

Are You
My
Mother?

A Comic Drama

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
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The Ordinary Devoted Mother





WHILE ENGAGED IN SOME SORT OF HOME-IMPROVEMENT PROJECT, I INADVERTENTLY BLOCK MY EXIT FROM A DANK CELLAR.



I START TO PANIC.

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS TO SQUEEZE THROUGH THE SMALL, SPIDERY WINDOW.



I WALK ALONG THE BROOK, LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO CROSS.

THE STEPPING STONES ARE UNDERWATER.

THE POOL IS DEEP AND MURKY. IT'S WARM OUT. I'M NOT WEARING ANYTHING I NEED TO WORRY ABOUT GETTING WET.

I HAVE SOME CONCERN ABOUT THE DIRTY WATER...



..BUT THIS ONLY SLIGHTLY DIMINISHES A SUBLINE FEELING OF SURRENDER.



THIS STORY BEGINS WHEN I BEGAN TO TELL ANOTHER STORY.



I HAD THE DREAM ABOUT THE BROOK RIGHT BEFORE I TOLD MY MOTHER I WAS WRITING A MEMOIR ABOUT MY FATHER.



THE EMOTION OF THE DREAM STUCK WITH ME FOR DAYS. I HAD GOTTEN MYSELF OUT OF A DEAD PLACE AND PLUNGED WITH BLIND TRUST INTO A VITAL, SENSUOUS ONE.



I FELT KIND OF LIKE I DID TWENTY YEARS EARLIER, WHEN I WAS PREPARING TO TELL HER I WAS A LESBIAN.



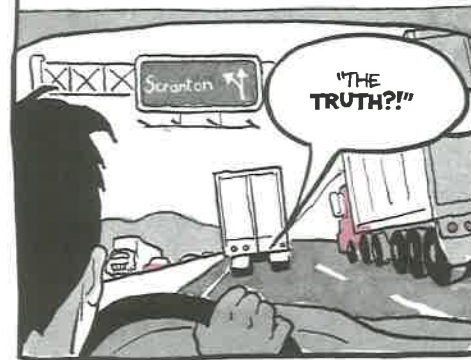
AND KIND OF LIKE I DID FIVE YEARS BEFORE THAT, WHEN I WAS WORKING UP THE COURAGE TO TELL HER I'D GOTTEN MY FIRST PERIOD. THAT HAD TAKEN ME SIX MONTHS.



THIS STORY--A MEMOIR ABOUT MY MOTHER--COULD BEGIN WITH EITHER OF THOSE SCENES.



BUT AS I CONSIDER MOVING THE BEGINNING FURTHER BACK IN TIME, BEFORE THE COMING OUT, BEFORE THE FIRST PERIOD...



...I SEE THAT PERHAPS THE REAL PROBLEM WITH THIS MEMOIR ABOUT MY MOTHER IS THAT IT HAS NO BEGINNING.



SORT OF LIKE HOW I'D UNDERSTOOD HUMAN REPRODUCTION AS A CHILD. I WAS AN EGG INSIDE MY MOTHER WHEN SHE WAS STILL AN EGG INSIDE HER MOTHER, AND SO FORTH AND SO ON.



EVEN IF I'D EVER HAD THE SLIGHTEST URGE TO REPRODUCE, IT'S TOO LATE NOW. I'M RUNNING OUT OF EGGS.

MY CLOCKWORKLIKE MENSTRUAL CYCLE SKIPPED ITS FIRST BEAT THE VERY WEEK, IN MY FORTY-FIFTH YEAR, THAT I SAT DOWN TO BEGIN WRITING ABOUT MY MOTHER.

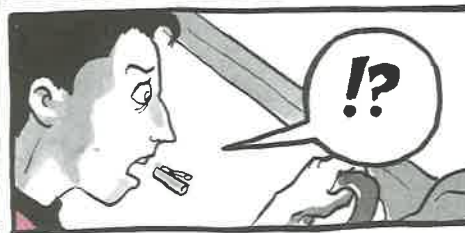
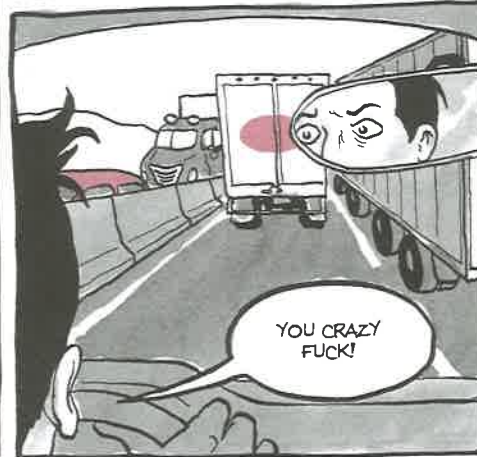
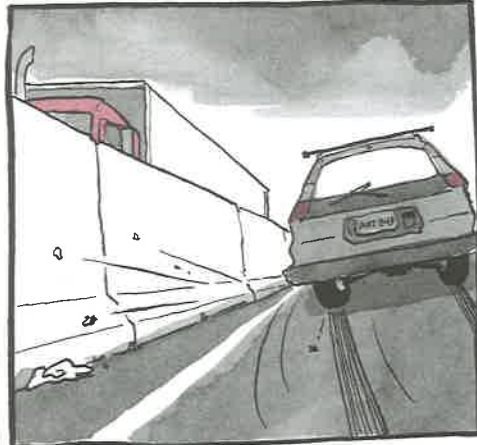


OF COURSE, THE POINT AT WHICH I BEGAN TO WRITE THE STORY IS NOT THE SAME AS THE POINT AT WHICH THE STORY BEGINS.



YOU CAN'T LIVE AND WRITE AT THE SAME TIME.



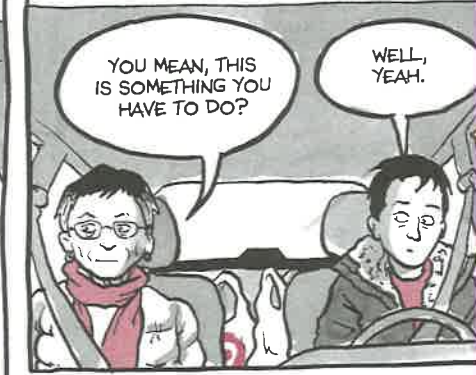


IT HAD BEEN A STROEHMANN SUNBEAM BREAD TRUCK THAT KILLED MY FATHER...
...THAT MY FATHER LIKELY JUMPED IN FRONT OF.



AFTER SUCH A CURIOUSLY LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE BRUSH WITH DEATH, TELLING MY MOTHER ABOUT THE BOOK LOOMED RATHER SMALLER.

AND A FEW DAYS LATER, RETURNING WITH HER FROM A STRING OF ERRANDS, I DID IT.





ON THE WHOLE, IT WENT AS WELL AS I COULD HAVE HOPED. MOM'S BOYFRIEND, BOB, CAME OVER FOR DINNER THAT NIGHT.

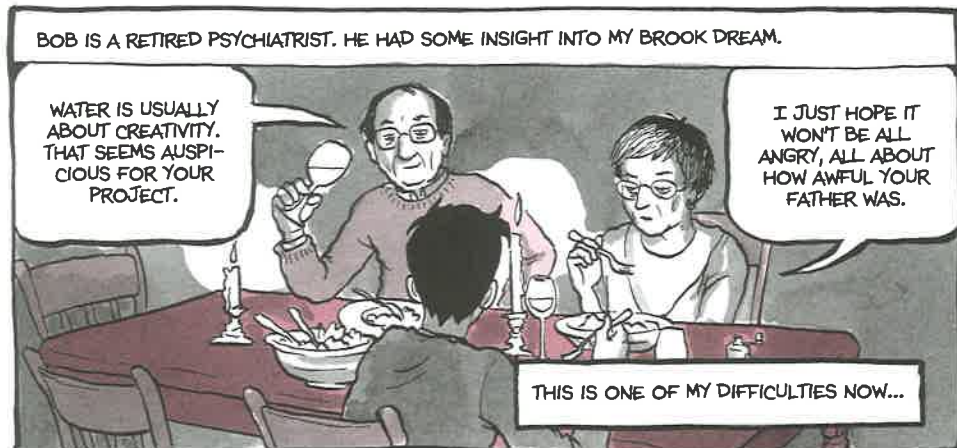
SHE SAYS IT'S SOMETHING SHE HAS TO DO.

AND YOU'RE OKAY WITH IT?



I FEEL RECKLESS. TELL EVERYONE.

I'M GONNA GO DO MY PUZZLE.

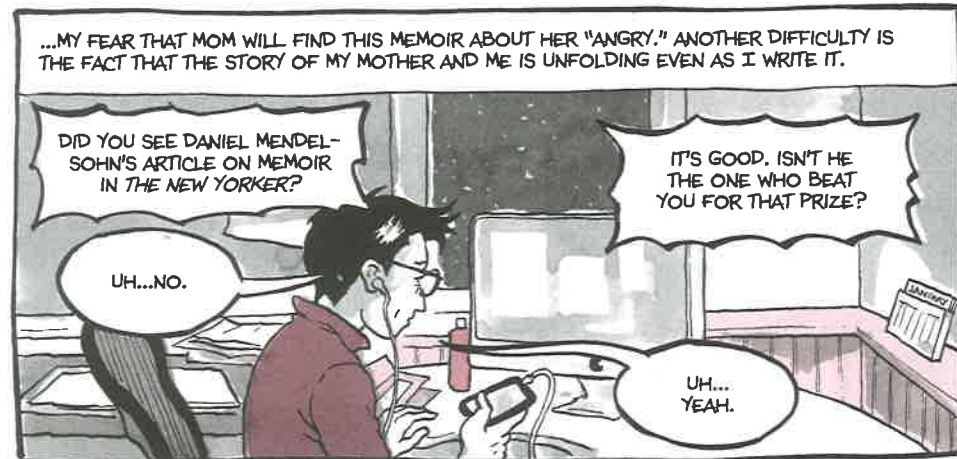


BOB IS A RETIRED PSYCHIATRIST. HE HAD SOME INSIGHT INTO MY BROOK DREAM.

WATER IS USUALLY ABOUT CREATIVITY. THAT SEEMS AUSPICIOUS FOR YOUR PROJECT.

I JUST HOPE IT WON'T BE ALL ANGRY, ALL ABOUT HOW AWFUL YOUR FATHER WAS.

THIS IS ONE OF MY DIFFICULTIES NOW...



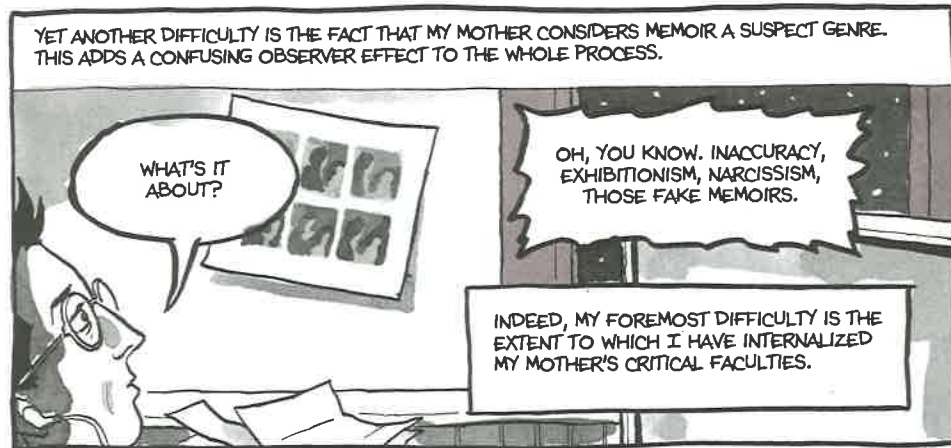
...MY FEAR THAT MOM WILL FIND THIS MEMOIR ABOUT HER "ANGRY." ANOTHER DIFFICULTY IS THE FACT THAT THE STORY OF MY MOTHER AND ME IS UNFOLDING EVEN AS I WRITE IT.

DID YOU SEE DANIEL MENDEL-SOHN'S ARTICLE ON MEMOIR IN THE NEW YORKER?

IT'S GOOD. ISN'T HE THE ONE WHO BEAT YOU FOR THAT PRIZE?

UH...NO.

UH... YEAH.

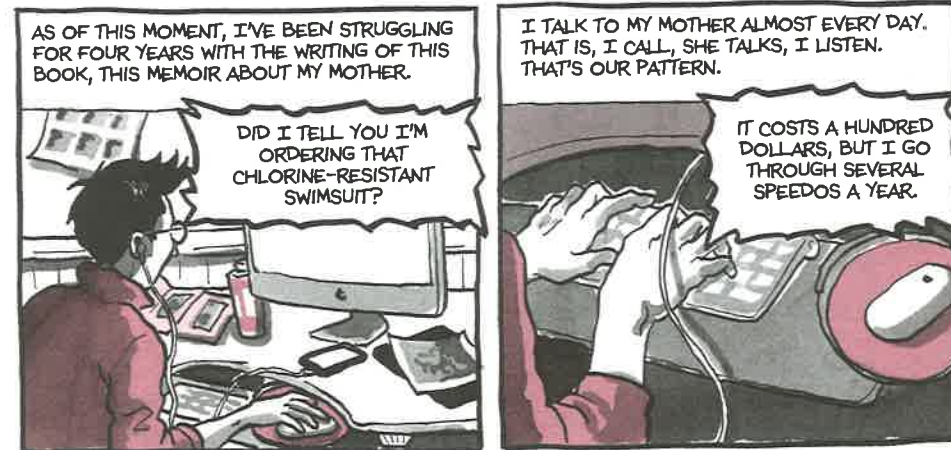


YET ANOTHER DIFFICULTY IS THE FACT THAT MY MOTHER CONSIDERS MEMOIR A SUSPECT GENRE. THIS ADDS A CONFUSING OBSERVER EFFECT TO THE WHOLE PROCESS.

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

OH, YOU KNOW. INACCURACY, EXHIBITIONISM, NARCISSISM, THOSE FAKE MEMOIRS.

INDEED, MY FOREMOST DIFFICULTY IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH I HAVE INTERNALIZED MY MOTHER'S CRITICAL FACULTIES.

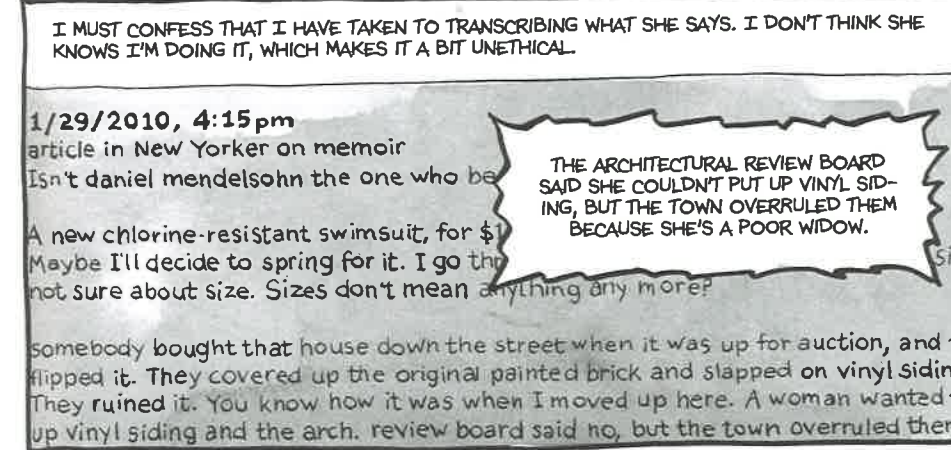


AS OF THIS MOMENT, I'VE BEEN STRUGGLING FOR FOUR YEARS WITH THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK, THIS MEMOIR ABOUT MY MOTHER.

I TALK TO MY MOTHER ALMOST EVERY DAY. THAT IS, I CALL, SHE TALKS, I LISTEN. THAT'S OUR PATTERN.

DID I TELL YOU I'M ORDERING THAT CHLORINE-RESISTANT SWIMSUIT?

IT COSTS A HUNDRED DOLLARS, BUT I GO THROUGH SEVERAL SPEEDOS A YEAR.



I MUST CONFESS THAT I HAVE TAKEN TO TRANSCRIBING WHAT SHE SAYS. I DON'T THINK SHE KNOWS I'M DOING IT, WHICH MAKES IT A BIT UNETHICAL.

1/29/2010, 4:15 pm
article in New Yorker on memoir
Isn't daniel mendelsohn the one who be

THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD SAID SHE COULDN'T PUT UP VINYL SIDING, BUT THE TOWN OVERRULED THEM BECAUSE SHE'S A POOR WIDOW.

A new chlorine-resistant swimsuit, for \$1
Maybe I'll decide to spring for it. I go th
not sure about size. Sizes don't mean anything any more?

somebody bought that house down the street when it was up for auction, and t
flipped it. They covered up the original painted brick and slapped on vinyl siding
They ruined it. You know how it was when I moved up here. A woman wanted t
up vinyl siding and the arch. review board said no, but the town overruled them

BUT I WANT TO CAPTURE HER VOICE, HER PRECISE WORDING, HER DEADPAN HUMOR. I DON'T THINK I COULD POSSIBLY RE-CREATE IT ON MY OWN.



WELL, I'M A POOR WIDOW, TOO, AND I DON'T WANT TO LOOK AT VINYL SIDING!

I'M TRYING SO HARD TO GET DOWN WHAT SHE'S SAYING THAT I'M NOT REALLY LISTENING PROPERLY.



UH HUH...

I WOULD HAVE MORE SCRUPLES ABOUT THIS, I LIKE TO THINK, IF I DIDN'T SUSPECT THAT SHE WAS NOT SO MUCH TALKING TO ME AS DRAFTING HER OWN DAILY JOURNAL ENTRY OUT LOUD.



MY MOTHER HAS ALWAYS KEPT A JOURNAL. SHE INSISTS THIS IS JUST A RECORD OF THINGS SHE'S DONE. OF EXTERNAL, AS OPPOSED TO INTERNAL, EXPERIENCE.

I SHARE THIS COMPULSION FOR KEEPING TRACK OF LIFE.

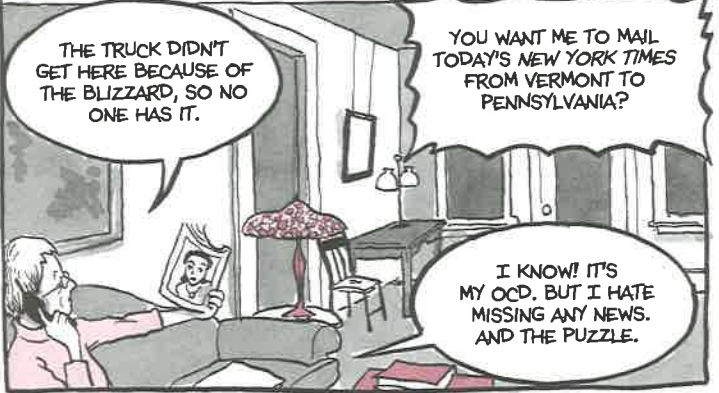


MY MOTHER LOGS HER DAILY ACTIVITIES IN HER JOURNAL. AND EVERY DAY SHE READS ANOTHER JOURNAL—THE NEW YORK TIMES.



IF YOU'RE GOING OUT, CAN YOU GET ME A COPY OF TODAY'S PAPER?

NOT ONLINE. THE NEWSPRINT, THE THING ITSELF.



THE TRUCK DIDN'T GET HERE BECAUSE OF THE BLIZZARD, SO NO ONE HAS IT.

YOU WANT ME TO MAIL TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES FROM VERMONT TO PENNSYLVANIA?

I KNOW! IT'S MY OCD. BUT I HATE MISSING ANY NEWS. AND THE PUZZLE.

I OFTEN THINK OF THIS PASSAGE FROM VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DIARY: "WHAT A DISGRACEFUL LAPSE! NOTHING ADDED TO MY DISQUISITION, & LIFE ALLOWED TO WASTE LIKE A TAP LEFT RUNNING. ELEVEN DAYS UNRECORDED."

I STARTED MY OWN DIARY AS A CHILD. AND WHEN A SPELL OF OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER MADE MY ENTRIES TOO TIME-CONSUMING, MY MOTHER SAT ON MY BED AND TOOK DICTATION.



MOTHER WENT TO SCHOOL TO SUBSTITUTE TEACH. MARY-JO BROUGHT IN A LOVE TEST THAT WE DID ON THE BUS.

GETTING HER UNDIVIDED ATTENTION WAS A RARE TREAT. IT FELT MIRACULOUS, ACTUALLY—LIKE PERSUADING A HUMMINGBIRD TO PERCH ON YOUR FINGER.



I DIDN'T GET MUCH DONE. I WENT TO MY PIANO LESSON. I GOT BACH'S MINUET.

SHE WAS LISTENING TO ME. WHATEVER I SAID, SHE WROTE DOWN.



I FOUND THIS CALMING. COMPOSING

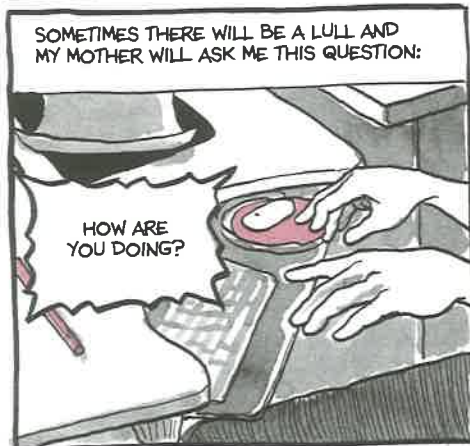


MY MOTHER COMPOSED ME AS I NOW COMPOSE HER.

SHE LIKES TO USE SCRUBBING BUBBLES, BUT I TOLD HER TO USE THE COMET.

FLICKATICKA
TACKATICKA
TIC

THE RUNNING TAP OF HER LIFE FLOWS THROUGH MY FINGERS.



SOMETIMES THERE WILL BE A LULL AND MY MOTHER WILL ASK ME THIS QUESTION:

HOW ARE YOU DOING?

MY CONSIDERABLE VERBAL APPTITUDE OFTEN FAILS ME COMPLETELY WHEN I'M TALKING TO MY MOTHER.

When she cleans the bathroom to use the comet.

She asks how I'm doing.

THROUGHOUT MY TWENTIES AND THIRTIES, SHE NEVER ASKED ME ABOUT MY LIFE.



EVEN NOW, WHEN SHE POSES THE QUESTION POINT-BLANK, I KNOW HER ATTENTION FOR MY ANSWER IS LIMITED.

UHH...



THE PRESSURE TO BE CONCISE, ENTERTAINING, AND OPPOSITE IN THIS SMALL WINDOW IS FIERCE. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, I PASS WITH A "FINE. NOTHING NEW TO REPORT."

I...



BUT I KNOW I CAN'T BLAME HER FOR DOMINATING OUR CONVERSATIONS IF I REFUSE TO PARTICIPATE. SO SOMETIMES, LIKE TODAY, I DIVULGE SOMETHING.

I HAVE TO REWRITE MY BOOK.

WHAT?!



I HAVE TO START OVER. I...I FEEL LIKE I'M WRITING AROUND SOMETHING.

HA!



SHE'S LAUGHING IN WHAT SEEMS LIKE AN UNDERSTANDING WAY. SHE DOESN'T ASK ME WHAT IT IS THAT I'M WRITING AROUND.

YOU HAVE TOO MANY STRANDS!



SHE KNOWS THIS BOOK IS ABOUT MY RELATIONSHIP WITH HER, AND SHE SEEMS TO FEEL ABOUT IT ROUGHLY THE WAY SHE FELT ABOUT THE BOOK ON MY FATHER--RESIGNED.

WELL, I READ IT IN THE WRONG ORDER. I COULDN'T FIGURE OUT THE PAGINATION. I'LL HAVE TO LOOK AT IT AGAIN.

I HAD RECENTLY SENT HER WHAT I THOUGHT WAS THE FIRST CHAPTER. WE DISCUSSED IT, FOR ABOUT THREE MINUTES, DURING MY CHRISTMAS VISIT.

THE CHAPTER HAD BEEN A TURGID ABSTRACTION ABOUT THE SELF AND DESIRE THAT BARELY MENTIONED MY MOTHER.



HER TONE WAS WEARY BUT NOT UNKIND. SHE SEEMED TO BE SAYING, "WRITE ABOUT ME IF YOU MUST, BUT DON'T ASK ME TO APPROVE IT."



TWO NIGHTS AFTER RECEIVING THIS MIXED BLESSING, I HAD AN ECHO OF THE BROOK DREAM I'D HAD TEN YEARS EARLIER. I WAS SOMEWHAT BETTER EQUIPPED THIS TIME.



I KNEW I COULD MAKE IT, BUT AT THE SAME TIME I WAS TERRIFIED OF GETTING STUCK DOWN THERE. I STALLED, FUSSING WITH MY MASK TO GET A GOOD SEAL.



FINALLY, I HAD DETERMINED TO JUMP...

...WHEN I WOKE UP.



I TOOK THIS DREAM, LIKE THE EARLIER ONE, AS A GOOD SIGN, AN INDICATION THAT I WAS GETTING SOMEWHERE WITH MY WRITING.

THE ONLY WAY OUT WAS TO DIVE INTO THE WATER AND SWIM UNDERNEATH THE ROCK LEDGE. IF I DID THIS, I'D COME UP ON THE OTHER SIDE, UNDER THE OPEN SKY.

BUT WITHIN A FEW DAYS, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT "GETTING SOMEWHERE" MEANT STARTING OVER. THIS FELT ODDLY ENCOURAGING.



LIKE MY MOTHER, I KEEP A LOG OF THE EVENTS OF DAILY, EXTERNAL LIFE. BUT UNLIKE HER, I ALSO RECORD A GREAT DEAL OF INFORMATION ABOUT MY INTERNAL LIFE.

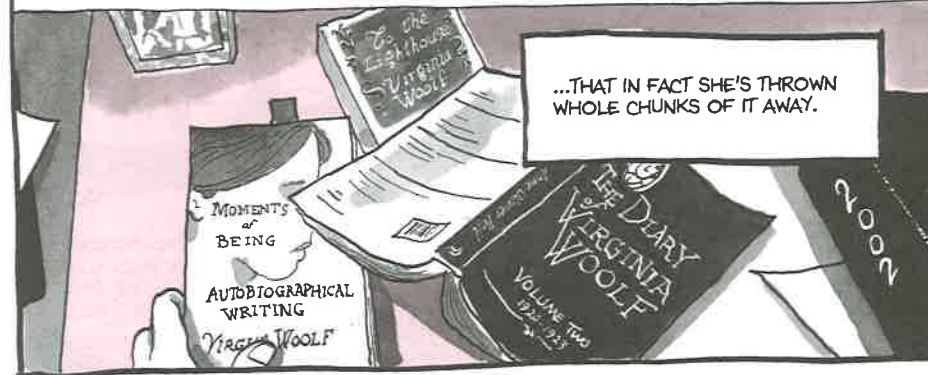
ALTHOUGH I'M OFTEN CONFUSED ABOUT PRECISELY WHERE THE DEMARCATION LIES.

VIRGINIA WOOLF SEEMS TO HAVE CONSIDERED HER OWN DIARY TO BE MORE OF AN EXTERNAL RECORD, AN ACCOUNT OF "LIFE" RATHER THAN "THE SOUL."

Monday 19 February

How it would interest me if this diary were ever to become a real diary: something in which I could see changes, trace moods developing; but then I should have to speak of the soul, & did I not banish the soul when I began? What happens is, as usual, that I'm going to write about the soul, & life breaks in. Talking of diaries sets me thinking of old Kate, in the dining room at 4 Rosary Gardens; & how she opened the cabinet (wh. I remember) & there in a row on a shelf were her diaries from Jan 1 1877.¹³ Some were brown; others red; all the same to a t. And I made her read an entry; one of many thousand days, like pebbles

WOOLF'S DISMISSAL OF "THE SOUL" REMINDS ME A BIT OF MY MOTHER'S INSISTENCE THAT HER OWN JOURNAL IS LITTLE MORE THAN A COMPLETED TO-DO LIST, THAT SHE NEVER RE-READS IT...



I'M SURE THESE THINGS ARE TRUE.

BUT THE WAY SHE SAYS THEM FEELS LIKE AN IMPLIED CRITICISM. AS IF SHE'S COMPARING HER OWN SELFLESSNESS TO MY SELF-ABSORPTION.

BUT OF COURSE THAT'S JUST EVIDENCE OF MY SELF-ABSORPTION. MY MOTHER IS PROBABLY NOT THINKING ANYTHING LIKE THIS.



IN FACT, MY DESIRE TO THINK THAT SHE'S THINKING OF ME AT ALL IS A BIT PATHETIC.

SHE LOOMS MUCH LARGER IN MY PSYCHE THAN I LOOM IN HERS. WOLF SAYS THAT HER OWN MOTHER, WHO DIED WHEN VIRGINIA WAS THIRTEEN, OBSESSED HER UNTIL SHE WAS FORTY-FOUR.

when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe.

LET'S LEAVE ASIDE THE ANNOYING RAPIDITY WITH WHICH SHE DISPATCHED THIS MASTERPIECE. THE POINT IS, WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARD.

when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. But what is

I'VE BEEN IN THERAPY FOR NEARLY MY ENTIRE ADULT LIFE AND HAVE NOT LAID MY DEEPLY FELT EMOTIONS ABOUT MY MOTHER TO REST.



MY LIFE IS A MESS. I'VE BEEN IN A REALLY SOLID RELATIONSHIP FOR EIGHT YEARS...

BUT I KEEP GETTING ATTRACTED TO OTHER PEOPLE.

I STARTED SEEING MY CURRENT THERAPIST, CAROL, TEN YEARS AGO.

I'M WRITING THIS MEMOIR ABOUT MY DAD'S SUICIDE AND FOR EVERY SENTENCE I PUT DOWN, I DELETE TWO.



I JUST FEEL LIKE I'M IN MY OWN FUCKING WAY ALL THE TIME.

IT'S LIKE...LIKE I'M HOBBLING SOMEHOW.



MY PRESENTING SYMPTOM WAS SOMETHING THAT SHE WOULD LATER CALL "UNDOING."

OR NOT. I COULD BE TOTALLY MAKING THAT UP.

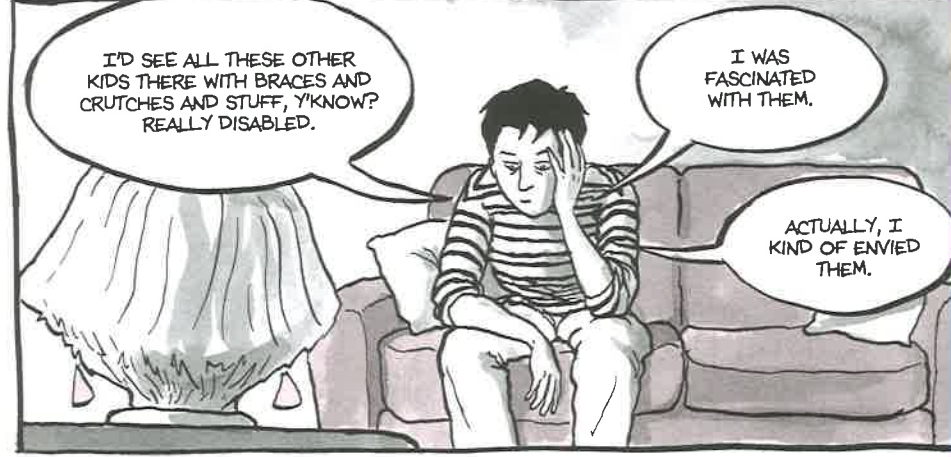
I DON'T KNOW!

BUT LONG BEFORE CAROL, THERE WAS JOCELYN. I STARTED SEEING HER WHEN I WAS TWENTY-SIX.



WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I'D GET MY MOM TO PLAY THE "CRIPPLED CHILD" GAME WITH ME.

I HAD, LIKE, FLAT FEET OR SOMETHING, AND HAD TO WEAR CORRECTIVE SHOES. AND EVERY SO OFTEN I'D GO TO THE HOSPITAL FOR A CHECKUP.



I'D SEE ALL THESE OTHER KIDS THERE WITH BRACES AND CRUTCHES AND STUFF, Y'KNOW? REALLY DISABLED.

I WAS FASCINATED WITH THEM.

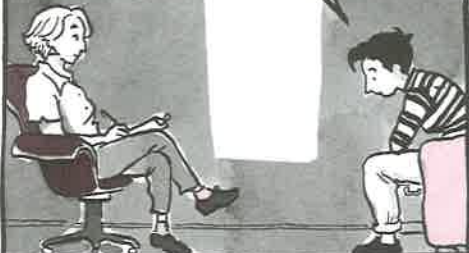
ACTUALLY, I KIND OF ENVIED THEM.

I'D PRETEND I WAS A "CRIPPLED" CHILD, AND MOM WOULD PLAY ALONG WITH IT.



YOU'LL NEED THESE CRUTCHES.

IT WAS SO FUN. WHEREVER I WENT WITH THE FANTASY, SHE WAS RIGHT THERE.



FOR MY FIRST TWO YEARS WITH CAROL, I JUST SAT ON THE COUCH. BUT THEN I BEGAN LYING DOWN ON IT. IN THE TIME I'VE BEEN SEEING HER, SHE HAS BECOME A PSYCHOANALYST.



WHY AM I LYING HERE?

ANALYSIS AND THERAPY ARE DIFFERENT IN MANY WAYS, BUT THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT IS A BIG ONE.



I SHOULD BE WORKING.

IN THIS POSITION THE PATIENT CAN'T SEE THE ANALYST. AND LYING DOWN, IN THEORY, ALLOWS MORE READY ACCESS TO THE UNCONSCIOUS.



I'M NEVER GONNA GET THIS FUCKING BOOK DONE.

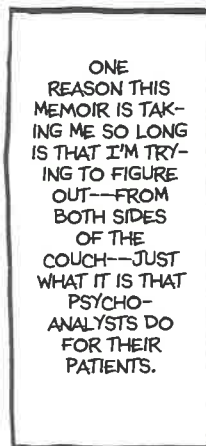
ANALYSIS IS IN NO HURRY TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THINGS. THERAPY IS USUALLY A SHORTER-TERM PROPOSITION, MORE FOCUSED ON SYMPTOM RELIEF.



I CAN'T TELL WHETHER IT'S NORMAL CREATIVE STRIFE OR MENOPAUSAL INSANITY.

ALSO, A PSYCHOANALYST MUST UNDERGO A TRAINING ANALYSIS OF THEIR OWN.

ONE REASON THIS MEMOIR IS TAKING ME SO LONG IS THAT I'M TRYING TO FIGURE OUT—FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE COUCH—JUST WHAT IT IS THAT PSYCHOANALYSTS DO FOR THEIR PATIENTS.



IN PARTICULAR, I HAVE BEEN STUDYING THE WORK OF THE BRITISH PSYCHOANALYST AND PEDIATRICIAN DONALD WINNICOTT.

PLUS I STILL CAN'T FIGURE OUT HOW TO FIT WINNICOTT IN.

IT HAS TAKEN ME SEVERAL YEARS TO FEEL AS IF I HAVE EVEN A SLENDER GRASP OF HIS CURIOUSLY COMPELLING IDEAS.



WHAT IS IT ABOUT HIM THAT YOU'RE SO DRAWN TO?



I WANT HIM TO BE MY MOTHER.

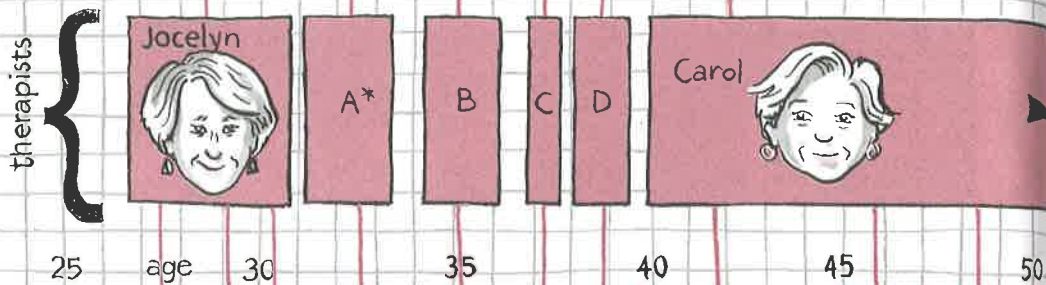
WINNICOTT WAS ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY.

FREUD SAW THE INDIVIDUAL AS AN ISOLATE, AN EGO SEEKING SATISFACTION OF PRIMITIVE INSTINCTUAL DRIVES.

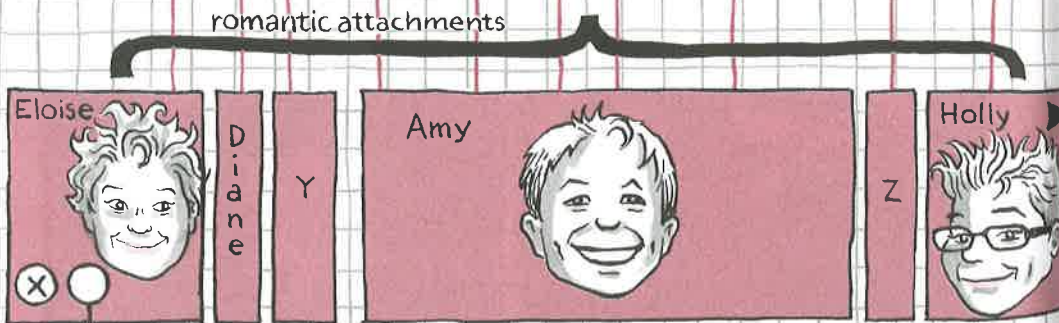
BUT WINNICOTT IS FAMOUS FOR SAYING, "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A BABY..."

"...IF YOU SHOW ME A BABY YOU CERTAINLY SHOW ME ALSO SOMEONE CARING FOR THE BABY..."

HE WOULD SEE IN THE MOTHER-INFANT RELATIONSHIP A PARADIGM FOR WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN THE ANALYST AND THE PATIENT.



AND HE WOULD USE HIS EXPERIENCE ANALYZING PATIENTS TO GO BACK AND PLUMB THE MYSTERIOUS PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE NEWBORN. IT'S IN THOSE EARLIEST DAYS, HE FOUND, THAT THE PARTICULAR WAY WE RELATE TO OBJECTS--INDEED, THE WAY WE RELATE TO THE ENTIRE OUTSIDE WORLD--IS DETERMINED.



BUT WINNICOTT ALSO BELIEVED PASSIONATELY IN "THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL...FROM THE WORD 'GO' TO THE TIME OF DEATH FROM OLD AGE."

AND HIS OWN LIFE WOULD EXEMPLIFY A PERPETUAL UNFURLING OF THE SELF INTO THE WORLD IN A VIVID WAY.

*LETTERS DESIGNATE CHARACTERS WHO DON'T FIGURE INTO THIS BOOK.



IT WAS SOMETIME BETWEEN OCTOBER 1924 AND THE FOLLOWING SPRING.

WOOLF NEVER UNDERWENT PSYCHOANALYSIS. HER BROTHER ADRIAN DID, THOUGH.

VIRGINIA WROTE RATHER SNIDELY TO HER SISTER, "I GATHER THAT HIS TRAGEDY---AS THE DR. CALLS IT---IS ALL OUR DOING. HE WAS SUPPRESSED AS A CHILD."

WOOLF WOULDN'T REALLY READ FREUD FOR ANOTHER TEN YEARS OR SO...

...THOUGH THE HOGARTH PRESS, WHICH SHE FOUNDED WITH HER HUSBAND, LEONARD, HAD JUST PUBLISHED HIS COLLECTED PAPERS.

THESE HAD BEEN TRANSLATED BY JAMES AND ALIX STRACHEY, THE BROTHER AND SISTER-IN-LAW OF VIRGINIA'S CLOSE FRIEND LYTON.

JAMES STRACHEY HAD BEEN ANALYZED BY FREUD AND WAS A PRACTICING PSYCHOANALYST IN NEIGHBORING GORDON SQUARE.

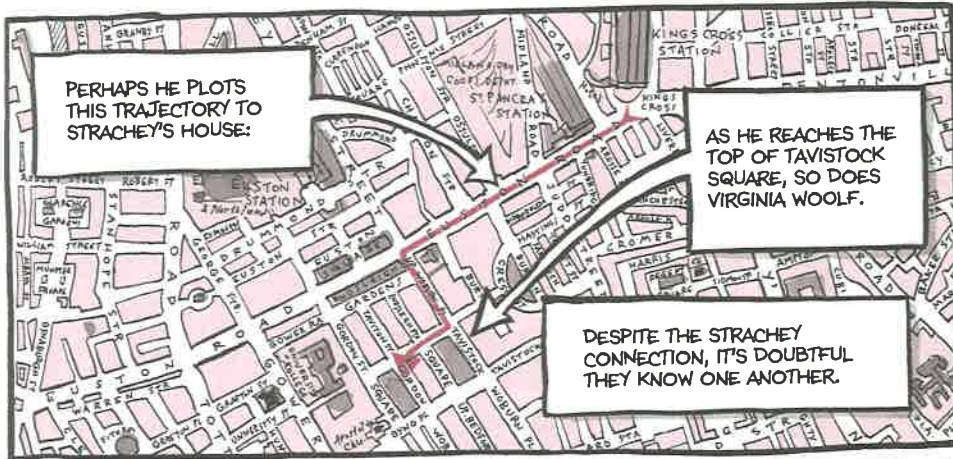
IN FACT, HERE COMES ONE OF HIS PATIENTS NOW. A YOUNG DOCTOR OF CHILDREN'S MEDICINE.

DONALD WOODS WINNICOTT WORKS AT TWO HOSPITALS AND HAS AN OFFICE IN HARLEY STREET.

BUT TODAY, LET'S SAY HE'S COMING FROM THE QUEEN HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN. HE'D PROBABLY HAVE TAKEN THE UNDERGROUND FROM BETHNAL GREEN.

NO, THERE WAS NO BETHNAL GREEN STOP IN 1925. LET'S SAY HE WALKS TO LIVERPOOL STREET STATION AND CATCHES THE TUBE TO KING'S CROSS.





PERHAPS HE PLOTS THIS TRAJECTORY TO STRACHEY'S HOUSE:

AS HE REACHES THE TOP OF TAVISTOCK SQUARE, SO DOES VIRGINIA WOOLF.

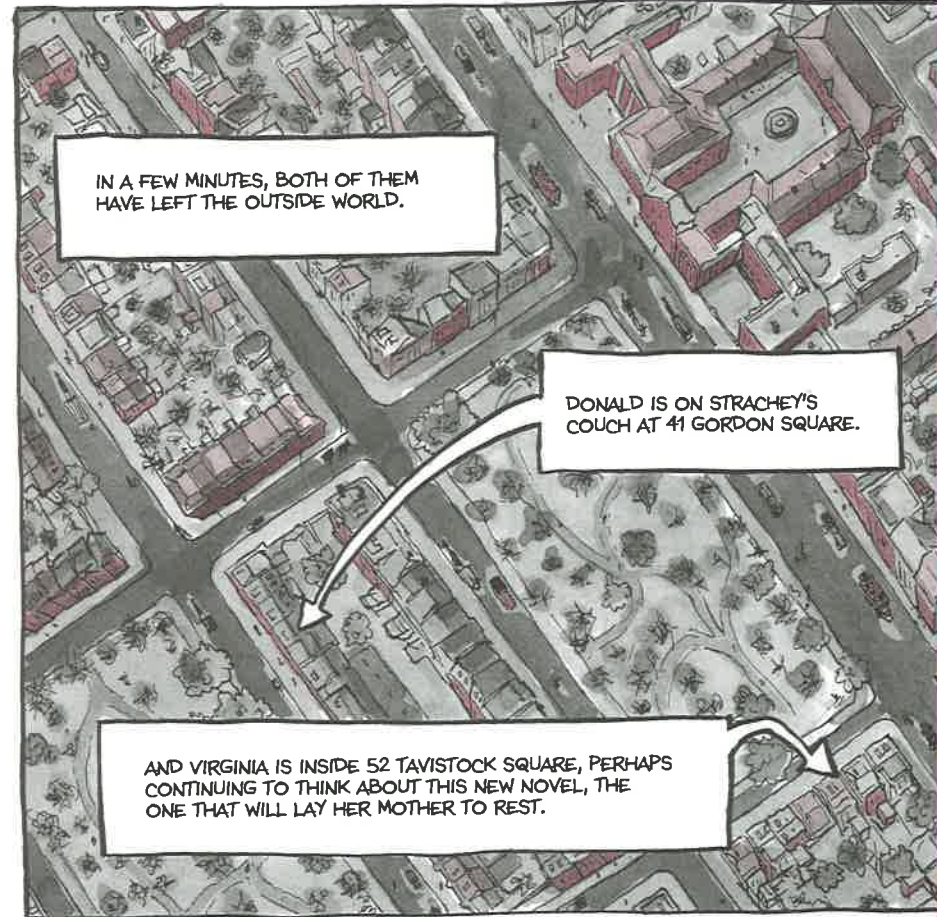
DESPITE THE STRACHEY CONNECTION, IT'S DOUBTFUL THEY KNOW ONE ANOTHER.



DONALD IS TWENTY-NINE, THE SON OF A MERCHANT, IN AWE OF HIS ANALYST'S CULTIVATED BLOOMSBURY WORLD.

WOOLF IS AT THE CENTER OF THAT WORLD, MIDDLE-AGED AND BECOMING FAMOUS.

WINNICOTT WILL EVENTUALLY BE PUBLISHED BY THE HOGARTH PRESS, BUT NOT UNTIL SOME TIME AFTER VIRGINIA'S DEATH.



IN A FEW MINUTES, BOTH OF THEM HAVE LEFT THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

DONALD IS ON STRACHEY'S COUCH AT 41 GORDON SQUARE.

AND VIRGINIA IS INSIDE 52 TAVISTOCK SQUARE, PERHAPS CONTINUING TO THINK ABOUT THIS NEW NOVEL, THE ONE THAT WILL LAY HER MOTHER TO REST.

DONALD IS VERY POSSIBLY THINKING ABOUT HIS MOTHER, TOO. SHE HAS EITHER JUST DIED, OR WILL DIE BEFORE 1925 IS OUT. I CAN'T FIND THE EXACT DATE.



MY MOTHER WAS DISGUISED IN A BEARSKIN. THEN HER PENIS POPPED OUT AND CASTRATED ME.

THIS WAS AN ACTUAL DREAM OF WINNICOTT'S. ALTHOUGH I AM ENJOYING THIS LITTLE FORAY INTO FICTION, I FEEL THE NECESSITY OF "CLINGING AS TIGHT TO FACTS AS I CAN," AS WOOLF WROTE IN HER 1923 DIARY ABOUT HER PROGRESS ON MRS. DALLOWAY.

BUT I AM NOT ULTIMATELY INTERESTED IN WRITING FICTION. I CAN'T MAKE THINGS UP. OR RATHER, I CAN ONLY MAKE THINGS UP ABOUT THINGS THAT HAVE ALREADY HAPPENED.



I HAVE TO REWRITE MY BOOK.

WHAT?!

I HAVE TO START OVER.

ONCE MY MOTHER TOLD ME SHE WISHED I HAD WRITTEN THE BOOK ABOUT MY FATHER AS FICTION.

ON THE THEORY THAT IT WOULD NOT HAVE EXPOSED OUR FAMILY IN THE WAY MEMOIR DID.

I EXPLAINED THAT THE WHOLE POINT OF THE BOOK WAS THAT IT WAS TRUE, AND THAT EVEN IF I HAD FICTIONALIZED IT, PEOPLE WOULD ASSUME IT WAS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.

THIS HAD NOT SWAYED HER. *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* IS FICTION, OF COURSE, BUT HEAVILY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.



HA! YOU HAVE TOO MANY STRANDS!



I DO. I JUST NEED TO TELL A STORY.

IN THE SAME WAY VIRGINIA WOOLF DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN "LIFE" AND "THE SOUL" IN HER DIARY, SHE DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN "TWO KINDS OF TRUTH" IN WRITING BIOGRAPHY.



YES. NARRATIVE IS WHAT THEY WANT.

BUT IT'S HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THE STORY IS.

"LET THE BIOGRAPHER PRINT FULLY, COMPLETELY, ACCURATELY, THE KNOWN FACTS WITHOUT COMMENT; THEN LET HIM WRITE THE LIFE AS FICTION."

IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*, THE CHARACTER LILY BRISCOE HAS A BRIEF VISION AS SHE WATCHES MR. AND MRS. RAMSAY PLAYING CATCH WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

ing catches. And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they became, as they met them, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay watching the children throwing catches. But still for a mo-

THIS "SYMBOLICAL" QUALITY THAT TRANSCENDS MERE "REAL FIGURES" SEEMS TO BE WHAT FICTION ACHIEVES FOR WOOLF--A DEEPER TRUTH THAN FACTS.

PERHAPS THAT'S WHY SHE FOUND IT "DIFFICULT TO GIVE ANY CLEAR DESCRIPTION" OF HER ACTUAL, NONFICTIONAL MOTHER. SHE WAS "ASTONISHINGLY BEAUTIFUL..."



But apart from her beauty, if the two can be separated, what was she herself like? Very quick; very direct; practical; and amusing. I say at once offhand. She could be sharp, she disliked affectation. "If

ALL THESE THINGS WILL DO VERY WELL TO DESCRIBE MY MOTHER, TOO.

BUT IT'S HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THE STORY IS.

I'M READING SYLVIA PLATH'S DIARIES. SHE PUT HER HEAD IN THE OVEN.

MOM MEANS THIS KINDLY, COMMISERATINGLY. "OH, THE WRITER'S LIFE." STILL, I THINK OF MY OWN OVEN AND AM GLAD IT'S ELECTRIC.

OH! I FOUND MY LOST POEM!



GREAT! I WAS GONNA TELL YOU HOW TO SEARCH THE COMPUTER.

I FIGURED IT OUT MYSELF!



MOM STARTED WRITING POETRY IN HER YOUTH, STOPPED FOR ALL THE YEARS OF MARRIAGE, CHILDREN, AND HER CAREER TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL. NOW SHE'S TAKEN IT UP AGAIN.

OH, THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESS LADY IS AT THE DOOR. I HAVE TO GO.

UH...OKAY.

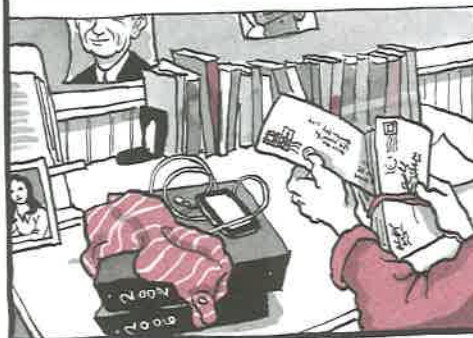


SHE INSISTS THAT SHE'S NOT A POET.

BYE.



I HAVE NEVER READ SYLVIA PLATH. MY MOTHER HAS NEVER READ VIRGINIA WOOLF. IN GENERAL, WE HAVE STAYED OUT OF ONE ANOTHER'S WAY LIKE THIS.



WHEN SHE WAS EXACTLY THE AGE I AM NOW, AND I WAS IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, MOM RESPONDED TO A LETTER I'D WRITTEN TO HER ABOUT A DREAM I'D HAD.

will probably hear from him since he wants to stay over with you on his way home.

I have puzzled over your dream. I don't know what it means. I dream about brain tumors and babies. I am staring out my dirty windows at the lilac buds. Now I am trying to analyze why I put those two things together. Why do you and I do that? Patterns are my existence. Everything has significance. Everything must fit. It's enough to drive you crazy.

Today I gave one class a list of who your enemy. Sycophant, philanderer, little rash, but I didn't have time

BRAIN TUMORS AND BABIES. DIRTY WINDOWS AND LILAC BUDS.

THIS SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL PATTERNS MAY VERY WELL BE CRAZY, BUT TO BE ENLISTED WITH HER IN IT THRILLS ME. "WHY DO YOU AND I DO THAT?"

I AM CARRYING ON HER MISSION.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY THIS SNAPSHOT OF THE TWO OF US.



BUT I DIDN'T REALIZE UNTIL RELATIVELY RECENTLY THAT IT WAS ONE OF A SEQUENCE.

FIVE OTHER SHOTS HAD BEEN SCATTERED ABOUT IN DIFFERENT ALBUMS AND BOXES.



I CALLED MOM A FEW DAYS AFTER THE HEAD-IN-THE-OVEN CONVERSATION.



HEY, MOM. JUST CHECKING IN. WHERE ARE YA? CALL ME.

I DON'T HAVE THE NEGATIVES, SO THERE'S NO WAY TO KNOW THEIR CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER. BUT I'VE ARRANGED THEM ACCORDING TO MY OWN NARRATIVE.

MOM IS MAKING FACES AND PRESUMABLY SOUNDS AT ME. IN EACH SHOT, I REFLECT HER EXPRESSION AND THE SHAPE OF HER MOUTH WITH UNCANNY PRECISION.

BUT "THERE IS NOTHING MYSTICAL ABOUT THIS," SAYS DONALD WINNICOTT, IN THE ORDINARY DEVOTED MOTHER.

agrees, that ordinarily the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she ordinarily recovers in the weeks and months after the baby's birth, in which to a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her. There is nothing mystical about

FOR A LONG TIME I RESISTED INCLUDING MY PRESENT-DAY INTERACTIONS WITH MOM IN THIS BOOK PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY'RE SO "ORDINARY."

MOM!

HI. I WAS AT THE GYM. HAD TO GET MY LAPS IN.

Abison 3mo. Christmas '60

I COULDN'T BELIEVE LADY GAGA ON THE GRAMMYS LAST NIGHT. PUH-LEASE. I LIKE PUNK. I LIKE WEIRD!

BUT SHE CAN'T DRESS LIKE THAT WITH THOSE THIGHS. IF I HAD ANOTHER LIFE TO LIVE, I'D COSTUME ROCK DIVAS.

THEN I STARTED SEEING HOW THE TRANSCENDENT WOULD ALMOST ALWAYS CREEP INTO THE EVERYDAY.

I DIDN'T GET MUCH SLEEP LAST NIGHT. I KEPT HAVING THESE DREAMS ABOUT DAD.

I GUESS IT'S FROM READING SYLVIA PLATH'S JOURNALS. SHE AND TED HUGHES ARE ALWAYS FIGHTING.

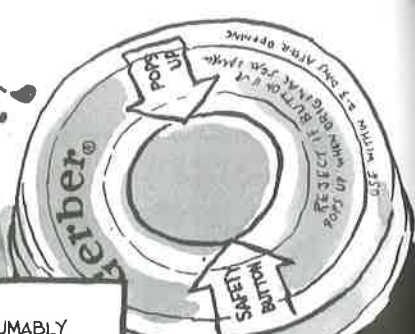
IN MY ARRANGEMENT OF THESE PHOTOS, THE RAPPORT BETWEEN MOM AND ME BUILDS UNTIL I SHRIEK WITH JOY.

SHE'S SUCH A SPOILED BRAT.

THEN THE MOMENT IS SHATTERED AS I NOTICE THE MAN WITH THE CAMERA.

AT THREE MONTHS, I HAD SEEN ENOUGH OF MY FATHER'S RAGES TO BE WARY OF HIM.

Abison 3 mo. Lowest Lane



THE PHOTOS WERE TAKEN RIGHT ABOUT THE TIME MOM REALIZED THAT SHE WAS PREGNANT AGAIN.

SHE'S A SNOB, TOO. A SNOB AND A BRAT.

I THOUGHT YOU LIKED HER.

THERE ARE THREE MAIN REASONS, WINNICOTT SAYS, WHY A MOTHER MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO "GIVE HERSELF OVER TO THIS PREOCCUPATION WITH THE CARE OF HER INFANT."

SHE'S ALWAYS ASKING HER THERAPIST FOR PERMISSION TO HATE HER MOTHER.

ONE, SHE DIES. TWO, SHE "STARTS UP A NEW PREGNANCY BEFORE THE TIME THAT SHE HAD THOUGHT OUT AS APPROPRIATE." THREE...

THE ORDINARY DEVOTED MOTHER

ing. Or a mother becomes depressed and she can feel herself depriving her child of what the child needs, but she cannot help the onset of a mood swing, which may quite easily be reactive to something that has impinged in her private life. Here she is causing trouble, but no one would blame her.

In other words there are all manner of reasons why some children do get let down before they are able to avoid being wounded or maimed in personality by the fact.

Here I must go back to the idea of blame. It is necessary for us to be able to look at human growth and development, with all its complexities that are internal or personal to the child, and we must be able to say; here the ordinary devoted mother factor failed, without blaming anyone. For my part I have no interest whatever in apportioning blame. Mothers

"AM I ALLOWED TO HATE MY MOTHER?"

"NO!"

OH, SERENA'S GRANDDAUGHTER JUST GOT HER PERIOD. SHE'S ONLY TWELVE. THAT'S SO SAD. TWELVE IS TOO YOUNG.

UHH...I THINK TWELVE IS KINDA NORMAL.

I HAVE NOT BEEN MAIMED, ONLY WOUNDED, AND PERHAPS NOT IRREPARABLY.

her baby and in his or her care. At three or four months after being born the baby may be able to show that he or she knows what it is like to be a mother, that is a mother in her state of being devoted to something that is not in fact herself.

THE PICTURE OF ME LOOKING AT THE CAMERA FEELS LIKE A PICTURE OF THE END OF MY CHILDHOOD.

WELL, I'M HEARTBROKEN. SHE WON'T BE A CHILD ANYMORE.

"SHE IS THE BABY AND THE BABY IS HER." I DISAGREE THAT THERE IS NOTHING MYSTICAL ABOUT THIS.

No! (mom, as if she's SP's therapist
Serena's granddaughter just got her period
is too young....

Well I'm heartbroken.

She won't be a child anymore

FOR TWO SEPARATE BEINGS TO BE IDENTICAL--TO BE ONE...

...ung...

heartbroken

...t be a child

...THIS SEEMS TO ME AS MYSTICAL,
AS TRANSCENDENT OF THE LAWS
OF EVERYDAY REALITY, AS IT GETS.

child