

# Introduction

My need to revisit the women in my life starts with my mother. She left us slowly before we lost her—a pernicious crumbling that began in 2001 when she took her first trip to New York City, an eighty-three-year-old widow on a tour with her Shrine lady friends from Tacoma, Washington. As fate would have it, at nine in the morning on September 11, 2001, she was on a charter bus working its way through Manhattan’s streets toward Pier 83. When I finally reached her by phone late that afternoon, she was back in her downtown hotel, locked down in effect. They just turned the bus around, she said. She sounded frightened and disoriented—no wonder, the whole city in turmoil. The whole country.

What she didn’t tell me then on the phone was that she had fallen in the hotel’s bathroom, the first of many falls over the next few years as she grew more confused and the bills and dishes piled up around her. My mother always feared she would suffer the same fate as her mother, and she did. For five years my mother slipped away in the care of my brother, her favorite son, whom she would forget as well. Alzheimer’s, the doctor penciled in as the cause of death, an illness we had suspected but refused to acknowledge.

No one was talking. Not talking seems to be our family’s way. Reticence, accounts held close to the vest, mum’s the

word, lives and histories “not for you,” my grandmother said to me on more than one occasion. For years that had to serve. When I was growing up, the women in my family—aunts, grandmothers, my mother—set the domestic stage with their productions: food, caretaking, the house tidy and secure. Deaf to them, if they spoke to me much at all, I ran headlong out the back door each morning and returned pitch-stained for dinner, my attention still tree-bound in the woods of Hamlin Park. I assumed meals would grace our table forever.

“What did I know, what did I know?” Robert Hayden asks of his indifferent boyish self when he remembers how his father cared for him. Let me admit the same for the women who shaped my world from the contour of my feet to the haircut above my clean collar. They weren’t looking, I thought, as I escaped, trying to find myself. They spent their days industrious and fretful, both independent and dutiful, busy dawn to dusk setting the schedule and the limits wherein I ran my heedless ways. They kept house, kept up with their lives and jobs, kept an eye on me.

What I didn’t know as a boy was legion. Perhaps they preferred it that way. My wife, on the other hand, has spent the last forty-two years turning my gaze from childish things. She adopted my family as I did hers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers to discover. Then our daughter stood center stage, her growing up as baffling in its complications as the clouds. “Oh, Dad,” she would say, her grimace suggesting I was hopeless, my questions all trespass. Where did such weather come from, we’d ask ourselves? Now she has a son. It’s his turn to run headlong into the sun-filled days. Such is the universe. Left behind, I wish my mother could have seen him. In my daughter’s voice calling after her boy, I hear her mother. In my daughter’s worry I remember my own mother up late at night

and smoking, the windows dark and bills laid out on her kitchen table. My mother died in 2008. The more I imagine her over time, the closer she draws.

In “Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction,” Bret Lott says we write with a “desire not to let slip altogether away our lives as we have known them, and to put an order—again for better or worse—to our days.” I write about these women from memory and research and imagination—these remarkable women who precede my daughter. Aware of how to survive their time and place, each fashioned a life for herself: a great-great-grandmother who found the wherewithal to divorce her abusive husband in 1860 in Wisconsin, after thirty years of marriage and eight children. A “new woman” who rode the train alone from Boston at the turn of the twentieth century, a .41 caliber derringer in her purse, to look for work in Washington State. Her daughter, my aunt, who swam for the Washington Athletic Club, held a number of world records and won a bronze medal in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. And my wife’s grandmother, once “Queen for a Day,” who pulled up stakes and moved for the sake of a little girl.

And let me admit that by writing about them, I may have turned the light of betrayal on what they wished left in shadow, the enigmatic, the nuances of their internal lives, restrained or hidden by gender and class. I can only imagine their lives. They are real people. For years, I have been away. To write and revise is to see them again. To write about their lives is to write about my own life as well. Vivian Gornick explains, such is “the betrayal of intimacy necessary to the act of becoming oneself.”

One morning long ago, I left home. Now hearing my name called across the neighborhood at dusk, I look for a way back. Dead reckoning perhaps, I find myself in good company.

# Lesson Plan

Plan for the class to be over. But in the meantime, week after week, move closer, for she sits always to one side of the classroom near the window, the same chair. She will be the first to take the papers, instructions, announcements you have duplicated for them all, and she will take one and pass the rest. Be amazed why this is special. Move toward her one half a chair length per week. Arrive before she does, and nod and say hello, for she is lovely and composed, an off-white blouse, a sleeveless sweater, jeans, her blond hair tied back. She has blue-gray eyes when you look closely, trying not to dwell, saying thank you and how are you and hope your weekend went well, this Monday of the tenth week of class, a room full of eccentrically good students, a retired physician from the state penitentiary, the housewife novelist and fan of e. e. cummings, the grocer, the Vietnam vet.

Every day you are taken first by how she looks, upright, ankles crossed, but every day it's her timing that amazes, for she has saved you on more than one occasion, the talkers in this class gifted and spontaneous and when the conversation stalls or meanders, she raises her hand. *Would it help to find a central metaphor?* she might ask, brow furrowed, a question she must know leads you to an answer you know, that settles the air back onto the poem at hand. She listens and nods. Finally, it's her writing all these weeks

that has won you over late at night in lamplight when you hear her voice and understand maybe a little how she composes her world in simple vignettes. Here in clean, precise prose she rides in the backseat of her parents' car, wondering through the rain-streaked window what might become of her on some other road on some other evening.

When you hold the semester's last conference at a table in the cafeteria, announced in the syllabus, she will arrive on time and you will lose your train of thought, margin notes forgotten. Careful. And when you blurt out, "Who are you? I'd really like to know," she looks caught in the rain. No, no. Too personal. Foolish. Better to have addressed her work and what she likes to read, *The Lord of the Rings* you will find out later and large classics and mysteries started in the middle. Here is a moment to recover. "Sorry, that was out of line," you might say but she will not forget over these next forty minutes what you have asked, and maybe she wonders herself why in this class unlike any other she has felt so inclined to speak out, has offered her opinion about poems and stories, what feels genuine and moving, what seems true. And now the rain falls.

*Am I careless?* she might question as well. Hadn't she been warned by her overbearing family beneath a roof of narrow tolerances, the dinner candles starved in the thin, critical air? Danger. But both of you, student and instructor, know the conversation has changed. She gathers her books and notebook and must leave for work, she says, and sorry the semester is over and thank you, a formality you return, saying how you have enjoyed having her in class and so admired her work and hope to see her again, a simple courtesy these words, she may think, that drift after her and dissipate in the afternoon air. But you know what you mean. You want to see more of her, to draw closer, and have no idea how to do this now the artifice of the class has expired. She is twenty, and you are twenty-six and

stumped.

Your roommate Brian suggests an intermediary. You live in a dump—three horse-kicked acres, a two-bedroom house furnished with wire spools, boxes, palooka couches, folding chairs, and two German shepherds, one classically saddled and kind, the other blond and murderous. “I think a friend of mine Julie knows her,” your roommate offers. “She can ask whether your fair student would go out with you. By the way, aren’t there rules about this sort of thing?”

“The class is over,” you say, not sure about what’s acceptable at this small college, the precedents if any, the ethics, the application of the term “moral turpitude,” printed in boldface across your contract like a prophecy to firing. Lose the contract. Don’t ask.

“Julie will talk to her and let you know, and maybe the four of us could head for the Blue Mountains to cut a Christmas tree.”

You wait. His friend Julie doesn’t call. You don’t have her phone number, but you do have your student’s number retrieved from the registrar’s office for “business” purposes. It is December 15, and the class has been over for a week. Still no word. “Did she find out?” you ask your roommate.

“Got me,” he says, oblivious to your pacing back and forth before the phone.

The next step must be anti-Prufrockian. Time is running out along with your patience. If you call first, will she think you’re too forward? She wished the semester longer, no? Or will she say, “That’s not what I meant. That’s not what I meant at all.”

OK. It’s time to dial, number by number. It doesn’t matter that your roommate’s friend had called and asked your good student what she thought about the possibility of going out with you, her instructor, maybe something simple like coffee or a show, the conventional no more no

less. And what you don't need to know is that your good student had said absolutely not, that's not done, I couldn't think of it. What a horrifying prospect.

The problem, or maybe your good fortune, is that Julie didn't relay any of this to you, and now the phone is ringing, and your student's mother answers. When you introduce yourself, she says yes as if she knows who you are. You ask to speak to Penny, for that is your good student's name. She must be standing close by because she answers at once.

"Remember me?" you ask, though it's lame you realize. "How are things?"

"I'm glad the semester's over [*oh, no*]. You?"

"Fine. Thanks. Still finishing up, you know, papers and things. But I was wondering [*here we go*] this Friday if you'd like to go with us to cut a Christmas tree in the Blue Mountains, you know, just outside of Walla Walla, maybe for the afternoon, a couple of hours in the afternoon? Back by five."

"Well . . . [*Interminable wait. Ear buzz and rush. Oh, to be deferential now, useful, a bit obtuse*] . . . sure."

"Yes? Terrific." You're pleased, though baffled. How can you lose three quarters of your vocabulary in a thirty-second conversation? Don't worry. The words will come back. You will need them.



The vehicle will be a 1962 Volkswagen Bus, a twenty-three window, red and white Samba, with forty-one brake horsepower, three OK tires and the spare. Your roommate drives and you hold a piece of paper with directions to find your student, her family's house west of Pasco at the end of a long driveway.

One complication. It's snowing, not a blizzard but

steady. Unusual for this time in this country, big flakes cover the streets and the yards and the driveway that Brian tries to negotiate, unsure now of the boundaries. Her house lies up ahead, but how to get there? Where to park? The snow covers everything. Do you turn left or right at the house? Although it's early in your lesson plan, where you park yourself is crucial. You'll be given a chance to retake this quiz, but today your roommate decides to try circumnavigation. Oh, what they must have seen from inside—a Volkswagen Bus with two mustached guys, hair sticking out from their stocking caps, pattering by the front door, the side bedrooms, the master bedroom, the patio in front of the living room, the breakfast nook, the kitchen, and finally skidding so slightly before the garage door they missed on their first time around. You have arrived.

Penny is out the back door fast. It will be some time before she tells you that her father's favorite pastime is tending his four acres of lawn you have driven slowly across. Today she smiles. Someone waves from the door. When you slide open the Bus door, you extend your hand. She takes it and steps up to sit beside you, and from then on—the Bus accelerating first to Julie's house and then south toward the Blue Mountains—the gears shift. The beginning is silence and small talk and snow outside the window and portends nothing of the complications you will discover in this relationship and what you will be asked and how moment-by-moment will unfold in the community of her family. Your future will study a new history, albums and narratives, the mythologies of Norway, Wisconsin, and North Dakota. Count on daily phone calls. Soon enough there will be tribunals of aunts and dinner each Sunday, and awkward silences when the family gathers on the Fourth to eat potato salad and burned dogs. Fireworks. Camping trips with friends. Movies and walks and letters when you part for more than a day. Long week-



end trips to Tacoma. Fishing at Westport. Vancouver B.C. museums and walks through old-growth forests. Brothers and cousins and sisters and their children. And then six months later she will move away to attend another school and you will take a leave from teaching, by coincidence, to attend the same school. You will spend a year together, walking to class and back, shopping, cooking meals and sitting at a small rented table in a small apartment. A year for study and living.

But this is all yet to come, your asking her beneath the Narrows Bridge in Tacoma to marry you, and her saying yes, and how she will insist on being married at home in Pasco. How you will buy a green-checked, bell-bottomed suit for this very occasion, your fashion sense outdone only by your best man's blue-checked sports coat, blue pants, and white bucks, this being 1974. You will never have more hair than on that day, sunny and bright with champagne and good wishes, many friends having traveled a long way to wish you well and honor your parents, who stand in the receiving line as if blessed.

But not yet. The Christmas tree in the Blue Mountains lies ahead. From the Forest Service, you have purchased one red-tag tree permit, pine or fir. You would like her to choose, and when you reach the national forest, the Bus parked, having slid into a ditch, you and Penny walk, lunches packed in your backpack, a thermos of tea, the snow ankle deep. This one? Or that? Too thin. Too short. Who can decide? Tree after tree, green and fragrant in the falling snow, the elevation enough to fog her breathing as you walk behind her up a slight incline, the Volkswagen in sight back down the hill. Her parka is blue and her knit hat gray with red striping. She turns and asks if you have decided just as you reach down to cup a handful of snow and pack it hand over hand.

She says "Oh, no," and reaches down into the snow

herself only to slip both feet out and land rear first. There she is sitting in the snow, Penny, you standing over her, watching, snowball in hand, frozen a moment. Her cheeks are red in the cold air, her hair still tucked beneath her cap. She is not smiling and leans on one hand, the semester over finally, and lifts the other toward you and says, "This is where you help me up."

Yes. Of course. And you extend your hand, unaware at that moment there will be no other future for you besides her, thinking only that she is no longer your student, that you have much to learn, that you will need to find a new vocabulary for her and you and that may take forever. Take stock of yourself and invent and prepare. Start with the tree. A fir you both agree is gorgeous, taller than she and shorter than you, the branches full around. You cut it with a hand saw, the pitch redolent, and bind the tree with cords, sanction it with a red tag, and tie it on top of the Bus, which you both help push out of the ditch, the engine whining, the tires spinning and catching on the road back. Then it's a cup of wine shared between you all and the radio playing as the evening settles in early this short day in December, the air warm inside the Bus as she removes her cap and leans her head, sleepy on your shoulder.

Not far now. You will put your arm around her and rest your cheek against the top of her head. She smells like mountain air, pine and cedar, and when you kiss her forehead once, she settles in, her cap in hand all the way home, where her father, in Penny's afternoon absence, has lined the driveway with pylons (his firewood) on both sides clear to the back door that stands open now. He will wait there to look you up and down and shake your hand for the first time.