

PORTRAIT OF A LADY

PART ZERO

“Isabel was in a situation which gave a value to any change. She had a desire to leave the past behind her, and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh.”

The Portrait of a Lady, by Henry James

My mother and I were in the car ready to go when Daddy stepped out from his workshop in the garage. He made an expansive crescent with his arm and called out, “Good-bye Annie.” He knew I was flying to Madrid, Spain, but didn’t ask me what my plans were after landing there, which was just as well because I didn’t know myself.

Mom didn’t seem nervous about her daughter traveling alone either. Her job of raising me was done. She helped me pack, drove me to the airport, and said, “Bye, dear. Stay in touch.”

The brakes on the plane needed repairs and the flight was delayed, so Trans World Airlines treated the passengers to a snack. I opted for a vanilla milkshake, not knowing when I would have one again.

It was September 1965 and I was quitting my job and leaving the country with \$400 in my pocket and two thousand dollars in a savings account. A more reasonable person would have felt uncertain with so few resources. Sitting there sipping my milkshake, I tried to do some analysis of my situation.

I hoped to stay abroad for a long time, which would make me an immigrant to somewhere. I knew a few inbound immigrants in my hometown, Montclair, New Jersey. Albert, a classmate from Poland, was adopted after the war by a woman down the street. He’d been in a concentration camp and it was easy to figure out why he had come to America. He was safe now. Steve Louvis said he enjoyed his visits to the family’s native Greek village, but he had no yen to move back to Greece. Madame Marguerite had come from France to America as the wife of an

American man. She told me that when she was a girl, her mother had taken a string and tied a knot through the last stitch of her knitting when she left the house, then checked on her progress when she came back. She seemed relieved to be in America, too.

More famous Americans than I had taken the outbound trip to Europe. James Baldwin and a host of other black artists had moved to Paris so they could live without segregation, humiliation, and lynchings. Ernest Hemingway stayed in Paris after the war, where he could enjoy women and wine without beady-eyed neighbors condemning him, and he could befriend Gertrude Stein, who was lauded there as a literary figure, not scorned as a lesbian.

What was driving me away? In America, speaking French was considered a great achievement, while educated Europeans are assumed to speak at least two languages. I didn't want to bask in the admiration of others; I just wanted to speak French. In America, whole blocks of thinking, Communism for example, were banned. I had spent the summer of 1961 with the Sala family in Italy, and Communists sat at their dinner table; in America they sat in jail. I had no affinity for Communism, but wondered where my mind would go once it was allowed to think freely. With the Salas, I had only a taste of what I hoped to discover now — a new way of leading my life.

I had been raised to be someone's wife, but so far, every romance had ended in failure, from a callow hardware salesman to that night about a year ago when the love of my life told me that he was very sorry not to have told me before that he was already married, though his wife had been living in California. Even in the face of such heartbreak, I still wanted to marry and have children, but was clearly not yet wise enough to choose the right man. Maybe I was chasing wisdom.

The alternative to marriage was a career, but most careers in New York City in 1965 were closed to all but the most persistent, ambitious women, and my professional aspirations stopped at the picket fence. By chance, I had found a job where I was paid well and might have been rewarded with promotions, but it involved making television commercials. I hated television commercials.

Those moments nursing my milkshake were the last chance to change my mind, yet all I felt was impatience to be airborne. The time had come to lay myself on the anvil of life.

PART ONE

“Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.... All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.”

Betty Friedan

My decision to fly away had been building for a while, maybe all my life. There was nothing wrong with my childhood; nothing to run away with that was any more potent than boredom or that strain of loneliness that strikes the young in need of purpose. But I had a restless and rebellious nature.

I was raised in what today we deem the “old days.” Children ran free (so did the dog), families stayed together, women were contented housewives and stalwarts of local charities, churches, and schools, and dad came home every night to a placid household and a home-cooked dinner. This description felt true to me at the time. It took history and astute observers like Betty Friedan to uncover the rumblings underneath this placid stability.

There were only a few restaurants in Montclair because people rarely ate out. My family met every night at our smooth, warmly cherry colored dining table. Daddy sat at the head, my mother and baby brother Norris on his left flank, my older brother John on his right, and I sat at the opposite end. There was a lazy susan in the middle which held the salt and pepper, sometimes ketchup, a gravy boat, or extra napkins. The food was wheeled into the dining through the swinging kitchen door on a trolley my father had crafted in his basement workshop. My chore was to clear the plates, put them on the trolley, wheel them back into the kitchen, and help my mother put the dishes in the dishwasher.

At the dinner table there were rules: no talking with your mouth full, no elbows on the table, sit up straight in your chair, both feet on the floor, napkin in lap. I was the picture of propriety.

“So what about you, young lady?” my father said. He secured his napkin in the V just above the button of his tweed jacket. “What do you have to say?”

Daddy had served out the food, the plates had been passed, my mother had lifted her fork, and we were beginning to eat. My mouth was full of brussels sprouts.

Now that I was fifteen, Daddy had been pressing me to do more than use the right fork. He’d been asking me to “say something interesting.” I pointed to my full mouth.

“You had a piano lesson,” my mother prompted me. “I could hear you practicing what was it, Beethoven?”

I shook my head yes as I swallowed the brussels sprouts. “Yes. Beethoven.”

“A lady always has something to say,” my father continued. “It’s up to you to be the conversationalist. If you don’t have anything to say yourself, you should ask other people about themselves.”

“You don’t make John do this.”

“He is not being trained to be a lady,” Daddy said.

“I was a lady at Halloween.” John was always ready with a joke.

I burst out laughing. “You thought you were going to be in disguise.”

“Yeah. It was embarrassing. They knew right away it was me.”

“I thought you looked lovely.”

“That’s not what I am talking about.” Daddy forged ahead.

“Sometimes I have something to say and sometimes I don’t. Nothing happened today. A piano lesson is not interesting.”

“It’s not always about you. A lady tries to draw others out. A lady is expected to be a both a good listener and a good conversationalist.”

“Conversationalist. There are plenty of women who aren’t good conversationalists. Aunt Jean isn’t, for example. And Mrs. Downes.”

Daddy looked down, pursing his lips, frustrated. “As you grow up, you’ll realize how important this is for you.”

“Then why doesn’t John have to do it, too?”

“Because that’s the way it is. It is the role of a lady to draw other people out. She doesn’t talk about herself.”

“But you just asked me about myself! You asked me what I had done today.”

“Be respectful the way you speak, young lady.” Daddy took a deep breath. “Why can’t you be like your brother and add a little levity? That’s what I’m talking about. Lighten things up. Put other people at ease. Don’t fight with them.”

My appetite had disappeared. But besides sitting up straight and being a good conversationalist, a well-mannered person had to be a “member of the Clean Plate Club,” and that rule applied to my brothers, too. I would have to eat the brussels sprouts, and the pork chop, and the noodles. I had started with the brussels sprouts so I could get the taste out of my mouth when I ate the rest of the meal.

“Daddy, it’s 1957, not 1857. Ladies don’t go around tittering in corsets, carrying parasols, making small talk.”

“Courtesy doesn’t change.”

“I’m only in ninth grade. I don’t have to think about things like this.”

“These things, as you call them, have to become second nature to you. You don’t start learning to be a lady when you’re all grown up.”

“What if I don’t want to be a lady!”

He threw his napkin down on the table. “This is inexcusable,” he muttered.

“We don’t have to make a capital case out of this, dear,” my mother offered.

He pushed his chair back and got out of his chair, coming toward me around the table.

“She is insufferably rude.”

He would never hurt me, but he might secure my arm and escort me to the front stairs, telling me to go up to my room and only come back when I was ready to be acceptable company.

I ran out the back door and up the street to my friend Jill’s house, and didn’t come back for two hours. When I snuck in around 9:00, Daddy was asleep in front of the Dodgers game.

I tiptoed to the television and clicked the knob to change the channel to the Yankee game, which woke my father.

“Oh no you don’t,” he warned me with a smile.

“Heck! You always wake up when I do that.”

“I’m your father and I get to choose.”

I smiled and settled in for the Dodgers game. Despite our arguing and tussling, which disrupted everybody’s dinner, we understood each other. He wasn’t much for affection or compliments, but occasionally he said, “I like your spirit,” giving me permission to be contrary. If I had been forced to hide my convictions, I think I would have exploded.

I appreciated that my parents were preparing me for a secure and happy life as somebody’s wife, but I didn’t like the prospect of having to “draw people out” all the time.

I didn't object to becoming a fit, genteel, and well educated woman, competent in domestic skills. My mother fit that mold; she was tall, cool, cultured, and more than pretty. She knit sweaters and Argyle socks with bobbins of many colors which she flipped back and forth hanging from her knitting needles. She played the piano and took me to concerts. She volunteered for the Women's Club, the PTA, the Camp Fund, the League of Women Voters, and other worthy causes, and was a shrewd bridge player. She also cooked all the family meals and cleaned the house, hauling the heavy vacuum cleaner up and down three flights of stairs. She did the laundry in the basement, then carried the heavy laundry basket up the stairs leading from the basement to the back yard and hung the clothes on the line to dry. All of our clothes were ironed.

My father supported the family and did manly chores. Besides making some of our furniture, he dug a dry well outside the basement to keep it from flooding, frightened us by climbing up a two-story ladder to paint the house, and ventured into a hurricane to close the garage doors. When I asked my mother what my father did for a living, she said, "He's a space salesman," which meant he sold advertising space for publishers. His office was in the attic.

They had a well balanced life, and I never imagined any other for myself.

I especially liked to cook. In Home Economics class we made lemon cake-top pudding which separated miraculously into a custard base with an airy topping, and I loved how, when stirred properly, cornstarch turned milk, sugar, and an egg into a silken vanilla pudding.

When I was fourteen, my mother went on a religious retreat for a week and I cooked for the family. I had a reputation for introducing exotic elements into our meals, such as chili powder and garlic, so my father wondered aloud how we would all survive.

On the first night, I felt grown up going to the bottom of the stairs and shouting up, "Dinner's ready!" I had carefully followed a recipe for pork chops with parsley, but used the

wrong kind of parsley. The dish was so bitter that my brothers spit it out, but my father ate it without a word. I redeemed myself with a chocolate cake, the peppermint frosting dyed green with melted chocolate dripped around the edge.

Cooking for the family was one of the core assignments of housewives in those days. My family ate at restaurants only a handful of times every year; in the entire town of Montclair, where there were only three or four restaurants. Every meal was made by my mother, and I could easily see myself doing that for a lifetime. It wasn't the daily chores that chafed, it was the conformity, the obedience.

The most important social events of the year were dances, for both kids and their parents. Twice a year, my mother swanned down the stairs in a full-length gown. She was model slim, and her gown gamboled around her ankles. My tuxedoed father grumbled about going to a dance, and my mother grumbled that my father didn't know the steps. To me, they looked like the royal couple.

Knowing how to do the waltz, cha-cha, lindy, fox trot, and tango was one of the social graces, and all the kids in my junior high school went to dancing school once a week. I was tall, skinny, and shy to the point of hostility, so it wasn't surprising that I often sat unchosen after the boys scrummed across the floor to choose a partner. I viewed myself as unattractive and unpopular. When a boy did invite me to dance, the rhythm came naturally and every once in a while we clicked into a single moving unit. Even more rarely, his whiskers brushed against my cheek, sending a thrill to my toes. Daddy's instructions didn't teach me how to deal with that.

Like Snow White, I would wait for my prince to come. It didn't seem such a silly idea – my mother had come through the door of the Christian Science Church one day in the 1930s

wearing a white hat in a halo of sunlight; my father saw her, pursued her, and married her. This was how love happened – all of a sudden and out of the blue.

I clung to the hope of living happily ever after, though I could see that neither my own parents nor anybody else's were doing so. Not all the time anyway.

Over time, my innocence would fall away in shards, sometimes softly, other times tearing away the flesh of my aspirations.