

one : 1945-1956

My mother, Dorothy, whom everyone called Dora, had the even features of a classical goddess—cool hazel eyes, a generous mouth with teeth like ivory Chiclets, a flawless vanilla and peach complexion, and a sprinkling of pale freckles across her perfect, straight nose, all deliciously framed by a mass of copper hair. Her Pre-Raphaelite proportions—tiny waist, long legs, generous bosom, graceful arms and hands—made anything she wore look as though it had been designed just for her.

I, on the other hand, came into my classic middle-aged Jewish lady looks early on. My body, by the time I was twelve, pot-bellied, with tiny shoulders, skinny arms, and spindly, knock-kneed legs, looked like the result of an alien abduction. My face, hidden behind thick black harlequin-shaped rhinestone-studded glasses, wasn't exactly what I'd hoped for, either. I was cursed with incisors that had been pushed outward because too many teeth crowded my undersized mouth, and the only advantage to my vampirelike fangs was that I could use them to scare my little brother. When my upper lip began to look like corrugated cardboard, I got braces, the kind that turned my mouth into a small arsenal of double and triple rubber bands that stretched from top to bottom, front to back, and could snap loose without warning to strike anyone unlucky enough to be in the vicinity. I wore the fist-sized iron maiden from the time I was fourteen until I was a sophomore in college, with a single break for my senior prom, courtesy of

my kindly orthodontist, with whom, of necessity, I'd developed an intimate, long-term relationship.

As for my nose, I discovered it one day while standing in front of my mother's blue glass vanity table, looking into the big round mirror that housed her face as she put it on each morning. Trying to figure out if lipstick and a pair of tweezers could make me as beautiful as she was, I picked up a little handheld mirror and swung it around experimentally, catching sight of my profile. It was a vision for which years of full-frontal mirror gazing had left me hopelessly unprepared. As if summoned by my shock, my mother appeared behind me, her hair a fiery halo framing her exquisite face. A long moment of silence, then a discouraging sigh. "You'll grow into your looks," she said.

She was right—now my looks fit me perfectly.

Looking at the tiny black-and-white images that are proof of my lineage, I'm torn between envy at my mother's charm and self-assurance and another sensation that's somewhere between longing and despair. My mother, while beautiful and glamorous, was also our day-to-day disciplinarian, which made it tough to get close to her. She could find fault with anything: my nails were dirty, my hair wasn't combed properly, my posture was bad, I made noise when I walked. Still, I was in Olympic training to win her affection, which I did whenever I brought home straight A's, dressed according to her specifications, or cleaned my room perfectly. Otherwise, I had the sinking feeling that once again I had failed to place.

In 1953, going to Miami Beach was as exotic as going to the moon, only better because it was in Technicolor. In the taxi, windows down, we sped along avenues lined with palm trees, their leaves gently flapping in the breeze like the wings of prehistoric birds. Broad boulevards with sprawling cotton-candy-colored art deco hotels and apartment houses whizzed by. The streets teemed with fat, pink-faced men in tropical shirts sporting blondes, bare-legged and tanned, on their arms. My parents, my brother, my grandmother, and I were staying at the rose and white Delano Hotel, which glistened in the heat like a strange, somnolent monster. I was sharing a room with my grandmother, who was "recuperating." I didn't know what that entailed, but it couldn't have been all bad, because it meant that I had her all to myself.

Grandma Ida was a big-bosomed, deceptively stern-faced woman who had emigrated from Russia with my Grandpa Jake, and re-created, as best she could, the comfortable Old World in the midst of a modern, unfamiliar new one called Brooklyn. She would emerge from a kitchen filled with delicious smells, parting the noodles that were drying in long strands overhead, to take me in her arms and cover me with kisses. Then she'd perch me, triumphant, on a tall stool next to her to help cook.

My grandmother was as full of praise as my mother was critical.

"Get your hair out of your eyes!" my mother nagged.

"*Tatteleh*, what beautiful curls!" my Grandma would crow.

"Why can't you stand up straight?" my mother complained.

"*Kenna hurra*, she's so graceful, like a little ballerina," Grandma parried.

"What on earth do you think you're wearing?" my mother wailed, one of her favorite laments.

"That dress is almost as gorgeous as you are," Grandma would say, even though it sagged hopelessly on my skinny frame.

My grandmother was clearly the only person in the world who understood me. And here we were, alone together at last, in our very own pink and cream wallpapered room, with pale green silk curtains on the windows overlooking the pool, flamingo-shaped bedside lamps, and a turquoise and yellow floral rug covering the cool expanse of floor. Giggling, I pulled my pajamas from my suitcase. "Which ones do you like better?" I asked, holding the ballerina pair in one hand and the clowns in the other. I heard her laugh, and as she turned, half-undressed, to answer me, I saw that where there should have been a breast, the left side of my grandmother's chest was an enormous plane of raw scar tissue. I stopped mid-sentence, my jaw gaping and terror flooding my body, but she came toward me and, taking my hand in both of hers, said gently, "This you should worry about? This is nothing. I had cancer, now it's gone. See? The scar gets better every day!" And lifting her arms to do a little dance, she sing-songed, "I can move almost as good as before!" She put her arms around me to give me a gentle kiss, and then slowly put her nightgown on, but not before I had a chance to take a really good look at what wasn't there.

The image of my grandmother smiling down at me engraved itself on my retina, crisp and bright. While I saw the scars as clearly as I saw her sweet smile, they didn't fill me with dread. They were just there, that's all.

When my parents were courting, my father wrote to my mother almost every day. He called her his “dear, dear Crackerjacks.” He reassured her that the long wait—seven years!—till he finished law school and they could get married was worthwhile. But by the time they were married and had kids—first me and, five years later, my brother, Warren—the longing they’d once felt for each other had stretched thin and was weaving itself into a pattern of frustration and disappointment. The biggest tension between them was the question of money, which my parents seemed to talk about with more animation than anything else.

My mother wanted my father to be successful, and he tried to please her, to bring a smile back to her face. But making money took work and time, a lot of it, and there was never enough of either to fill the void. My father worked constantly, and my mother didn’t take to being a housewife. She was never a great reader, which would have helped to fill the lonely hours, and she was partially deaf, which isolated her even further, and at that time hearing aids were as yet imperfect and, anyway, far beyond her means.

She was a mediocre cook for whom supper was a package of frozen blintzes, the insides still chilled to a crunch, or a gray flank steak that had spent its final hours bleeding wearily into our sink. My mother wasn’t much on the playground front, either. I don’t remember her ever playing with me or my brother when we were little. She was obsessively meticulous but hated housekeeping, a contradiction that was guaranteed to keep her on edge. She must have been bored silly, stuck at home day after day with two kids and nothing more than an occasional mah-jongg game to challenge her mind.

The summer I was twelve, we left our little apartment in Brooklyn and moved to the other side of the world—Upper Montclair, New Jersey. It was a tiny ranch house with a yard, only a few houses up from the much less prestigious lower Bloomfield town line, but to my dad, ownership of a house in the suburbs was a firm step up the social ladder into the middle class. Most kids don’t do well with change, and my brother and I were no exception. My brother became increasingly withdrawn, and I began to write a daily litany of woes that ultimately became dozens of journals I kept in order to make sense of my life. But my parents seemed thrilled to be out of Brooklyn and loved the extra room, the screened back porch and little yard, and the fact that the house was theirs. They slowly began to make new friends.

The one thing none of us counted on, especially my mother, was that within a year of moving, she was hospitalized. When she was released two

weeks later, it was as though she had left her heart, mind, and body behind. No matter how much I begged my father to tell me what was happening, he kept silent. I'm sure that he and my relatives thought it was better not to tell the children, ostensibly to spare us the pain of that knowledge, but it did the opposite. Not knowing kept us in a state of perpetual fear and uncertainty.

Rummaging in her drawers one day when she was at the doctor's, I found part of the answer. There, tucked away behind a pile of girdles and stockings, was a beige brassiere with wide straps and an empty inner pocket on one side. Lying next to it were the rounded foam shapes that matched the pocket. They looked practical and ordinary, but I recoiled, deeply unsettled. I knew instantly that my mother had lost a breast, but I still didn't know what that meant. I didn't know that she had breast cancer or that she'd just had a radical mastectomy, a painful, crippling operation in which they removed the breast, the lymph nodes, and the muscles of the chest wall. I didn't know that the follow-up treatment was massive doses of radiation and steroids.

Within months of beginning treatment, my mother went from a slender, melancholic beauty to a bloated, disfigured bundle of nerves, her hair lying over her forehead in sparse strands, her life in shreds. For most of the day, she sat hunched at the kitchen table, staring into space, her useless arm straining to burst its sleeve, her chin propped in her good hand. My own adolescent body was just beginning to take shape while my mother's was falling apart, and my stomach was chronically twisted with guilt. I was sure that it was all my fault.

My father found his escape in his work and in books, and I learned to do the same. At twelve, I wanted so much to be my father's pride that I went straight to the bookcase whenever I had a spare moment. The mahogany console in our living room was crammed with literary goodies. Dozens of red and gold volumes of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* marched neatly long the bottom shelves, and one level up was a set of identically bound books by Poe, Hawthorne, Swinburne, Milton, Pope, Swift, and Dickens. When I had read just about all the books we owned, I moved over to the Montclair library, determined to read every single volume in it, starting with the A's. My eyes were bigger than my abilities, and I soon began to select what caught my fancy. The range of books I read was broad and included everything from *Anne of Green Gables* to *Beowulf* to *The Fountainhead* to *The Invisible Man*. Every few days, the librarian happily loaded me down with books to take home. One day, when my mother saw the toppling pile I was

carrying and realized I was actually reading all those books, she forbade me to read more than one book a day, because she said I was ruining my eyes. This measure was to no avail, since I would read during the hours that she thought I was doing my homework and I would stay awake until she was asleep in order to continue to read, eventually fulfilling my mother's prophecy—I ruined my eyes. That's how I came to add the thick glasses, constantly slipping down my big nose, to a face that already sported a mouth full of crooked teeth, wires, and rubber bands.

I had long hair, chewed gum, spoke with a pronounced Brooklyn accent, and was more interested in shooting marbles or linoleum guns in a corner lot than I was in boys or clothes. Kids at school called me called "Turtle," "Four-Eyes," and "Swamp." I may not have been beautiful, but I was popular in my own way. I formed the Ugly Club with my closest misfit friends. The Ugly Club had card-carrying members (I made the cards, each with a personal caricature), officers (the positions rotated among the founders every few months), and a theme song parodying the one the Mouseketeers were famous for: "U-G-L Y-C-L U-B ugly too! / Ugly Club! Ugly Club! / Forever we will hang our noses low, low, low, low! / Come along and sing our song and join the Ugly Club! / U-G-L Y-C-L U-B ugly too!" Well, *we* thought it was clever, and after one blowout Ugly Club party, everybody started clamoring to get in. "Vengeance is mine," saith the teenage reject.

I can see our family unit, circa 1953, sitting in front of the television in the burnt-orange and avocado green living room of our new house, just after everything has been unpacked and we are settled in. Warren is perched on a hassock, forefinger permanently lodged in his mouth even though he's eight years old. My own gangly body is slouched on the spotless shag rug, and my parents are settled behind me on the plastic-covered sofa. It's Sunday night and we're watching Ed Sullivan, which always puts us in a relatively good mood. My mother, hairbrush in hand, begins to untangle the knots in my uncontrollably curly hair. Her task accomplished, she unexpectedly continues to brush, lulling me into a stupor of pleasure and relief. "She loves me, she loves me not," I chant under my breath as the brush smoothes the curls. "She loves me, she loves me not." I want *The Ed Sullivan Show* to last forever, or at least long enough so that when she stops it will be on the right phrase.

I desperately want things to work out. I want my parents to be in love with each other. I want my mother to smile, I want my father to be rich and

my brother to stop crying. I want to be pretty and popular, too, but I know it's not going to happen. I am what I am. We are what we are.

My kid brother was an adorable curly-haired little boy who didn't give my parents any trouble, at least not until they started giving it to him. As a baby, he got a lot of attention, but it didn't last long. He was eight years old when my mother got sick, and no one paid much attention to him after that.

My father hardly ever did the normal things most dads did with their sons. He never coached him or came out to cheer him at a ballgame, never took him on a trip, never spent much time with him at all except to make sure that his chores were done, his clarinet practice was perfect, and his homework was finished on time. My brother pleaded with my father to play with him, to do something with him, just the two of them, but my father was too busy. When Warren complained in a small, sad voice that my father didn't love him, the answer was always the same: "What haven't I given you? You have everything—a bicycle, clarinet lessons, good clothes, a room of your own. Why don't you appreciate all the things I've done for you?" And he'd stomp off.

The more sick my mother got, the more my father stayed away. My dad focused his energies on moving our family into the upper middle class, although as a criminal lawyer, no matter how dedicated, he wasn't ever going to make a lot of money. When we lived in Brooklyn, his business came mostly from the Italians who lived on our own block. When we moved to New Jersey, my father's clientele changed from Italian to Jewish, despite the widely held assumption—at least among the Jews—that there were no Jewish criminals. But my father's law practice was always based in our local community. Despite his efforts, some of the people he represented were convicted and couldn't pay him. The ones whose cases he won usually weren't all that well-off either. Years later, my father told me there were times when we were so broke, we didn't have seven cents to buy pepper.

To my mother's disappointment, my father didn't push to look for wealthier clients, nor would he charge more than he thought was fair. He took on negligence and criminal cases of all kinds, explaining to us as we sat in the kitchen watching him reenact the day's trial, "It's about the law, you see. Everyone is entitled to the benefit of a fair trial, and guilt is only determined by a jury of one's peers. Until then, you're presumed innocent." He accepted cases he must have known he couldn't win because he loved the challenge of trying them and believed in the justice system. Sometimes, though, he'd

come home triumphant, full of exuberant goodwill, bearing expensive gifts for my mother that usually involved something made of alligator. Then, at supper, he'd hold forth, reenacting the trial with drama and flair, playing all parts, saving the denouement—the one detail the prosecution had neglected but that my father had caught—for last. Those evenings were a pleasure for all of us, because my father was a good trial lawyer and, by definition, a good actor. He shaped his stories artfully, leaving us in suspense as he left the kitchen for a moment to get a fresh cigar from the humidior.

My father was the first and only lawyer among his colleagues to hire an African American as his junior partner. When Bob Burns joined the firm, I remember my dad telling us that he was losing business because he had hired a black lawyer. He told the clients who complained that he had hired the very best young lawyer he could find, and if they didn't want his services, they could go elsewhere. And they did, at least some of them. But my father held his ground, and his business picked up again once people realized that he'd simply been telling the truth.

I was seventeen years old, and I thought Bob was absolutely the greatest. He wasn't that far from my own age, at least in my estimation—it's easy to feel very grown-up when you're not—and one Saturday at the office after a morning of companionable banter, he invited me out for an evening with some of his friends. They were attractive, middle-class, smart young African American men with advanced degrees, and I was wowed. We went to a jazz club in Harlem, where I had a great time playing the sophisticate, drinking Southern Comfort and pretending I was a jazz aficionado.

I wrote in my journal:

November 27, 1956

My name is still Marcia. Thank God. At least there's one thing I can recognize about myself. I still have dark hair, I still have a large nose and I still have the same general shape, plus about twelve pounds.

I am now a cynical young adult (I use the term loosely) who has come into direct contact with poetry, poets, pseudo-intellectuals, sex, James Joyce, jazz and older men. At times I can see myself as I really am—a childish and vague personality, striving to improve and to live up to standards which have the advantage (a doubtful one) of being different.

I am, to use a cliché, world weary. At any rate, my name is still Marcia.

Bob stayed with my dad for several years, until he left to work in Harlem “to defend his own people,” as he put it. My dad threw a farewell party for

him when he left, inviting his lawyer friends and clients, especially the clients who had refused to work with Bob when he first started. Although my father was sad to see him leave, he was happy for Bob. Decades passed before I heard his name again, when he surfaced as “Bobby” Burns, one of the defense attorneys in the 1989 Central Park jogger case. I felt personally let down when he didn’t win the case, even though my heart and soul were with the woman who’d been attacked.

My favorite activity from the time I was in kindergarten until I went away to college was to drive with my father to his office on Sunday mornings and wait in the huge musty law library down the hall while he did a half-day’s work. Then he would take me to lunch at Schrafft’s, where he would buy us hot fudge sundaes and we would catch up on the week, his and mine.

As he locked the office door behind him, he’d point to the opaque glass panel where his name was etched, telling me with a proud smile, “Some-day this door will read ‘Emmanuel Silverman and Daughter, Esqs.’” In the early 1950s, there weren’t too many women lawyers in sight, so his desire to have me as his partner was both unusual and a sign of extraordinary confidence.

In spite of my father’s plans for me, I wanted to be an artist. The fact that it never came easily to me was beside the point.

When I was twelve, my aunt gave me a modeling set for my birthday, the kind that came in a long, flat box and had strips of different-colored clay lined up like the fat bars of a xylophone. Two wooden modeling sticks were included in the box, but when I unwrapped the thick plastic and began to play around with the dazzling pliable color, I discovered that the tools were too big for what I wanted to do. I ran upstairs to grab the implements I really needed—pins, needles, and safety pins, whose various-size points could be used to pick up and attach an eye, carve fingers into a tiny hand, or incise waves on a head of hair. The first figures I made were a girl and a boy, each about an inch and a half high. Before I knew it, Saturday morning had become night and I had made over fifty figures.

Each one became increasingly elaborate, acquiring a personality, a function, a wardrobe, and a starring role in my imagination. I was considering branching out into buildings and houses when it occurred to me that my characters were in mortal danger. They could be squashed into oblivion because they were so small that someone might not notice they were there.

Then I had an idea. Why not bake my figures? They might become brittle, but at least they wouldn't get flattened like chewing gum if I accidentally left them out. I knew that a low heat was best—received wisdom from a craft teacher—and so one afternoon when no one else was home I set the oven to 200 degrees, lined up my treasures on a cookie sheet, and put them in to bake. I was very pleased with myself for having worked out a solution on my own.

When the timer pinged, I raced to open the oven. Little puddles of melted color dotted the tray like bright, swirled miniature sugar cookies. With a howl of despair, I collapsed on the kitchen floor. Underneath my grief that day a resolution was hardening into cement: I would never, ever again create something thinking that I would be able to preserve it.

Still, making art was what I liked doing the most and what I thought I was best at, and I never wanted to stop. There was no such thing as time when I was working. My family problems disappeared, my loneliness evaporated, self-consciousness flew out the window. I felt light and energetic and just, well, *there*. When in my senior year of high school I was named Class Artist, I thought my fate was sealed.