* like never before. This is why college and university is called 'higher education'...."

I learned a lot from these students, of course, as all teachers do. Reading their personal essays, I learned what it was like to grow up in Taos in a large, loving, Hispanic family. One student, I recall, said he'd made a list of all the people in his family he could turn to in case he needed help, and that list filled a lined notebook page. (Reading this I became tearful.) I learned about some of the traditions of the Pueblo people and what those traditions mean to them. (I envied their rootedness.) I learned how much Taos had changed since these college freshmen were preschoolers. Yet, despite all the changes and the invasions (by Anglos), this was home for them, and they had no desire to ever move away.

My Creative Nonfiction Writing class was an elective, which attracted older students, including a number of retired professionals living in Taos. These former lawyers, doctors, pilots, photographers, psychologists, businessmen, and professors had hopes of writing their memoirs, if not for the world, then at least for their immediate families. Many of them went on to do so, and I have their published books here on my bookshelf in Mexico today.

My Culinary Arts classes, also electives, were pure fun. All of my students – older, younger, male, female, Hispanic, Native, and Anglo – worked harmoniously in teams to make dishes that we then sat down and ate together as a family at a long, harvest-like table. We became *companions*, in the true sense of the word: those who break bread together.

These cooking classes reminded me of the bread-baking classes I gave in my home in Gabon when I was in the Peace Corps there: Women from the many different ethnic and

religious groups in town, women who would not otherwise have had anything to do with one another, sat in my living room side by side, happily learning how to bake bread and then sharing our just-baked bread together.

When I wasn't teaching, either classes at the university or Creative Nonfiction workshops through SOMOS, I was writing books at home alone, spending time with friends, or riding my beloved bike as far as my legs would take me. This bike was a shiny new Specialized ten-speed I'd bought with a $500 award I was given one year at a UNM-Taos graduation ceremony for being elected "The Most Inspirational Instructor." I told friends this bike was my horse.

Taos, I found, was filled with remarkable women. There's even a book by this name to prove it. REMARKABLE WOMEN OF TAOS: A Year-Long Community-Wide Celebration Honoring Outstanding Taoseñas features the stories of 167 women who had played, and were still playing, important roles in shaping this one-of-a-kind community. I was fortunate to call many of these women my friends, and they have remained cherished friends to this day.

(Photo: celebrating my 70th birthday in May 2015 with my remarkable-women-of-Taos friends at Ojo Caliente; l. to r. – Cherie Burns, Janet Webb, me, Judith Kendall, and Barbara Scott)

During my years in Taos, as she had when she was a little girl living with me in Salisbury, my daughter would sometimes blow up at me as an adult on the phone, without provocation. Her vitriol, like arrows, traveled through our telephone connection, across the miles and mountains, piercing an otherwise sunny Sunday afternoon: I was selfish, because I lived alone and only had myself (and Blue) to care for; I was narcissistic because I wrote essays and books about my life. . . .

I found no point in arguing with her. This was her point of view, and, like her father, she was always right. She needed to find fault. She needed to punish me, verbally, for all the bad things she'd been led to believe I'd done to her father and to her when she was a baby. As one psychologist had counseled me, I had to be the bad guy. With age, though, this role was wearing me down.

With my 70th birthday on the horizon and retirement looming, I realized, sadly, I'd soon need to move on. The new head of the English Department, a young, tech-savvy woman new to town, refused to renew the contracts of the older female adjuncts (of whom I was one), replacing us with her own, younger friends. The roof of my adobe condo needed major, exorbitantly expensive repairs. In short, in doing the math, I found I would not be able to afford to live in Taos as a retired person on my meager Social Security income. And not only in Taos, anywhere in the United States.

Also, my big, sweet, beloved cat Blue, who had been something of a roommate for me during my years in New Mexico – always waiting for me by the front door (like a puppy!) when I got home from teaching, or by my side or on my lap inside my home, purring soothingly – became terminally ill and had to be put to sleep by the vet as I held him in my arms. I felt Blue's loss profoundly. I felt that my last attachment to Taos, my small anchor, had been severed and I was floating away.

So I decided, after months of soul-searching, to move again. This time, alone, to "Old" Mexico.

Old Mexico

I had never given much thought to Mexico earlier in my life. Like many *Norteamericanos,* I think, if I'd thought of Mexico at all, I envisioned life south of the border stereotypically: merciless sun, parched deserts, spindly cacti, derelict adobe homes, and bent little old men in wide sombreros. How uninformed we Americans can be about the outside world.

After living in *New* Mexico, though, for 14 years, and tasting some of Mexico's food, music, colors, and culture there, Old Mexico beckoned me. New Mexico became for me a logical stepping stone to this new-to-me, proud, old country. As my 70th birthday approached and with it the prospect of retirement, I decided to listen to Mexico's call and explore it.

A friend offered to let me housesit at her home in the city of Guanajuato, capital of the state of Guanajuato in Mexico's central mountains, for several months beginning in late May 2015, soon after my 70th birthday. She arranged for a driver to pick me up at the Leon airport and take me to her house. After I'd gotten through Customs, this driver, Ramiro, met me with a big smile and open arms. I walked into his bear hug and immediately fell in love with Mexico.

Guanajuato is a beautiful, colorful, old city, shaped a lot like a huge bowl, and my friend's spacious house was high up on the rim of that bowl. I was alone there, not knowing any Spanish nor any of the neighbors, so Ramiro and his family took me under their warm wings. They invited me to join them at their family gatherings and celebratory events. They adopted me. I flourished.

Ramiro's English was excellent because he'd lived in California for 17 years, so he was my bridge to this new Old World. He also tried to teach me: "The two most important Spanish words you need to know," he first told me, are *necesito,* 'I need,' and *quiero*, 'I want.'" *How brilliant*, I thought, *to begin by knowing the words that express the two main human motivators!*

So when I walked down into *centro*, at the bottom of the bowl, every day to wander, sight-see, and shop, I put Ramiro's first lesson to the test. At the Mercado Hidalgo, for example, an enormous, Quonset-hut-shaped building filled with dozens and dozens of

stalls selling all sorts of goods, edible and otherwise, I'd approach a vendor, smile, and say, *"Buenas tardes, señor (*or *señora). Necesito…"* and then point. It worked every time. The vendor would smile back and give me what I needed. Mostly what I needed was a smile, and Mexicans, I've found, are quick to offer that.

Every Wednesday Ramiro picked me up in his car to take me to do my weekly grocery shopping at the enormous Mega store, well beyond walking distance for me. He insisted on pushing the shopping cart because he said I didn't have a Mexican driver's license, so it would be against the law for me to "drive" the cart. He made me laugh.

Sometimes, on our way to La Mega, we played silly games. He was no longer in the serious, father-knows-best role he played with his family; he could be silly with me alone in his car. He'd ask, for instance, "Where would you like to go today?"

"Bolivia," I answered once.

He then described in detail the route he'd follow and how long it would take us to get there. "And when we arrive, I'm going to catch fish in the ocean!"

"I don't think so," I said. "Bolivia is a landlocked country."

"Oh! Really? Well, they must have lakes! I'll just fish in a lake."

(Photo: Ramiro on the rooftop of his rancho in the countryside)

When he wasn't telling jokes or stories as he drove, he was singing – old, romantic Mexican ballads, filled with lots of *"corazón"* (heart). To me, he was like a Mexican version of Zorba the Greek. I called him Mr. Mexico.

One day he asked me, "Were you ever married?"

"A long time ago," I said.

"Any children?"

Most people who know me socially don't know my story, but I felt close enough to Ramiro by then to tell him, as briefly as possible. When I looked over at him behind the wheel, I saw a tear roll down his cheek.

"How could anyone do such a thing to a mama?" he finally said, as he wiped his eyes and shook his head.

During that summer's stay in Guanajuato, as often as I could do so, I took the bus to nearby San Miguel de Allende, an hour and a half's drive away, to explore that city. Because San Miguel is more of a walking city – flatter and *not* bowl-shaped – and I love to walk (and wouldn't have a car); and because there appeared to be a larger gringo community there, especially of older, single women like myself, I felt more drawn to San Miguel as my retirement destination. So I looked more deeply into that possibility.

In Spanish the infinitive "to retire" is *jubilar,* while the adjective "retired" and the noun "retiree" are the same – *jubilado(a)*. Such joyful-sounding words – like jubilation! – and so unlike the exhausted-sounding English word "retired." I was beginning to love being retired in Mexico – the beauty, the climate, the kind and embracing people. After a lifetime of working and supporting myself in the U.S., I was feeling jubilant as a 70-year-old newly retired person in the verdant mountains of Mexico.

Toward the end of my housesitting stay in Guanajuato, Ramiro and his family invited me to join their extended family's Independence Day celebration in mid-September. Like the 4th of July in the U.S., this national holiday in Mexico is a joyous event, studded with spectacular fireworks displays lighting up the night sky.

According to Mexican tradition and folklore, I learned from Ramiro, late in the night on September 15, 1810, a Catholic priest by the name of Don Miguel Hidalgo went into his parish church in the town of Dolores in the state of Guanajuato, rang the church bell, and told the villagers who came running that they needed to revolt against Spanish rule. Hidalgo's call to action marked the start of a revolutionary civil war that lasted 11 years and culminated with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence of the Mexican Empire in Mexico City in September 1821.

So every September 15th at 11 p.m. the president of Mexico honors the legacy of Father Hidalgo by performing a reenactment of sorts from the balcony of the National Palace in Mexico City. Despite the uncertainty around Father Hidalgo's exact words, the president's televised speech today celebrates Hidalgo's passion for Mexico and its people – and honors the moment when this heroic priest (who was later beheaded) pushed the country toward its eventual independence. Mexicans – who love to celebrate for any reason – celebrate this significant anniversary super-enthusiastically, with an array of performances, fireworks, and dance routines well into the next day.

Ramiro's family's celebration lasted until two in the morning, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun. We watched the president's speech on TV, admired the fireworks from the apartment balcony; we sang and laughed and ate delicious homemade Mexican food and danced and danced.

"You're only dancing on this earth for a short while," Cat Stevens sang in his 1970s song, "Oh Very Young." Having recently turned 70, I felt I had a lot of lost dancing time to make up for, so I danced to the Mexican music as if the rest of my life depended on it.

The next day, Sunday, when we shared our news during our weekly telephone visit, as we had throughout my summer in Mexico, I told my daughter about the night before. Exuberantly, I told her all that I'd experienced at the party, how much I loved the food and the music and the dancing, how nice everyone in Ramiro's big Mexican family had been to me.

Perhaps she'd had a difficult week and couldn't tell me about it. Perhaps she was envious of my newfound joy. Perhaps, in my designated role as the bad guy, I was only permitted to be quiet and contrite. But her response struck me like a poisoned arrow to the heart.

"Why would *anyone* be nice to *you*?" she said.

I pulled the telephone from the side of my head and stared at it in my extended hand. Then I found the OFF button and pressed it.

She had often tried to goad me into an argument before, but I was always careful not to take the bait. This time I did take the bait, though I didn't argue. I simply had no more

words. But with this one touch of a button, I would ultimately learn, I would be blamed for severing our relationship and ending our communication forever.

We haven't talked since that day nearly ten years ago. I send her my love in handmade birthday and Christmas cards, but she doesn't respond. Perhaps she doesn't open mail from me.

Something happens when a woman turns 70. She turns a corner and doesn't turn back. It's as if she's been driving straight ahead in the middle lane on a highway, glancing from time to time in the rear-view mirror, for her whole life. Then at 70, she makes a turn off of that highway, and the familiar view in the rear-view mirror changes. She's on a new, unpaved road. She knows this road will be dusty and short. But she's determined to make the most of it, to take it slower, appreciate the vistas, skirt the potholes and road blocks.

That was my unscientific theory, anyway. And I decided, once I settled in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, to test it by interviewing other older, mostly single women over the age of 70 to get their views.

Let It Be a Dance

When only half of my luggage arrived with me on my United flight into Leon, Mexico, from Albuquerque via Houston in early-December 2015, I was given two choices: Either let United deliver the rest of my things to my new address, a rental apartment in San Miguel de Allende "*mañana*," or wait until the next flight to arrive from Houston in more than three hours.

Since I wasn't sure what "*mañana*" might mean in this case, and since I needed what was in that luggage sooner rather than later, I thought it best to wait. Ramiro, who had come from Guanajuato to pick me up and drive me to San Miguel, agreed. The question then became: How to fill the three-plus hours?

First, Ramiro and I had a drink at the airport's restaurant, at a table by the window where we watched the incoming flights' headlights in the night sky. Then we went for a long walk around the airport's parking lot in the cool night air.

Then we danced.

"Look, there's a fiesta going on in that development over there," Ramiro pointed out from the farthest end of long-term parking. The happy music from the party wafted toward us like an invitation.

"Let's dance!" I said.

By this time it was nearly midnight, I'd been traveling all day, and all that was left in my tank was adrenaline.

Ramiro taught me the steps.

Doesn't every woman, I thought, *wait all her life to dance to traditional Mexican music with a patient and good-natured Mexican man in a Mexican airport's parking lot under a crescent moon?*

"People will think we're crazy," Ramiro said.

"I really don't care," I told him.

That's one of the big pluses of turning 70, I was finding. You no longer care what people think. Something inside says, *I've earned the right to dance wherever and however and with whomever I wish – and nothing can stop me now.*

When my mother died at the age of 69, when I was 39 and my daughter was 19 and we were newly reunited, she gave me a poem by an American poet and song writer I'd never heard of, Ric Masten, titled "Let It Be a Dance." This poem became especially meaningful to me after I turned 70. It reads, in part:

> …Everybody turn and spin
> Let your body learn to bend
> And like a willow with the wind
> Let it be a dance.
> A child is born, the old must die
> A time for joy, a time to cry
> So take it as it passes by
> And let it be a dance…

So now, looking back, I can say that I began my life as a permanent resident of Mexico dancing. And I haven't looked back.

After housesitting in Guanajuato that past summer, I'd returned to Taos and got my affairs in order: To rent my condo, I had to put some things in storage, give away many other items – including my beloved books and bike – then pack only the bare essentials to take with me to San Miguel. This process of downsizing, as countless others in my age group have found, was both difficult and liberating. It made me feel lighter, but also unmoored.

Of course I packed the necessities – warmer-climate clothes and shoes, as well as toiletries and such. But I also packed some "toys" – my sewing machine and sewing supplies, paint sets and pads, blank notebooks and journals, my MacBook Air. Oh, and a few other small, lightweight unbreakables of sentimental value, such as a brass candleholder, the sole survivor of a pair my grandmother bought for me in Maine in 1961, when I, at 16, spent the summer with her on Penobscot Bay and helped her with her work. I thought perhaps this candleholder might help to light the way.

San Miguel de Allende, a once small provincial town in the central mountains of Mexico, founded in 1542 by a Franciscan monk, has, since the end of the Second World War and the G.I. Bill, become a mecca for American ex-pats. A lot like Taos, New Mexico, San Miguel has also been especially attractive to artists.

The city's school of fine arts, the Allende Institute, was established in 1938 by the American artist Stirling Dickinson and Felipe Cossío del Pomar of Peru. San Miguel's *centro* is also known for its churches and numerous colonial buildings and is a national historical monument; in 2008 it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

I'd begun writing a weekly blog the year before, called the WOW Factor – Words of Wisdom from Wise Older Women, in anticipation of turning 70 and retiring. Initially, the main thrust of my WOW blogposts was to conduct interviews with remarkable women over 70 who could serve as role models for the rest of us.

Not knowing anyone to interview when I first arrived, I found that my new life in San Miguel as a retired person provided an endless supply of other topics for my blog. In one of my many posts about this fascinating city, I focused on its juxtapositions:

"On my daily walks throughout this beautiful place, I see that the brand new often resides side-by-side with the very old. Colorful, delicate, living flowers abut buff-colored, rough, crumbling stone walls hundreds of years old. On the sidewalks pretty teenage Mexican girls in deliberately ripped jeans stride past bent old women in brightly colored traditional indigenous skirts and blouses.

"The many contrasts here – the vivid colors and varied textures, the hot sunshine and cool shadows, the extremes of wealth and poverty – are eye-popping and thought-provoking. There are sermons in such snapshots for me…."

People often ask, What is it about this city that draws so many of us from the north and seduces us to stay? Is it its beauty and old-world charm? Its mild, nearly year-round spring-like weather? Its lower cost of living (a fraction of that of the States)? The slower pace? The kind, tolerant, warm and embracing Mexican people? All of the above – and more? For me, it's all of the above. But "cost of living" has been, perhaps, the most urgent.

"Home," Robert Frost said, "is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." My more prosaic take on this sentiment as a retired person is that home is the place where you can afford to live happily. For me, here and now, that place is San Miguel. As much as I enjoyed living in enchanted northern New Mexico for 14 years until

retiring to Old Mexico, I realized the cost of living in the U.S. was too high for my newly fixed and limited income. I simply couldn't afford to live in my own country.

The cold truth is, life in the U.S. is wonderful as long as you are an advantaged person – and most especially if you're young, healthy, white, male, educated, and well off. If you're not, it's not. As a 70-year-old divorcée from an unsupportive family, who had always worked to support herself yet received little in the way of Social Security payments and had minimal savings, I felt immensely grateful to Mexico for taking me in.

I soon learned I was not alone in this. Many of the older women I came to know in my early months and years in San Miguel and with whom I've remained friends had found their way here under similar circumstances. Some, like me, were alienated from their adult children.

In many of their cases, I learned in private, heart-to-heart conversations, their children sided with their father after their parents' divorce because Dad was the one with more money. These women had spent their early years as dedicated full-time housewives and mothers, but this didn't count to their grown kids. Dad and his new wife had more to offer them now, especially during holidays.

We older women were so grateful to be living happily in San Miguel, we threw ourselves into the life here – dancing lessons, sketching groups, book clubs, volunteer work, community involvement, and more. There are many generous wealthy older ex-pat couples living in San Miguel in grand casas dotting the cityscape, but we single, older women represent the other side of this ex-pat coin. We live modestly. We don't have as much money to donate to charities, but we gladly give our time and talents as hands-on volunteers.

This is how I met these inspiring women and how we became friends. Some of us got together once a week to sit at a long table – like a quilting bee – to knit or crochet hats and scarves for children in the *campo* (countryside) during the region's cold winters. Some of us helped to serve hot meals to elderly Mexicans when they came for their weekly free lunch and social gathering at the main Parroquia church. Some of us brought our talents, whatever they might be, to the after-school children's program, Ojalá Niños, just outside of

town. And some of us, of course, taught English to (and learned Spanish from) neighborhood kids in our spare time.

(Photo: using one of my handmade puppets to teach English at an after school program)

Frank Bruni, in his poignant new book, THE BEAUTY OF DUSK, about losing his eyesight in one eye and the prospect of losing his sight in the other, writes about his "sandwich-board theory of life." For every one of us, says Bruni, there's a discrepancy between what others see on the outside and what we experience on the inside, between the "public gloss and the private mess."

His "sandwich-board theory," he contends, is that "we'd all be a whole lot less consumed with our own misfortunes and slights – and a whole lot more understanding of other people's moods and misdeeds – if each of us had just a glimpse of the burdens that people were shouldering, the fears that they were strangling, the scars that they were concealing."

I was fortunate, I felt, to get to know other women here in San Miguel whose private sandwich boards were not the same as mine but were similar enough. I felt I'd joined a kind of sisterhood of strong, independent, resilient and brave older women. And I was happily surprised to see that many of us at this stage of life found special joy in dancing.

For a time I took part in an international folk dancing group that met one evening a week. No partners required. We held hands and danced in circles, bobbed and wove, kicked and turned to exotic music from faraway lands. We were "willows in the wind." The group disbanded when Covid came to town, but while it lasted it was the best therapy in the world.

I Used to Write for My Mother

I can't tell you why other people write blogs, but for me my WOW blog was a way of staying in touch, staying in the game. I interviewed people – that is to say, older women – wearing my journalist's hat. I walked all around San Miguel de Allende every day as if it were my reporter's beat, always looking for a story to share. I thought of myself as a messenger, a conduit. It was my self-appointed job to convey what I was seeing, feeling, and learning to others for their consumption and, I hoped, benefit. A little like preparing and serving good meals to guests. For me, it was an act of giving.

And my blog was free – no subscription fee, no cost, no obligation, no annoying advertising. Since I was beholden to no one, I had the freedom to write whatever I pleased, whatever my Muse dictated, each week under the blog's four broad categories: News, Views, Reviews, and Interviews. As it turned out, the majority of my posts were Views – short, personal essays – my thoughts on this or that. A friend referred to them as "meditations."

I wrote about my favorite things, of course, including books, cooking, watercolor painting, teaching, travels, and writing. I wrote a lot about San Miguel and my love for this place and its people. I wrote about ageing and what I was learning from all the wise older women I was interviewing here. I wrote about famous wise older women, living and dead, and their legacies. What an education.

This weekly blogpost project lasted exactly ten years – from May 2014 until May 2024 – and in that time I wrote and posted 515 posts that received a total of 138,908 views and 8,238 comments from people, mostly women, all over the world. I'd found pen pals! And I loved them all.

Here is an example of one of my WOW views, this one from June 2017, titled "I Used to Write for My Mother":

My mom, Lee Black, was not much of a reader. Yes, she read our town's weekly newspaper avidly, hungry to learn all that was considered news in the little spot in northern New Jersey she considered the center of the universe. She read that paper with her reading glasses on,

a pair of kitchen scissors in her right hand, and a stack of small white envelopes and roll of postage stamps nearby, ready to clip and mail articles of interest that she was sure some of her friends might have missed. She was a one-woman volunteer clipping service.

But books? Not so much. Book-reading, she believed, was for lazy people. Like the big guy stretched out on our living room sofa, deeply absorbed in his latest Louis L'Amour frontier novel, waiting for supper to be served. This guy, whom she quietly referred to, as I helped her prepare supper in the kitchen, by the initials "G.D.S.O.B," was my book-loving father. Not good at keeping a job or helping around the house, he was excellent at finishing books. The more, the better. Books and booze were his great escapes.

My dear friend Maureen once told me that when she was young her mom used to chase the kids – all six of them – out of the house after lunch so she (her mom) could make herself a mug of coffee, put her feet up, smoke a cigarette, and read a book. This was her bliss, and the kids learned to respect it. They stayed outside and played.

I was shocked when I heard this story, not by the cigarette (moms used to smoke in those days), but by the book in her mom's hand. I don't remember ever seeing my mom hold a book when I was a kid, not even to read me or my siblings bedtime stories. To her, books were somehow, strangely, verboten. Other than the likes of Louis L'Amour paperbacks, there were no books in our house.

So, in time, after I learned to read, I had to sneak books into my life: creep off to the local library the back way on foot, check out the books that most tantalized me, spirit them into the house, tuck them under my pillow, then read them under the covers with the aid of a flashlight when everyone else, I thought, was asleep.

Sometimes she caught me. "You're going to ruin your eyes!" Lee scolded me, somewhat presciently. But what I think she most feared was that I'd become "lazy" like my father; and to her, the hardest working woman I knew, daughter of hard-working German immigrants, "lazy" was a curse word.

"Don't do this again!" she said to me, wagging her forefinger. But of course I did. I couldn't help it; I'd inherited the book-loving gene from my Scottish father.

Many years later, when the big guy who used to stretch out with a book on the living room sofa had long since left, and all four of her kids were grown and scattered, and she had more time for herself after she came home from a grueling day at work, I urged Lee to read books – for enjoyment and self-enrichment. By this time, I'd gotten a degree in Literature and Writing from Columbia University, and I'd become a professional writer. I was passionately in love with the written word, especially those enshrined between the protective covers of books.

"Here's one I think you'll love, Mommy," I said to her on a weekend visit. "It's a classic. It's also sexy."

"Oh?" Her interest was piqued. She picked the book up and turned it in both hands. "'Lady Chatterley's Lover.' Hmmm. What's it about?"

"You'll just have to read it and find out for yourself," I said.

The next time I visited her, she gave me an over-the-top book report: "I loved it! It was like watching a good movie in my head! I could see everything! I felt like I was right there! I understood every word! It's the best book I've ever read! I'm going to recommend it to all of my friends. D. H. Lawrence is a genius! Is he still alive? Has he written any other books? I want to read them all…"

Much later, after she was gone, and I'd embarked on a new career (to support my book-writing habit) teaching English and Creative Nonfiction Writing at the college level, I used to suggest to my students that they write for a person with the initials "Y.R." (for Your Reader). "Think of one person who embodies everyone you'd like to be writing for," I'd say. "Sit that person across from you – face to face, on the same level – at a pleasant, outdoor, bistro table. Write the way you would speak to that person, as a friend, sharing your thoughts. This will help you establish a consistent, genuine, tone and voice."

For me, for years, that person, my own "Y.R.," has been my mother, Lee. Having her sitting across from me, metaphorically, has reminded me to keep my writing real and down-to-earth (like Lawrence's?), not to use stuffy, puffed-up language, not to waste her time with unnecessary words. Books, qua books, to her might have been intimidating; but she, like everybody else, always loved a good story.

I used to write mainly for my mother, but now not as much. Now I seem to write for my two grandchildren, who are grown and forging lives and careers of their own far away. In my mind they're sitting across from me at that outdoor bistro table and I'm sharing with them my thoughts and observations and memories, in the hope that they will be able to find the time in their demanding schedules to read what I've written for them.

In May 2024 I suspended my WOW blog and moved on to other writing challenges. But the impulse and the hopes remain the same. For my grandchildren and their families, whom I never see in person, I especially want to convey: This is who I really am. And I am still here.

[To see other WOW blogs, go to: https://blog.bonnieleeblack.com/]

Covid Lessons

At the time, at least initially, it didn't seem to bother me much, and, honestly, I wondered what all the fuss was about. But now looking back with near-20-20 hindsight, I see much more clearly what the Covid pandemic wrought. It brought a tsunami of change, to which we're all still adjusting.

For introverts like me, being told to avoid social situations was, at first, hardly a hardship. Secretly, we introverts thought, "Wonderful! I have a great excuse for staying home and reading a good book all day!" My more socially gifted friends, however, bemoaned the fact that they could no longer get together with their pals and enjoy all that San Miguel de Allende had to offer. This pandemic was putting a real crimp in their well-crafted retirement lifestyles, to say nothing of threatening everyone's lives.

In the beginning I felt lucky. During the lockdown I lived in a small studio apartment on the third floor of a townhouse in the Guadalupe neighborhood of San Miguel not far from *el centro*. Because my downstairs neighbors and I were under the same roof, we considered ourselves a safe "pod," a quasi-family. Without breaking any Covid-19 rules, whenever possible we socialized in each other's apartments – making merry as if tomorrow we might die, which with Covid was possible. We actually had a lot of fun.

One of our more memorable events was a dinner party for just the four of us with a Paris-in-the-'20s – the *nineteen*-twenties, that is – theme, inspired in part by Ernest Hemingway's classic, *A Moveable Feast*. In addition to the Paris part, our dinner party was indeed a moveable feast because it involved moving up a winding staircase from each of our apartments to enjoy the three courses of our traditional French bistro menu: French onion soup in Kharin's first floor apartment, beef bourguignon in Sy and Bill's second floor apartment, and my (famous!) lemon tart in my studio on the third floor.

For one fun evening, *sans* masks, but wearing Frenchy outfits, we four – Kharin, a divorcée like me with one grown daughter, Sy and Bill, a happily married gay couple who've been together for more than 50 years, and I – pretended to be dining in France. Planning and executing this themed dinner party certainly broke the monotony of our almost-total Covid isolation.

Also fun for me at the time, in addition to my ongoing weekly blog, was my biggest Covid project – publishing another book. This one, SWEET TARTS FOR MY SWEETHEARTS, could be called a cookbook, but that's just the half of it. I gathered together 16 essays I'd written over the years about the most dramatic culinary experiences I'd had as a caterer in NYC and attached to each of these essays at least one favorite, tried-and-true sweet tart recipe.

Sweet tarts have always been my favorite things to bake, so I wanted to immortalize my favorite recipes for them in a book. Not to be confused with American pies, with their slanted sides, French tarts are normally baked in special tart pans (made in France, *bien sûr)* with vertical sides and removable bottoms. After the tart is baked and the sides of the pan removed, the result is like a crown made of golden pastry, filled with jewel-like fruit or other fillings. To me, such desserts are truly fit for kings and queens.

And this SWEET TARTS book project became something of a collaboration: My first-floor neighbor, Kharin, became the designated photographer. Throughout the project Kharin took professional-quality photos of my tart-baking process, step by measured step. And Sy and Bill, the gourmands on the second floor, happily became my always-obliging tart tasters. They dubbed me "Queen of Tarts," and to this day they address me as "Your Majesty."

Outside of my little "pod," however, Covid in San Miguel and just about everywhere else in the world was the farthest thing from fun.

When news of the Covid-19 pandemic struck San Miguel de Allende in force in March 2020, most of the snowbirds and tourists flew home to their respective homelands – mainly the U.S. and Canada – on the first available plane. Many expats with second homes in San Miguel also packed and left in a hurry. For them, San Miguel is their happy place; their hearths, however, their real homes, are where their families live, where their deeper, older roots are, up north.

For me, and for most of my fellow retired single older women friends who can't afford to live in the U.S. at this stage of our lives and whose family ties are, sadly, not strong, San Miguel has become home. So we stayed put. If, as V. S. Naipaul said, home is "a place

to feel safe," we felt safe here and at home. We mostly stayed in our rental houses or apartments and abided by the rules, as did the locals.

San Miguel de Allende, called "el corazón [the heart] de Mexico," is a sturdy old city – built as a fortress in the mid-16th century and made mostly of stone. The locals, steeped in and proud of its history, knew well that it had survived many onslaughts over the centuries, and it would survive this one. So everyone remained at home, behind their own barricades, hoping and praying that this particular pestilence would pass us all by – *pronto*.

The streets became empty. Doors that were once open for business were shut tight. Only those enterprises that provided necessities, like grocery stores and pharmacies, remained open. Church bells stopped chiming. Hot air balloons stopped floating. Mariachis stopped serenading. Public parks locked their gates. Restaurants shuttered. The Biblioteca Pública (public library), a literary hub, closed its massive wooden doors. Schools switched to remote lessons, on TV. The weekly, world-class, bilingual, local newspaper, *Atención*, folded. This beautiful, old, colonial city of over 60,000 residents became eerily quiet – and devoid of its lifeblood, tourists. It was gasping.

The municipal government's response to the pandemic was, in my view, not only admirable, it was heroic. Every precaution was taken to ensure that the death toll remained low. There were signs everywhere exhorting the public to wear face masks, and the vast majority of people complied. Social distancing – which, for people who are known for their social proximity, must have been difficult – became the new norm.

At a time when the Covid death toll in New York State surpassed 15,000, in April 2020, the number of reported confirmed Covid *cases* in the state of Guanajuato (where San Miguel is) was 158. Nevertheless, the authorities continued to take all precautions, and the people continued to comply.

Gradually, I felt the changes – large and small – that Covid wrought, many of which have remained permanent. Groups I'd belonged to, such as the folk dancing group, were disbanded. Volunteer opportunities, such as making and using puppets to teach children English in classrooms, evaporated for me. In-person literary events switched to Zoom. Many of us abandoned our hairdresser, at least for the time being, because, well, who

would notice this neglect? Ladies who used to lunch together now stayed home alone and made ourselves a sandwich.

But life went on! There were relatively few Covid deaths here. And I found the steadiness and stoicism of the Mexican people deeply inspiring. “Keep calm and carry on,” seems to be their unspoken mantra.

(Photo: some of the signs in San Miguel’s centro during Covid)

We anxious gringos can learn a lot from most Mexicans’ philosophy of rolling with the punches. Living closer to the ground, perhaps, many of them have less far to fall. And the fabric of their familial ties tends to be stronger than ours, I think. They never feel unsupported. Admirable – and enviable – I’d say.

Now four years on, the Covid pestilence seems to be history. But the lessons remain. The main one for me being: Change. Things change. Life is fluid here. Gringos, especially, come and go. We make friends, and the friends leave – either move on or pass on. Circumstances shift, like tectonic plates.

Covid taught us that life is fragile, but people, *juntos* (together), can prove to be sturdy. Covid taught us how to dance to different music. Covid taught us, perhaps, compassion for our universally shared human vulnerabilities.

I now live in a sweet, sunny, affordable, one-bedroom apartment on a hill outside of town, with a view of San Miguel down below. I hope never to leave it. This view symbolizes for me the distancing I feel with advancing age. I came to Mexico at age 70, and I'll turn 80 on my next birthday. My health, I feel, is in decline. Dear old friends my age are dying of terminal illnesses. People I don't know, in wars in far-off places – Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza – are dying by the tens of thousands. My heart is breaking. My strength is ebbing. But I seem to be carrying on! I really don't know why. I wish I had more words of wisdom, but I don't at the moment.

I'm reminded of the famous Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, "Lament," I learned in high school so long ago, which has stuck with me all these years:

> Listen, children:
> Your father is dead.
> From his old coats
> I'll make you little jackets;
> I'll make you little trousers
> From his old pants.
> There'll be in his pockets
> Things he used to put there,
> Keys and pennies
> Covered with tobacco;
> Dan shall have the pennies
> To save in his bank;
> Anne shall have the keys
> To make a pretty noise with.
> Life must go on,
> And the dead be forgotten;
> Life must go on,
> Though good men die;
> Anne, eat your breakfast;
> Dan, take your medicine;
> Life must go on;
> I forget just why.

Mamas' Girls

My daughter is a closed book to me. Do other mothers sometimes feel this way about their daughters, I wonder? Is it normal for some mothers and daughters to be strangers? *What is normal? And is it even attainable?*

When I try to think about all that my daughter went through as a child – being taken from her loving mother so young, living on the run with an obsessive and possessive (and likely mentally ill) father, being indoctrinated and molded to suit his will – I shudder. *How did she survive this?* How did she become the upstanding person she appears to be today?

As anyone on the outside can see, she is a beautiful, highly intelligent and articulate woman who married a good man who has provided her and their children with a solid home and rootedness in a fine community. She is a loving and faithful wife and a deeply devoted mother to their two beautiful, now-adult children. She is an adoring grandmother to her children's growing families who live close by. She is a devout Catholic, active in their local church, the same small, white, clapboard church where she and her husband were married 37 years ago.

To her, I think, I am an alien – not married, not Catholic, not Republican, not rooted in the U.S.A. I'm not even a woman or a mother, by her definitions. She told me once that to her a woman is a grown female human being with large breasts, and a mother is a woman (who fits her definition) with at least two children. On both counts, I don't qualify. Once, when she and her husband visited me in New York and I went out into the street to hail a cab for us, she accused me of being "masculine" because a real woman would have had the man do it.

She told me once she wished we could turn the clocks back to the 1950s – well before she was born – when women were women and men were men, everyone knew their place, and families stayed together. "I think you would have hated the repressiveness of the '50s," I ventured. But she didn't hear me.

We tried over the years, as I've said, to find common ground, and sometimes we succeeded. I know she tried, as a good Catholic, to forgive me for my past sins – all the things she believed I did to her and her father years before. But I could see that this effort to

tamp down her deep-seated anger and resentment toward me put a tremendous psychological strain on her, which on occasion caused her to burst.

I understood it. But I had no remedy for it. I began to believe there was no remedy for it. All I could think to do was to keep a healthy distance but stay in touch, and when she at times tried to goad me or bait me on the phone, I resisted. Until I could no longer do so.

My longtime friend and former neighbor in New York, Marty, who is perhaps the most unsentimental woman I've ever known, used to tell me my daughter and I would not have been close even if she'd never been abducted and brainwashed by her father. "You two are just *very* different people," Marty, who'd met my daughter, flatly said. Most of Marty's matter-of-cold-fact pronouncements held some truth. But we'll never know about this one. The reality is my daughter was deliberately turned against me, and there seemed to be no turning back.

Like most of my close women friends over the years, Marty was, like me, a Mama's Girl. Marty was born in March 1943, some months after her father left for military service in the Second World War. When he returned at the war's end in '45, Marty was a toddler, very much attached to her mother. She saw her father as an interloper who siphoned off her mother's love and attention. The cool feeling between her and her father became – and remained – mutual.

"My father died today," Marty reported to me matter-of-factly one afternoon in New York, as she packed a suitcase to join her beloved mother in Baltimore for the funeral. She didn't shed a tear.

Marty had been married for many years, but she'd chosen not to have children. She'd loved *having* an adoring mother, but she never wanted to *be* one.

Despite our many differences, my mother and I were always close. We were pals, teammates, even. I was her eldest daughter and chief "mother's helper," and as such she made me feel useful, valuable.

As a little girl I'd been her shadow, following her everywhere and mimicking her every move. Whenever the handsome UPS driver arrived at our doorstep with a delivery and flirted with my pretty, young mother, I stood behind her and held tightly to her skirt to make

sure she wouldn't run off with him in his big, chocolate-brown delivery truck. I was both her shadow and her anchor.

As an adolescent, after she returned to the workforce as a secretary at the local bank to support us, I took over the household chores – cooking and cleaning when I got home from school – which she made clear she appreciated. "You're my good bunny," she would tell me repeatedly, patting my hand.

My siblings and I saw our mother differently, perhaps because we knew her at different stages of her life. When I was very young, she was still young and buoyant, still a stay-at-home housewife, and I came home from grammar school to the fragrance of fresh laundry and just-baked pies. She was light and dancerly and funny, often trying to reenact scenes from "I Love Lucy" for laughs. When things got tough, she'd toss her pretty hands in the air, sigh, and say, "Into each life some rain will fall!" like the lines of a Hollywood actress.

When things got much tougher, though, with more children and more abuse from her alcoholic husband, she'd admit to us with an exhausted shrug, "Hey, kids, I'm not perfect. I'm doing my best here." My younger sisters later felt she could have done better. I disagreed. I knew how hard she'd worked to keep us together – to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table – how easy it would have been for her to run off with that dashingly handsome UPS driver.

My mother was proud of me, I knew, and I of her. When she was about to retire from the position she'd risen to – Vice President at the one-and-only bank in our hometown in northern New Jersey – she was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer. After she died two years later, when my sisters and I organized a memorial service for her at a local funeral parlor, there was standing room only in their large hall. She was beloved in our small community.

My mother had been a Daddy's Girl. Her relationship with her own mother had been fraught. They never got along. When my spirited, young, unmarried mother got pregnant with my older brother, her mother threw her out of the house. "You made your bed, now

sleep in it!" my strict German grandmother told her only daughter. My mother never forgave her mother for her cold-heartedness.

Grandma didn't visit us often. She didn't get much time off from her work as a domestic servant for the Zimbalists in Philadelphia. But when she did visit, normally at Christmastime, the air between my mother and her mother crackled with tension. We kids used to watch them as if watching a tennis match. Who would win? Who would walk off the court in a huff? It was always exciting for us small spectators.

My daughter and her daughter, my granddaughter, are close, which is beautiful to see. My granddaughter posts happy, smiling photos of the two of them together every Mother's Day on Facebook. Last Mother's Day, she included her baby boy, her first child, in the photo too, with the caption, "Happy Mother's Day to the absolute best Mom and Oma [grandmother] there is! We all love you so so much!" My granddaughter named her baby James, no doubt to please her mother, after the grandfather she never knew who died well before she was born.

This little J. is my fifth great-grandchild, none of whom I've ever seen or will likely ever see or hold in person. I am a mother – but not a mother, a grandmother – but not a grandmother, a great-grandmother – but not a great-grandmother. All because of lies and unwavering loyalty to the deified liar-in-chief.

Some may wonder why I don't just give up, "leave well enough alone," "get on with my life." That, to me, is like asking a prisoner who's been wrongly accused, convicted, and imprisoned for years to do the same. Tell that prisoner, "Hey, just be happy! Put the past behind you. Stop beating your head against your cell wall," and that exhausted but not yet defeated prisoner will likely respond, "You just don't understand. I am fighting for truth and justice. I'll never give up, and I'll never shut up as long as I have breath."

There's something undefinable about being a mother. Even though J. tried his best to break the bond between my daughter and me, there is still a shred of it left, at least on my end. I still feel I must *do* something to repair the damage, to fill those old potholes on the road. *But what? And how?* All I can do, I feel, is keep telling my truths in the belief that truth, like love, is healing.

There has to be some good, too, in learning that your mother was never a bad person, never abused you, never abandoned you, that your mother is someone you can be proud of. And if there's a possibility that the blame for her father's behavior might be placed on the brain damage he likely suffered during his Korean War service – instead of on me – that, of course, would also be good.

The question remains: *Why did he so desperately want a child, his own child?* I believe now that J. was a deeply closeted homosexual, living at a time when homosexuality in the U.S. was illegal. I believe he, like many gay men I've known, wanted to be a father – to love a child with all his heart and to be loved by that child in return. I believe this hunger for love was his driving force.

Surrogacy was unheard of at that time. He chose unsuspecting me to make a baby for him to his specifications – blond hair, blue eyes, healthy, pretty. A simple plan. The only problem was I woke from my ignorance and fought him. So he had to fight back – and ultimately flee to keep his child all to himself.

It's possible that my daughter knew a different man than I knew. It's possible that he adored her and showered her with a love that knew no bounds, and she basked in his love and adoration. She told me once, "My father and I clicked." I confess I still don't understand what that means. I certainly can't say that my father and I ever clicked. But then I was a Mama's Girl, something my daughter has never been allowed to be.

Some years ago I tried to talk on the telephone with my grown granddaughter about all this, but she quickly shut down the conversation with, "There are two sides to every story!" Yes. And this is the other side.

Afterword

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the U.S., which was established in 1984, was inspired in part, I was told, by the 1981 publication by Viking Press of SOMEWHERE CHILD. The Center now estimates that approximately 200,000 of the 260,000 children who are abducted each year in the country are taken by a parent or other family member (*). Clearly, and sadly, the issue of parental child abductions has not gone away in all these years.

My story may be an extreme case because of the extent of my ex-husband's premeditation, the litigious lengths he went to, and his successful evasion of the law for so long. But it remains an example of the breadth and depth of harm and heartbreak these cases can cause. As I did with SOMEWHERE CHILD then, I share my personal story now, not for sympathy but rather in the hopes that it will raise consciousness about issues much larger than myself.

Over the years, some who have read SOMEWHERE CHILD have asked me, *So what happened next?* THE OTHER SIDE is my long answer to that question. In it I ask many questions, some of which I'm able to answer. Others, I've learned, are unanswerable. Other questions, perhaps, new readers will be able to answer for me. If so, I welcome your thoughts.

I'm offering this manuscript as a gift -- in the form of a Word.doc or PDF -- rather than a published book with a price tag on it, to anyone who emails me to request a copy. I'm hoping that those who read it will also share it widely as a free gift. When SOMEWHERE CHILD was published, I received dozens and dozens of letters from readers telling me I'd written *their* story. I'd like to think that THE OTHER SIDE will do the same. Because that's why writers write.

With love and best wishes,
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(*) https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/amp/family-abduction.html

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