

# The Vulnerable Observer

*Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*

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## The Girl in the Cast

*Five persons were killed early yesterday when an auto driven by a newly licensed teen-ager hurtled a dividing barrier on the Belt Parkway at the Pennsylvania Avenue exit and landed on top of an auto going in the opposite direction.*

*The dead included four neighborhood teen-aged friends, who were riding in the first car and a 24-year-old Hofstra College senior, who was driving the other vehicle.*

*The police of the Miller Avenue station house in East New York said that the car in which the four teen-agers were riding was returning from a discotheque dance at Murray the K's World, a restaurant in Roosevelt, Long Island . . .*

*The car hurtled the center island divider, a foot-high concrete curb topped by a three-foot metal fence. It landed on top of an auto traveling in the opposite direction operated by Joseph J. Venturino of 46 Radcliff Road, Island Park, Long Island . . . With him was Miss Betty M. Saltz, a 20-year-old secretary employed by a motion picture firm . . .*

*Mr. Venturino, with split-second timing, swung his car to the right to protect Miss Saltz and took the full impact of the blow, killing [him] instantly and trapping his body in the wreckage. Miss Saltz was taken to Brookdale Hospital and held there after treatment for a fractured right leg and left collar bone and multiple lacerations. She was reported in fair condition.*

*Three other autos, driving behind Mr. Venturino's car, piled into the wreckage. In the first car, Albert Behar, 32, of 141-65 85th Street, Jamaica, Queens, was driving with his wife, Rebecca, 30, a daughter, Ruth, 9, a son, Maurice, 10, and Mrs. Behar's mother, Mrs. Esther Glinski, 60. All were taken to Brookdale Hospital, where only Ruth was detained for a fractured right leg.*

—New York Times, May 1, 1966

THE STORY in the epigraph, with the headline "Five Die in Crash on Belt Parkway," appeared on page 48, next to an ad for emerald rings and brooches at Bloomingdale's department store. What happened to the Behar family is a footnote to the story. What happened to Ruth is a footnote to the footnote.

After the accident my childhood ended.

I WAS TOLD it was horrible. It was one of the worst car accidents in New York traffic history. The *Daily News* put the story on its front page.

My brother, who was actually six, not ten as the newspaper incorrectly reported, remembers seeing the car flying. It looked like it had wings. My grandmother remembers having to walk over dead bodies. My mother remembers that my grandmother kept screaming and screaming and clutching her heart. My father remembers stretching his arm across my mother's chest to keep her from crashing through the front window.

I didn't see anything. I barely remember anything. I was asleep on my grandmother's lap in the backseat. We were on our way home. When I awoke, I was all alone in the car. Where had everyone gone? I wanted to escape, too, but suddenly I could no longer walk. My right leg had swollen like a watermelon.

I heard my father's voice through layers and layers of distance. He was saying he had to get me out, that maybe the car would catch fire. At that moment, and this I remember vividly, I looked down at my left foot and noticed that my shoe was missing. It had flown out the window. What would I do now with only one shoe? I'd be sad like Cinderella. They were brand

new shoes, black patent leather shoes with little black satin bows.

“Papi, my shoe—”

But my father didn't go and find my shoe. He picked me up and pulled me out of the car. That was when I noticed the pain. That was when I began to cry. At Brookdale Hospital I was wheeled into the emergency room with Betty Saltz. I cried and cried. A doctor there told me to be quiet already, that the woman next to me would be paralyzed for life, and that I should be happy I just had a broken leg.

I WAS NOT allowed to feel sorry for myself because it might have been worse, and I was not allowed to be angry with the young men who had caused the accident because they were dead. The adults kept telling me I should be happy.

Happy, happy, happy. It's just a broken leg. A femur bone broken in a few places, that's all. Imagine if the leg had needed to be cut off. Or, worse, what if I had ended up a vegetable? I had to be grateful.

And so the nine-year-old girl stopped crying. It was bad to cry when you were supposed to be happy.

I DIDN'T CRY when they wheeled me out of the operating room, reincarnated as a mummy encased in a body cast of thick white plaster. My parents thought the doctor had gone mad. So much plaster for a broken leg? Why hadn't he given me a walking cast? The doctor tried to explain in simple English that with a walking cast there was a risk of one leg growing longer than the other, leaving me with a permanent limp. He

wanted to be sure my legs would grow at the same rate and the only way to do that was to put them both inside plaster. I was going to have to be inside plaster for a long time and he didn't want to take any chances. My parents were not convinced by the doctor's explanations, but they were immigrants making only enough to pay the rent, so what else were they going to do? Two years later, when I was fully healed, they would bless the doctor many times over, but they took home very reluctantly the girl in the cast.

The cast began just below my unformed breasts, took in my waist and hips, and enclosed each leg down to my toes, the tips of which stuck out like little fish coming up for air. A pole linked my legs at the ankles. With that pole, the doctor explained, my mother would be able to turn me on my stomach at night to sleep. My head and shoulders could be propped up with pillows when I ate, or if I wanted to read a book. The rest of the time I was to lay flat on my back.

Just below my belly an opening had been carved out for my private parts. Suddenly, the parts of your body you were supposed to hide, and that as a girl you were supposed to keep tightly locked between your legs, were wide open to view. With the cast, my legs were spread shamefully far apart and fixed in place. Nothing except the bed sheets covered my torso. I learned to pull the sheets up to my shoulders and cling to them tightly when other children were in the room, fearing that in cruel jest they would pull them off and leave me exposed.

I still had a young girl's body, but I already knew that within me there was a woman's body waiting to sprout at any moment, just when you weren't looking. My mother had shown me her box of Kotex napkins and explained to me that in a few years I would become a young lady. I think she must have also

tried to explain that once girls became young ladies they could have babies. And she must have hinted at how babies were made.

I remember, though I couldn't have expressed it then, that my attainment of sexual knowledge became connected in my mind to the car accident. The accident happened on our return home from Staten Island, where we had visited my mother's cousin Alma, who had just given birth to her second child, Miriam. At Alma's house I remember I overheard jokes I was not supposed to understand, and they had to do with what women and men did and how when they did it they sometimes had babies. Something about these jokes disturbed me and scared me, but I don't know what exactly. Soon after, we said good-bye, got into the car, and I fell asleep on my grandmother's lap. When I awoke I was a cripple.

**F**OR THE chubby nine-year-old girl there were two terrible things about being immobile. I was, first of all, put on a strict diet. I cannot forget being denied a second bowl of spaghetti by my mother, who told me that if I got too fat I wouldn't fit in the cast. The cast became a tight chemise I could not take off, not even for a minute to let my hips run loose.

But more terrible yet than the diet was having to relieve myself in a bedpan. That meant that whenever I felt the urge I had to call for my mother. If my brother and my cousins were in the room playing, I had to announce to them to leave the room; otherwise, I wouldn't allow my mother to lift up the covers and slide the pan under me. Once, when she was busy entertaining friends in the living room, she didn't come fast enough and I had an "accident." I felt miserable knowing that everyone knew.

Perhaps because I was told that it was important to keep my body from bursting out of the cast, I became severely constipated. Or, maybe, being an invalid, my bowels seemed to be the only part of my body I could willfully control. My mother would bring in the bedpan and urge me to go, which was impossible so long as she stood waiting and watching. On one occasion, a week passed without my making a bowel movement. Keeping a secret has never been one of my mother's virtues. She spread the word to the entire family that Rutie was not making *caca*. Zayde, my maternal grandfather, whom I adored, appeared one day with a bottle of prune juice. When he poured out the juice it looked so dark and foul that it reminded me of excrement. My grandfather drank some to show me it was good, but when I tried to sip a little bit with a straw, I gagged and spit up into a tissue.

With his prune juice, my grandfather had tried to spare me the worse fate that my mother intended for me. Walking into the room with a determined look on her face, my mother meant to do something awful to get my bowels to obey. I pushed my mother away with all my strength, but with a quick turn of the ankle pole she had me flat on my stomach. Then she stuck in an enema. This was profoundly humiliating, profoundly violating, and my only comfort was to think of the excrement oozing into the bedpan as coming from someone else's body, not my own.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL sent a tutor to teach me and for a year I had private lessons in a wide range of subjects. My mother served us toasted English muffins at the start of the lesson and the tutor and I would work without interruption until midday. I came to enjoy those classroom sessions held around

my bed as I enjoyed nothing else during my long convalescence. The days became bearable. It was wonderful to be the only student, to have a teacher all to myself, and I made tremendous progress in reading and math.

The accident took place just four years after we arrived in the United States as immigrants fleeing communist rule in Cuba. My father had brought into his exile a couple of pamphlets of Fidel Castro's speeches out of a bizarre sense of nostalgia, but we had no children's books or stories in English. Books were a luxury. The first goal was to acquire a television. The second goal, a used car. During my year at home, the tutor filled my bed with English storybooks and I read voraciously. When I returned to school I was no longer a Spanish-speaking child struggling with English, but among the more gifted kids who would be steered toward "special progress"—SP—classes in junior high school. The accident spurred my assimilation.

I also discovered, about a year after I returned to school, that I could no longer see the biggest letter on the eye chart. During my year in bed, in which I always faced the same direction, always looked out upon a world that was no bigger than the bedroom I shared with my brother, my field of vision shrank. My eyes, not needing to take in the wider world, contracted until I could only see what was closest to me, the little world of my bed and my immobile body lying there, squeezed tight into its corset.

While writing this essay, I asked my mother if, indeed, she never thought to change my position, so I wouldn't always be facing in the same direction. She immediately became defensive, even annoyed, about my question. How was I going to change your position? You think the room was that big? How was I going to take you outside, when the doctor said you should not be moved? There was an edge to her voice. I was



making her feel guilty. I decided I would show her how grown up I was. I'm not accusing you, I said to her in an even voice, I'm just trying to remember. But I was lying. Of course I was accusing her.

**O**UR FIRST summer in the United States, in 1962, we lived with my grandparents, crammed into their apartment in Brooklyn. They were both working in a fabric store, my grandmother earning five dollars less than my grandfather. My grandfather—Zayde—knew the owner from the days when he bought lace from him for his store in Havana. He got a job for my father and by the end of the summer we moved to our own apartment in Briarwood, a neighborhood of faded red brick buildings in Queens.

My mother was told Briarwood was one of the better neighborhoods in Queens, even though it was on the outskirts of Jamaica, a black working-class neighborhood where the overhead train used to roar above stores and houses like an angry thunder-god. To my mother, the street in Briarwood that would now be her home seemed extremely ugly, but she figured she just didn't know what counted as pretty and what counted as ugly in America. My Aunt Silvia, my mother's older sister, was the one who knew. Not only was she already living in Briarwood, she had married an American, my Uncle Bill. They had met by chance just before the revolution, when he was visiting Cuba and seeking to date a nice Jewish girl. Bill knew New York like the back of his hand and he knew Briarwood was a step up from the Bronx. So, during our first years in America, the family reconstituted itself in one brick building at 141-65 85th Road. Silvia and Bill and my cousins Danny and Linda lived on the fourth floor, my grandparents lived on the

third floor with my Uncle Micky, a teenager soon to be married, and my parents, my brother, and I lived on the sixth floor.

At the time of the accident we lived in a one-bedroom apartment. My parents slept on a sofa bed, a Castro Convertible, in the living room and my brother and I shared the bedroom. The world became so reduced for me that I can only begin to imagine how the accident devastated my parents emotionally and economically. I know that my father worked two and three jobs, delivering rental cars and even fumigating apartments, to pay hospital bills and the costly trips to Brooklyn by ambulance for the X-rays that were periodically done of my leg.

It later seemed to me that my parents might have been able to request more compensation. But I suspect they were insecure about their status as "aliens" in the United States, not yet having attained the necessary residency period to apply for citizenship. They were just grateful, I think, that they were innocent.

I WAS IMMOBILE for close to a year. The body cast, changed once, stayed on for nine months. Then for one month I had a trimmer cast on my right leg alone, but I was still confined to my bed. When I was released from the cast, a visiting nurse taught me to use crutches, first two, then one. The left leg had emerged from the cast looking like a hairy monster, but it felt strong to me and, most important, it felt like *my* leg. Trusting my good leg, I mastered the crutches and could go anywhere on them.

But when I was told it was time to walk again with both feet planted on the ground, I simply refused to believe that my right leg could sustain me. It didn't feel like *my* leg; it hung

there limp, thick as molasses, unbending and foreign. How was I supposed to tell it to walk? No, it would never work. Never! And so I took to my bed again, to the despair of everyone around me.

There are some things my mother said to me when I was a child that got branded into my soul as though they were hot iron. During the period when my fear of walking was at its peak, she flung some of these hot-iron words at me. I imagine that by that time, after cleaning out my bedpan for a year, she had endured about all she could. As my mother busied herself changing the sheets of my bed, she began to talk about how soon I would be *una mujercita* and going to parties and dances. The boys, she blurted out, were going to see that from the waist up I was a pretty girl, but, wow, were they going to be disappointed when they saw what I was like from the waist down. She then went on to say that at the rate I was going I would grow up to be just like Abuela, my father's mother, who was very fat and sat in her chair all day and seesawed when she walked—and what a shame, with her face so pretty. . . .

The first nurse quit and said I'd never walk. Then they sent another nurse. She told my parents to let her handle me. What I needed was to be treated mean and hard. If they kept on pitying me, I'd be an invalid for life.

It wasn't just that I feared I would fall flat on my face and break my leg again. There was something I found even more unsettling: I simply could not, for the life of me, remember how to walk. Every shred of memory of how people did it—how they stood, moved one foot forward, then another, and got somewhere—had been erased. I begged the "tough" nurse not to force me to walk. I told her I wasn't ready, to please understand how afraid I was, to please wait just a little longer. And

maybe, as my great-uncle recently said to me, I did need a strong push to get me walking. But how I wish I had been urged to stand on my own two feet again with just a touch more gentleness, a touch more loving kindness.

**A**FTER I relearned how to walk I had a heavy limp that gradually went away with a long routine of physical therapy. It was at the Continental Avenue bus stop, as we walked together to the physical therapist's office, that my mother announced that my Uncle Micky and Aunt Rebeca were expecting a baby. By then I was certain that the knowledge I had intuitively grasped before the accident was resoundingly true. And do you know how people have babies?, my mother asked me. Yes, I said, hoping she wouldn't ask me to explain it aloud. But she wanted to be sure I understood, and she started saying, "*La cosa del hombre y la cosa de la mujer . . .*" (The man's thing and the woman's thing . . .).

"Yes, I know, I know," I said. And we kept walking.

**I** KEPT A diary during sixth grade that ran for about eight months in 1968. All I remembered of the diary was that it locked with a little key and that my mother had managed to pry it open once and find the boy's picture I had stashed inside. Recently, I asked my mother to look for the diary and it turned up in a box in her attic. My mother reported that the diary was still locked, but that it had apparently been torn open at some point; it was sealed with thick black tape, and the key was lost. Should she open it?, she asked. No, I said.

The diary is bound in a red fake leather, the pages have gilded edges, and it is small. I hold it in my hands for a few mo-

ments before I tear it open. I wonder whether the eleven-year-old girl will have much to say about what happened to her two years before. I only find two entries that refer to the accident. On January 21, 1968, I write to "Cheryl," the name I have given to the diary: "Today we went to Manhattan and then to this place where older people meet where my grandparents gave me a little party in my honor because I am well now. I'll tell you about my car accident one of these days!" Then on February 1, I report: "Now that I have time I'll tell you about my terrible car accident on April 30, 1966 where I broke the femur bone on my leg. Everybody else had practically nothing. Morrie had stitches on his head and so did Pappy. **BYE FOR NOW.**" Not another word of the accident in those pages. The only intimation that the healing process has been thorny is an entry from July 26: "Mommy, me and Morrie went to Manhattan. Going down the stairs [of the subway] I sprained my foot. It was terrible. I even cried in front of Pappy's secretaries. Now I feel terrible."

And yet, while the accident is notably absent from the day-to-day recording of events, the lack of self-assurance of the eleven-year-old girl is so stark that it becomes the major theme of the diary. On February 11, I write, "Today the Perkals came over. We had delicious Cuban sandwiches, tempting doughnuts, and what is called in Spanish 'panetela borracha,' a drunk cake. We played Monopoly and bingo. Morris got my guitar out of tune. Pappy always blames everything on me. I bet he doesn't like me." On February 22, I note, "Mommy doesn't like me so much. She thinks I'm so mean." Again, on March 18: "Pappy gets mad at everything now. I really don't know what's happening to this family. He wants me to be Miss Perfection and compares me with everybody. Boy, can't he take me the way I am?"

It soon becomes clear that the tension in the family—which I, at age eleven am interpreting personally as a withdrawal of affection from me—stems from my parents' plans to move out of Briarwood as soon as I finish sixth grade. On April 30, the anniversary of the accident, I write, "Mommy and Pappy are now American citizens," which suggests that their status in the United States is finally secure. At the same time, it seems clear that they are apprehensive about whether they have attained the means to relocate themselves more firmly within the white middle class. The May 17 entry notes: "There is a plan that we, the 5th and 6th graders, in September will have to go to IS-8 in South Jamaica." Our public school in Briarwood was primarily white, with black students being bused in from Jamaica. Now white children were going to be the ones bused into black schools. And my parents, aware that by age eleven I am already a menstruating *mujercita* about to start junior high school, begin to dream of moving to Forest Hills, where the influences will be "better," more white and more Jewish.

My mother explains that we need to move *porque se está echando a perder el barrio*, "because the neighborhood is getting bad" (literally, as in referring to overripe fruit, "beginning to rot"), code language for saying blacks are moving in. I wonder now: Where do my parents learn their racism? In Cuba, a black woman cared for me, shared a bed with me, took me out to lunch with her to eat Chinese food. But in the United States I grow up with a raceless image of Cuban culture, a bleached out version of the culture, listening to Beny Moré, Pérez Prado, and Celia Cruz, but not knowing they are black. That in the United States my parents, with their thick accents, become Latinos, and therefore suffer many of the same humiliations as other people "of color" (like getting bad service at restaurants and be-

ing stared at in elevators because they are speaking Spanish), somehow becomes irrelevant. We are determined to become white, at least as white as other Jews.

But the apartment hunting seems to have been very stressful. I note on May 5: "Hebrew school was okay. Mom and Pop went looking for apartments and left me and Morris at the movie the Double Man with Yul Brenner. It was great. Pappy was in a pretty bad mood." On May 28, I note, "About the apartment, Mommy and Pappy have been arguing about it. Now Pappy gets angry at anything. I don't know how he can be so mean." On May 29: "Mommy and Pappy are still angry. Pappy is really being mean to Mommy." And again on June 1: "Pappy was in a bad mood just because I didn't give him a kiss!" And then on July 1: "Well, here we are at our new apartment. Mommy looked so nervous. I hope she gets better quickly. I helped a lot with the cleaning."

The new apartment was much nicer than our old one in Briarwood. It had a huge picture window that looked out at the remains of the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadow Park. My parents furnished it in the most modern style of the day, with lots of glass and chrome and mirrors. But I know that it was not quite the apartment my mother had longed for. She had her heart set on one of the bigger apartments that were like houses, with two floors, and three bedrooms upstairs. My father said they couldn't afford that kind of apartment; it was already going to break his back just to pay for the two-bedroom apartment.

In the new apartment I entered into my adolescence. There, the migraines began, but I didn't yet know my condition had a name. What I knew was that a few times a month a dark shadow fell over my life.

THE BODY doesn't forget.

I learned to walk again, but that old fear never quite went away. It was years before I could run. It was years before I took possession of my legs. I would see people with a leg missing, or in a wheelchair, or hobbling along with one big-heeled shoe and one little-heeled shoe, and I would see myself in them. I would think: that's you, that's you, except you they forced to walk, you they pushed out of bed.

Not until after I had given birth to my own child did I begin to regain confidence in my legs. In my early thirties I began to exercise. I enrolled in an aerobics class. After a few years, I found, to my surprise, that I could move gracefully, that my legs worked just fine. Soon I was in the aerobics class with the most challenging teacher, the one who used a lot of difficult dance routines. I had gotten so good that I no longer hid in a corner in the back of the room, but staked out a spot for myself at the front of the class with the other accomplished women.

And then, in 1991, the day after I turned thirty-five, while I was at the front of the room doing an especially jumpy dance number, I turned my eyes to the mirror to catch a glance at my feet. That was all I did. The next minute, I felt dizzy, strangely out of it. I stopped immediately and in a daze went and sat down on the wicker chair with the tropical-print cushion, next to the table with all the magazines about how to achieve the right body. The odor of sweat struggling with deodorant filled my nostrils. I became so nervous I felt certain I would never be able to get home alone. I called David, and he and Gabriel came to pick me up.

After that, things went downhill. When I went back to aerobics a few days later, just lifting my arms brought on the feel-



ings of dizziness and doom. I felt I had to get out quick—as though an alarm were going off inside me. I ran to the locker room and frantically pulled off my exercise clothes. Come on! Quicker! Everything was racing inside me. This time, I told myself, I would get home alone, no matter what it took. I got into the car and drove off. Faster! Faster! All the familiar streets spun around me. I refused to pay attention. Optical illusions. Just keep driving. Don't look. Keep your eyes straight ahead.

If only my heart hadn't started to tear like a sheet of paper, I wouldn't have had to stop. I might have made it. I slammed on the brakes just as I felt myself passing out.

I was only five blocks from my house. I wanted to scream, but I needed all my energy just to be able to breathe. "Someone save me!" I wanted to yell, but I couldn't get the words out.

A young man in a black leather jacket and tall boots was coming down his porch steps. I waved him over. "Could you drive me home?" I asked in a small voice. He gave me a funny look, but he got into the car. I had already moved over to the passenger seat. "Just turn and go straight five blocks," I said, letting my head fall into my hands. Maybe this man is a rapist, I thought, but I've got to get home somehow. He drove me to my house, the Wedgwood blue Victorian house filled with antiques and Mexican pottery bought with my own money, and he said it had been no problem and that he would walk the five blocks back.

**I**N A MATTER of days my body shut down. I began to feel terribly, terribly tired and terribly, terribly agitated. I had no idea what was wrong with me. Neither did the doctor. But

when I told him I planned to go to a big anthropology conference two days later, where I had three speaking engagements, he said he thought it would be much wiser for me to stay home and rest. Without my asking, he filled out a disability form. I'll go anyway, I thought, I can't be that sick. But when the day came, I could barely get out of bed. And that same day David and Gabriel were leaving for Texas. They planned to visit David's parents, frighteningly nice white, retired schoolteachers with heavy southern drawls, from whom I have studiously kept my distance to protect myself—as I see it—from being swallowed up by their Americanness. It had seemed like a perfect plan: I would spend a weekend at my anthropology conference in Chicago and they would spend a weekend in Dallas. We would go to the airport together, take separate planes, and then meet a few days later. Instead, I ended up staying home in my bed. I was fortunate that three women friends checked in on me during that hellish weekend when fear, deep and unspeakable, became my most constant companion.

At the time, I felt myself racing against the clock to finish my book *Translated Woman*, the life story of a Mexican street peddler. It was already late November and I had set a final deadline for myself to have the book completely done and in my editor's hands before I left on a two-week trip to Cuba at the end of December. The trip to Cuba had me extremely worried, and though I desperately wanted to go, another part of me wanted to just pull the covers up over my head and forget the whole idea. I would be traveling with David and leaving Gabriel behind with my parents, who had heightened the worry level by saying that I would be lucky if Fidel Castro let me return home. My parents even demanded that I write out a will and leave them custody papers for Gabriel. Nothing scared me more than

the thought of never again seeing my son, who was almost five, the same age I was when we left Cuba.

Like other children taken into exile in the United States after the Cuban revolution, I had grown up internalizing the cold war between the United States and Cuba. I had absorbed both the Cuban immigrant paranoia about Cuba as a dangerous place, best left behind forever, and the United States ideology about Cuba as an enemy and a threat. There was also another issue for me, as a Cuban Jew. I kept asking myself what exactly I hoped to find in Cuba. After all, the members of my family were immigrants in Cuba, too. My grandparents, Jews from Byelorussia, Poland, and Turkey, had immigrated to Cuba in the 1920s, after the United States set sharp limits on Jewish immigration. All of my homelands, it seemed, were lost.

To calm these worries, I got into bed with my book manuscript, spreading the various versions of the text all around me. There in my bedroom on the second floor I decided that either I would finish the book or the book would finish me. Soon I discovered that I felt uncomfortable in any other part of the house. I took to bringing up a tray in the morning with water, rice, and ginger cookies, the only things I seemed to have an appetite for, which I nibbled on in the course of the day. I couldn't stand on my feet for long without getting dizzy, and I would return to my bed out of breath just from going up and down the stairs. I cursed myself for having wanted such a big old house with two floors—the very kind of house my parents had been unable to achieve when I was growing up. The only room I could bear to be in, my bedroom, was the smallest room in the house. I retreated to that room as though I were the littlest woman in a set of nested Russian dolls.

After David and Gabriel returned from Texas, I saw the doc-

tor once more. This time, just sitting in the backseat as David drove to the clinic precipitated a flood of heart palpitations. As soon as I entered the clinic, my legs began to feel like Jell-O and I asked for a wheelchair. And this time, the doctor came up with a diagnosis: my body was physically depressed and I needed an antidepressant to snap out of it. The medication would cause drowsiness and blurry vision, he said, but it would help in the long run. Dizzy as I was, I asked a million questions. Isn't it silly to take a drug that will make me tired when I'm already tired? Won't I get better just with rest and a good diet? Do I really need a drug? Casting hard blue eyes on me, the doctor replied that he knew from clinical experience that people like me took years to recover without a drug.

He turned his back and began filling out more disability forms. I had told him I was planning a trip to the Caribbean the following month. I didn't tell him it was Cuba I planned to visit. He'd think I was a communist. And then who knows what he would prescribe? He said I would not be strong enough to undertake any travel for a long time.

I paid my bill and David wheeled me to the outer office. Gabriel, who had been hyperactive during my visit to the doctor, running up and down the hallways like a wild boy, refused to put on his coat. When David approached him, he would run away and laugh. Tired of having two children to care for, David suddenly fell apart, crying and scolding Gabriel at the same time. Soon Gabriel was crying and screaming at the top of his lungs. Everyone in the waiting room watched in horror. I sank into the wheelchair. Still crying, Gabriel finally wriggled into his coat and climbed on to my lap. David wheeled us both to the car. My legs hung down from my body like a marionette's legs. I had no strength left in them anymore.

DURING THE weeks before I came to an understanding of what I was experiencing, I lived in a space of terror. A phone call to a psychiatric emergency number finally provided a ray of light: I had gotten caught in a spiral of anxiety and had developed agoraphobia as a result of confining myself to my bed. Once I understood my condition, I could begin to get well. I read various books on anxiety and learned how common panic attacks and agoraphobia are in women, especially contemporary women, who, as Carol Becker has written, "live in . . . a state of expectation, fearful about 'struggling for autonomy,' waiting anxiously for the ax to fall. . . . They expect to pay some price for the upheaval they have caused, yet are uncertain what the cost might be or what form of punishment they might be subjected to. Often the punishment is nothing more nor less than extreme, amorphous, and unrelenting anxiety. . . . Anxiety is an emotion of conflict—mind and body, internal and external reality, child self, adult self. . . . Anxiety will always accompany the unknown. It is an unwanted but unavoidable catalyst to change."<sup>1</sup>

Empowered by this knowledge, I finished my book. And I was able to push the terror back and go to Cuba, despite the doctor's advice and my parents' paranoia, and return, safe and sound and inspired. I dropped the doctor with the hard blue eyes, though not without writing a letter of complaint to the head of the clinic.

Exposure therapy, my self-help books claimed, was the best method for getting over panic attacks and the phobias they tend to set off. To conquer fear, return to the very sites that scare you, engage in the very things that chill you to the quick. For me, this meant going back to my aerobics class, where it all began.

At first, I was afraid to go alone, so David came with me. I found I could still do all the routines perfectly, but the room seemed to be spinning around me. I looked at myself in the mirror and felt a strange dissociation from the woman who was swinging her arms and legs about to the tune of the music. Exposure therapy, I kept saying to myself. Hang in there. I got through that class okay. Confident, a few days later I returned with David for another class.

Everything was going well and my inner voice was saying all the positive things it was supposed to say. You're doing fine, you're doing fine, you're not that nine-year-old girl anymore, your legs are healed, you can dance, you can do anything you want, you're doing beautifully. The room spun around me, but I kept moving. And then suddenly I had a sense of being in the ocean, and of being knocked down by the waves. They were pushing me down, deep into the water. I was nine again and crying, doing the aerobics and crying. I was seeing the darkness and the car flying over the divider. I was hearing the crash of broken glass and the moans of young men dying. And I was saying to my parents that I forgave them, that I wished they could have saved me, but I understood they had done what they could. Then I had to stop. The teacher told me to keep walking, not to sit, and I went off to the locker room, with David following, and paced back and forth, back and forth, until my heart settled itself. Then I cried and cried and cried for the nine-year-old girl who didn't get out all her tears and for the thirty-five-year-old woman who desperately needed her husband's shoulder because she had grown afraid of her own life.

**I**T WAS unbelievable to me that I could have an intellectual understanding of my illness and still find it so difficult

to physically carry out the tasks I set for myself. I was astonished at how difficult it was for me to get into a car again. I would become so breathless I had to roll down the car windows all the way in the height of winter to feel I had enough air. Weeks passed before I would get behind the wheel. Finally, I did it, and from then on I forced myself to be the one to drive to wherever David, Gabriel, and I needed to go. Driving by myself was a harder struggle, but that too would eventually become possible.

Through all this, I thought of my mother. For years and years after the car accident, she would clutch the sides of the car whenever my father slammed on the brakes or hit the accelerator to pass another car. He would become furious at her for her nervous reactions, saying they made it impossible for him to drive calmly. How sorry I felt for her at those times.

My mother's deepest desire, now that she and my father live on a tree-lined street in a neighborhood of small brick houses, is to get her driver's license and be able to drive. She has taken some driving lessons, but she can't quite muster the courage to get behind the wheel. Every time I see her, she tells me that this year she's going to drive. She's promised it to herself. *Sin falta*, she says, no matter what it takes, and she looks at me with the saddest eyes.

I HAD ALWAYS known that one day I would tell the story of the car accident. And yet I kept censoring it, wanting to remain loyal to the adult injunction not to make too much of the whole thing, to insist that it could have been much worse. I would tell friends about the accident and my broken leg, and found that I'd get irritated if they showed too much sympathy for the girl in the cast. I certainly had no sympathy for her. She

had been a crybaby and a coward and I was ashamed of her. Not until my unconscious rested, so many years later, the memory of my confinement to my bed and the dread of having to stand on my own two feet did I begin to feel empathy for the young girl I had been.

**A** FULLER EMPATHY came afterward, from the stories and interpretations I read to try to understand why the girl in the cast had resurfaced. If, as Alice Miller argues, coming to terms with one's childhood is a process of mourning, of "giving up the illusion of the 'happy' childhood," I needed to find others with whom to share my grief.<sup>2</sup>

One text that spoke to me immediately was an essay published in 1959 by the psychologist Marjorie Leonard, which explored the case of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl named Nancy, who had developed an intense fear of walking after recovering from a leg fracture caused by her fall from a kitchen counter. The cast stayed on Nancy's leg for only three weeks, but when it was removed she refused even to stand up and would cry bitterly if coaxed, urged, or scolded to try walking. Nancy's parents said she had been "a gay little girl before the accident," but afterward, "she appeared continuously unhappy, whined and cried."

Marjorie Leonard, working with Nancy as a Freudian psychoanalyst, came to the conclusion that the girl's fear stemmed from inner conflicts about her hostile feelings toward a younger brother who had just been born at the time of her accident. After play therapy, in which Nancy was able to act out her aggression on a set of dolls, including castrating the male doll, Nancy started to walk again, although cautiously and with a limp. As Marjorie Leonard astutely notes, "With the magical



thinking common to children at that age, Nancy must have believed that her 'bad' impulses were perceived by her parents and that they had let the accident happen in order to punish her. . . . To resume walking meant being faced with the possibility of committing an aggressive act."<sup>3</sup>

No one thought to call in a psychoanalyst to figure out why I was afraid to walk. Such behavior was impossible for people of our class and immigrant status. But I can't help thinking that maybe at two and a half they would have taken pity on me and not pushed so hard to get me to walk before I was ready. The young girl, soon to become a *mujercita*, inspired only impatience.

○ OF COURSE, I recognize that, in the end, I was lucky. Lucky because I healed well. Lucky because the doctor took not only my broken leg seriously, but my future seriously.

I suspect things would have turned out differently had my skin not been white. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the African-American literary critic, was not so lucky. At the age of fourteen, he incurred a hairline fracture of his leg while playing touch football. Unaware of the fracture, Gates continued to use the leg until the ball-and-socket joint of his hip finally tore. The white doctor who attended to him, in the Appalachia of 1964, mistakenly diagnosed his injury as a torn ligament in the knee and decided to put Gates in a walking cast. While plastering his leg, the doctor engaged the young Gates in a conversation about his future. Gates wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. So the white doctor thought he would throw him a couple of challenging questions. But Gates knew all the answers; he knew who discovered sterilization, who discovered penicillin, and who discovered DNA. Gates recalls that he thought his an-

swers “might get me a pat on the head. Actually, they just confirmed the diagnosis he’d come to.” And Gates goes on to describe how racism had everything to do with what happened to him and his leg:

“He stood me on my feet and insisted that I walk. When I tried, the joint ripped apart and I fell on the floor. It hurt like nothing I’d ever known.

“The doctor shook his head. ‘Pauline,’ he said to my mother, his voice kindly but amused, ‘there’s not a thing wrong with that child. The problem’s psychosomatic. Your son’s an over-achiever.’”

Although Gates’s mother immediately transferred her son to the University Medical Center, the damage had already been done. In years to come, Gates would limp through college while suffering from severe pain as the joint calcified, shortening his leg. Only at the age of forty, as a prominent man of letters, did he have hip-joint surgery to lengthen his leg. At last he was able to throw away his bricklike orthopedic shoes. But because a white doctor had presumed that “a colored kid who thought he could be a doctor was headed for a breakdown,” Gates spent twenty-five years wondering how it feels to wear real shoes.<sup>4</sup>

**O**LIVER SACKS’S book *A Leg to Stand On*, an account of his recovery from severe damage to his leg during a solitary mountain climb in Norway, sat unread on my bookshelf for years. After re-encountering the girl in the cast during aerobics, I knew the moment was ripe to read Sacks. As I expected, the book shed light on my experience. Both as a patient himself, and as a doctor questioning other patients, Sacks learned that almost anyone who injured a limb, “and whose limb had then been casted, out of sight, out of action, had expe-

rienced at least some degree of alienation: I heard of hands and feet which felt 'queer,' 'wrong,' 'strange,' 'unreal,' 'uncanny,' 'detached,' and 'cut off'—and, again and again, the phrase 'like nothing on earth.'" Sacks writes eloquently of the difficulty of repossessing alienated limbs, especially in a medical context where healing is supposed to occur as soon as the injured limbs have mended. And yet healing calls for more than a physiological mending; it calls for a full restoration of one's sense of being in one's body and in the world. Immobilized and bedridden, the patient succumbs to "prisoner syndrome," in which visual space contracts, together with the whole of one's existence. Getting better involves not only the ability to use the injured limbs again, but regaining the freedom to emerge "from self-absorption, sickness, patienthood, and confinement, to the spaciousness of health, of full being, of the real world." To stand confidently on one's own two feet, the posture of humanity for millennia, becomes for Sacks the symbol of full recovery: "The motions of uprightness, that physical-and-moral posture which means standing-up, standing-up-for-oneself, walking, and walking-away—walking away from one's physicians and parents, walking away from those upon whom one depended and hung, walking freely, and boldly, and adventurously, wherever one wishes."<sup>5</sup>

I cried reading these passages. And I really do mean cried. Like La Llorona, the Weeping Woman of Mexican lore, who is said to weep for the children she abandoned, I wept with fury, wanting to retrieve the child I once was and give her the understanding, the words, the knowledge, I now had. Reading about the terror Sacks experienced after only three weeks as a patient, I imagined the terror of being nine and immobile for almost an entire year. Here was Sacks, the neurologist, a man with credentials, bravado, an array of psychological, physiological, and

perceptual concepts, and there was I, a child, disempowered, disembodied, lacking the language to clarify my pain.

But it wasn't just for the child that I cried; I wondered, too, about the grown-up woman reading Sacks. I wondered whether the world was as wide open and boundless for her as Sacks seemed to think it was for himself. It would never have occurred to me to go off alone to climb a 6,000-foot mountain in Norway without telling a soul about my whereabouts.<sup>6</sup> I would never want to be that alone in the world. And as a woman, I can't walk freely, boldly, and adventurously, wherever I wish. I just don't feel that safe.

The girl in the cast grows up to be a woman in a cast.

"**P**ERHAPS WOMEN have forgotten girls," writes Carol Gilligan in an essay about her work fostering "healthy resistance and courage" in girls on the edge of adolescence. Her conversations with girls just beyond the sixth grade suggest to Gilligan that the threshold between girlhood and womanhood is a time when girls are pressured to become disconnected from their bodies, their anger, and their knowledge. "On a daily basis," Gilligan asserts, "girls receive lessons on what they can let out and what they must keep in, if they do not want to be spoken about by others as mad or bad or simply told they are wrong."<sup>7</sup> And so, at this age, girls lose confidence in themselves and begin to delegitimize their voices and perceptions. They fear that if they speak what they know they will be excluded from relationships, left unbearably alone. Under these circumstances, girls choose to not know what they know, beginning already the process of silencing the self that is so emblematic of women's depression.<sup>8</sup> For Gilligan, the only hope of breaking this cycle in women's development is for women to enter into

relationships with girls, not as perfect role models who keep girls from feeling their sadness and their anger, but as women "harboring within themselves a girl who lives in her body, who is insistent on speaking, who intensely desires relationships and knowledge, and who, perhaps at the time of adolescence, went underground or was overwhelmed."<sup>9</sup>

Gilligan's desire to see the boundaries between girls and women dissolve stems from a feminist vision that can imagine how, one day, the underground knowledge women have stored inside themselves since girlhood will cease to be merely psychologically corrosive and become, instead, a public resistance that will remake the world. Certainly, this vision is utopian and not attuned enough to multiple paths of resistance.<sup>10</sup> But its redeeming quality is the challenge it poses to the girl/woman dichotomy, suggesting a need to overcome the classical self/other dichotomy that structures most autobiographies of childhood. If the woman is, in some ways, already harbored in the girl, and the girl in the woman, then Richard Coe's definition of "the childhood"—as a literary structure that is "complete exactly at the point at which the immature self of childhood is conscious of its transformation into the mature self of the adult who is the narrator of the earlier experiences"<sup>11</sup>—will need to be changed to make room for the more elusive border positionings of girls and women.

*The House on Mango Street*, a coming-of-age story by the Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, is a model of how to construct a narrative that respects the fluidity of the border between the girl and the woman. The story exemplifies how the underground knowledge of girls can become the basis for a new social order. Yet Cisneros is always aware, unlike Gilligan, of

how ethnicity and class intersect with what girls know. In *The House on Mango Street*, written in a genre between poetry and prose, thirteen-year-old Esperanza, growing up in Chicago, reflects on the possibilities open to her as a Chicana from the barrio. Esperanza is given the space to tell her own story, but in a form that challenges autobiographical isolation. Her story is embedded within the web of stories that emerge from the destinies being chosen by the various girls who live on Mango Street, each of them in various stages of becoming women.

Almost all the girls have bought into a romanticism learned from storybooks and movies, which makes them want to grow up fast and get married, in hopes that this will be their ticket out of the barrio, their path to freedom and autonomy, to owning their houses, pillowcases, and dinner plates. But the shared experience of all these girls is that they end up confined to their houses, where they become virtual prisoners, like Rafaela, who "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at." Only on Tuesday nights, when her husband plays dominoes, can Rafaela lean out the window and allow herself to dream of a freer life, drinking the coconut or papaya juice she has asked the younger kids to bring her and wishing "there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room."

Esperanza is helped in her decision to maintain the young girl's questioning of romanticism by the fact that she is "an ugly daughter . . . the one nobody comes for." She chooses to model herself on the kind of woman she's seen in the movies "with red red lips . . . who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away." She wants a power that is her own. And, so, as she crosses the threshold into womanhood, Esperanza begins to wage a "quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the ta-

ble like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate." By starting to wage her quiet war against sexism before leaving her father's house, Esperanza can envision a house that will be totally her own, with "nobody's garbage to pick up after." Hers will be the power of the writer, the one who will tell the stories of the girl-women of Mango Street.<sup>12</sup>

Sandra Cisneros told me that it was precisely when she finished writing the vignette entitled "Beautiful and Cruel" that she stood up and said of her protagonist Esperanza, "This girl is a feminist." As she explained, *The House on Mango Street* is supposed to be told from a young girl's perspective, but it was written by her when she was a woman in her mid-twenties. In those years, as a counselor to Latina college students, Sandra Cisneros heard the stories of other barrio women struggling against poverty and sexism to get an education; and it was these stories, meshed with recollections of her own girlhood, that became the basis of her book.

Esperanza's voice is a young girl's voice inflected with the feminism and the politics of the woman Sandra Cisneros hoped she would one day become. For, indeed, Esperanza is a touch overly courageous and resistant for a girl her age. If one looks at how Sandra Cisneros wrote about herself in her diary at age thirteen, it is clear that she was not yet the Esperanza of her fiction. Her entry for August 23, 1967, announces: "I've made out some rules so when I get back to school: 1. I'll try to be more friendly and not so shy. 2. I'll try not to be so timid and answer more questions. 3. And I will try to be dressed prim and nice."<sup>13</sup>

SO IT seems clear to me now: the woman has to throw an anchor back to the girl she left behind, the girl who's

just barely treading water, the girl who is still worrying about why she's so shy and timid and not dressed nice enough.

The woman who forgets the girl she harbors inside herself runs the risk of meeting her again—as I did—in the lonely space of a house that is her own in name only.

**A**S THE Indian-English novelist Salman Rushdie has written, it is impossible for emigrants to recover the homelands they left behind. The best they can do is "to create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands."<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that the notion of an imaginary homeland is very helpful for thinking about childhood. Aren't all of our childhoods imaginary homelands? Aren't they fictions about places left behind? Homelands from which we have become exiled in the process of growing up and becoming adults? In becoming adults we are encouraged to put the child behind us, to disbelieve our own stories and our own childhoods.

Here I assert that the body is a homeland—a place where knowledge, memory, and pain is stored by the child. Later, the woman that the child has become will search and search and search in her adult language for that child, but find that, like Hansel and Gretel trying to return home, the place markers have vanished. She finds that the path back leads to an imaginary homeland—that space on the frontier of consciousness where, as James Olney put it, words fail, but meanings still exist; where meanings—unspoken, inchoate, raw, and throbbing with life—wait to be found, to be given voice.<sup>15</sup> Inevitably, living a childhood and writing about it as an adult are fundamentally different experiences, but the value of autobiography is



that it creates forms of embodied knowledge in which the (adult) self and the (child) other can rediscover and reaffirm their connectedness.<sup>16</sup>

The girl in the cast lives within the woman who won't move, can't move; the woman who has been stopped in her tracks, the woman who will not make up her mind as to how to place herself in relation to the lost homeland, the Cuba that is part memory, part forgetting, part longing. It is a homeland she doesn't know if she even has the right to claim as her own. It is a homeland so imaginary that she will only accept as evidence that it exists when her body forces her to stop, listen, and look.

**F**OR SEVERAL weeks after my return from Cuba, I have a distinct fear, when I set foot in the street, that I will not be able to find my way back to the Wedgwood blue Victorian house. I worry that a sudden oblivion will strike. The fear is so acute that I want to pin a piece of paper on my blouse with my address, just in case anybody finds me wandering around, lost.

Slowly the fear subsides. I calm down. I talk to myself in the supportive voice psychologists advise you to cultivate. I say, You went to Cuba and you came back. You see? It is possible. Don't be afraid anymore, little girl.

And during those weeks, when I seem to be driving in circles around Ann Arbor, I call to mind the teenagers who were returning from a discotheque dance at Murray the K's World in Roosevelt, Long Island, in 1966, when their car took off and flew, like a bird gone mad. And finally I stop hating them. Finally I mourn for them. Finally I pray that they are blessed among the dead.