JOYCE MAYNARD

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

In 1972, Joyce Maynard, an undergraduate at Yale, wrote an article for the *New York Times* Magazine called ‘An Eighteen Year Old Looks Back on Life’. Among the hundreds of letters she received as a result, one expressed deep affection for her writing, and concern at the exploitation that she might be subjected to. The writer was J.D. Salinger, author of *Catcher in the Rye* and famous recluse.

Their correspondence led first to friendship, and then to love, and after a few months she dropped out of college to live with him. In spite of the thirty-five year difference in their ages, she believed they would be together always – but after a year, he sent her away.

Courageous, beautifully written and affecting, this book is destined to become a classic memoir of a modern woman’s life.

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At Home in the World

A Life With J D Salinger

Joyce Maynard

To my sister, Rona, with admiration and love

And to Audrey, my firstborn child and only daughter, who may think that her father and I brought her into the world. But truly, she is the one who brought me here.

Author’s Note

I want to say something about letters, because they have played a profoundly significant role in my life.

For more than four decades my mother documented her life and the experiences of our family in letters to her parents and her friends. I regard the carbon copies of the many hundreds of typewritten pages she left as her most precious legacy to my sister and me, and to anyone else lucky enough to read them. My mother’s letters—quoted throughout this story—were an invaluable resource in the writing of this book, as was my father’s correspondence with my mother during the six years of their courtship—a correspondence that included drawings and original verse as well as extravagant expressions of love. No doubt the fact that I was the product of a love affair that knew its finest hours on paper contributed to my forming such a relationship myself, years later.

After growing up and leaving home, my sister and I maintained to some degree our family tradition of letter writing. I am deeply grateful to Rona Maynard for having kept the letters I wrote to her during the year I spent with J. D. Salinger and afterward. Rereading them from a distance of more than two decades, I felt as if a message in a bottle had washed up on my shore. The words and feelings of myself at eighteen years old came back to me in one powerful wave.

One set of letters that make up a crucial piece of my history are the forty or so pages of my correspondence with J. D. Salinger, from April 1972 to August 1973. Long before I met the author of the letters, I fell in love with his voice on

the page. Sometimes funny, other moments tender, and frequently wise, knowing, and scarily prescient, Jerry Salinger’s words formed the basis of my powerful and enduring attachment to him, and haunted me for years after he left my life.

I understood, when I approached the task of telling this story, that while the physical pages of J. D. Salinger’s letters are mine, the language of those letters belong to the man who wrote them to me, and that he would never allow his words to be quoted at length here or elsewhere.

Faced with the prospect of telling this story without the ability to reproduce fully the contents of the letters, I initially felt at a loss. While I continue to regret my inability to share with readers the precise and inimitable language contained in those letters, I well remember the feeling they engendered in the girl who received them. Conveying the feeling brought about by language without the language itself was one of the most challenging tasks I have ever faced as a writer, and one that, in the end, I felt equipped to handle. While it remains a loss for every reader not to have access to the letters themselves, what seemed ultimately most important was that I convey the effect they had on me when I read them, and the influence they continued to play on my life for years after.

Another large challenge that faced me as I moved deeper into this project was the task of recounting events and conversations that had taken place a quarter-century ago or more.

I was raised from my very earliest youth to be an *observer*. My parents encouraged me to take in the particulars of my surroundings with a reportorial ear and eye. Like it or not, all my life I have been taking mental notes. The fact that I lived this way is not only part of the story I tell here; it is also the reason why I am able to recount what I experienced as precisely as I have. The dialogue recounted from my past has been reconstructed to

the best of my ability, as are the details of what happened. While I could not swear to the exact veracity of every syllable quoted in these pages, I believe if film footage or tape existed documenting the stories re-created here, it would possess a startling similarity to what's reported here.

Some names have been changed. In a few instances, I have rearranged the chronology of events or left out details that seemed unnecessary and would in no way enlighten a reader's understanding of my journey through life. While I have no doubt that some will view my choice to tell this story honestly as an invasion of others' privacy, I have tried hard to describe only those events and experiences that had a direct effect on the one story I believe I have a right to tell completely: my own.

This book contains stories some people will regard as inappropriate for a parent to tell when she has teenaged children. As for me, I see no way I can ask my children to be honest people themselves if I don't honor them with truthfulness. Every sentence was written with an awareness of their eyes on the page someday, and an assurance firm as granite that there is no story I could tell—no story that exists—that would change my children's love and acceptance of their parents, their sense of themselves, or their knowledge of how treasured they are. No marriage that created our three children could be called a failure. That our family has also known its struggles and pain will not come as news to anyone who inhabits it. I pray what my children take from my telling of this story is freedom from the kind of shame I experienced as a young person, and the lesson that every child, woman, and man should possess license to speak or sing in his or her true voice.

Many people supported me during the writing of this book.

As I sat down to tell the story of a letter that changed my life, I thought about all the other letters from readers I have received in the years since.

That first letter warned me of the dangers of readers' voices in my ear. In fact, those very voices have sustained me throughout my writing life. They remind me why I write, and they respond when I do so. No influence has shaped my work more than the words of those readers who wrote me letters—particularly the many men and women who read and responded to my column and newsletter, "Domestic Affairs," and the members of my website community with whom I share my coffee every day. That website would not exist without the generous oversight and vigilance of my friends Joe Rosen and Myrna Uhlig.

Over the months of writing alone in rooms, I read out loud and showed portions of this book to friends and readers whose observations and suggestions were critically important in shaping the way I told my story. I want to thank Vicky Schippers of Brooklyn, New York; Lyla Fox, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Tom Gribbon, St. Petersburg, Florida; Susanna Clark, Nashville, Tennessee; Lin Oliver, Los Angeles, California; Rosemary Daniell, Savannah, Georgia; Billy Hults, Cannon Beach, Oregon; Mike Mills, San Francisco, California; Patti Hedge, Mill Valley, California; Dub Cornett, Nashville, Tennessee; Jack Young, Orinda, California; Gay Norton Edelman, Red Bank, New Jersey; Leslie Goodman-Malamuth, Washington, D.C.; Ronnie Rogers, Berkeley, California; John Stickney, New York, New York; Gail Venable, San Francisco, California; Julia Scolnik, Andover, Massachusetts; Francisco Sainz, Easthampton, New York; Jim Atherton, Fort Worth, Texas; Laurie Buchar, Bradford, New Hampshire; Mary Keil, San Francisco, California; Tom Luddy, Berkeley, California; Bill Ratner, Los Angeles, California; Chris Zenowich, Columbus, Ohio; and Stephen Hinerman, Pleasanton, California.

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My friend Ken Burrows offered insightful legal advice and moral support. Heather Florence provided invaluable guidance in the interpretation of copyright law and a keen sensitivity to the nuance of language, as well as great sensitivity to my manuscript and extraordinary patience.

To speak of Leonard Wagman simply as my trusted legal advisor—though surely he offers the wisest form of counsel—fails to convey the breadth and tenderness of the support he has given me over the years of our association, or what it has meant to me. I will never feel altogether fatherless, so long as Leonard's on the other end of the phone.

Joseph McElroy, my friend since early childhood, promised my mother on her deathbed that he would look out for me, and has. He transformed my vision of this book.

Margaret Lowe-Smith, who edits the little stories I sometimes tell on "All Things Considered," listened to me read aloud over long distance on Sunday mornings while her children called out for waffles in the background, and never lost her concentration. I have not encountered a better ear for sentences, or a person who understands more finely the rhythm of storytelling.

Jim Dicke, II, a longtime reader from New Bremen, Ohio, underwrote the last crucial months of work on this book in a way that allowed me to set aside worries and other jobs as I have never been able to before. In doing so, he offered not

only the financial wherewithal to work in a new way, but the gift of one reader's great and deeply heartening faith in me.

Lee and Kathy Larson, longtime readers from Portland, Oregon, gave me the use of their house in Cannon Beach, Oregon, to go away alone and write for a good part of one long and rainy winter. The majority of the work that appears in these pages was produced there in a room looking out toward Haystack Rock and the Pacific Ocean. I am also grateful for all the fine musicians who play at the Monday night music jam at the Cannon Beach American Legion Hall. Every book I write has a soundtrack. This one came from the washboard and string players of Cannon Beach and by the transcendant gospel singing of the Glide Ensemble of Reverend Cecil Williams's Glide Methodist Church of San Francisco.

Heidi Majano and Jim Lafferty took wonderful care of my sons while I was away working. Heidi's mother, Estella Majano, took care of me when I most needed it.

My sons, Charlie and Willy Bethel, encouraged me to go away to Oregon to write this book, broke no bones while I was gone, and gave me a hero's welcome when I walked back in the door. I could not do what I do without the gift of their acceptance and understanding, as well as that of their sister.

My agent and friend, Gail Hochman, has challenged me when I needed it, advocated for me relentlessly, and supported me without fail. More times than I could count, Gail has shepherded me through the hardest kinds of decisions a writer has to make—not simply business decisions but editorial ones as well—with her extraordinary gift to recognize the core of a problem as well as its solution.

Diane Higgins, my editor, sought me out and expressed a desire to work with me at a time in my writing life when no others were beating a path to my door. More than anything I've ever written, this book represents a true collaboration

between a writer and an editor. Diane was not simply present to oversee every one of the many stages of this book's revision; she was a crucial and irreplaceable part of its conception. There is not one sentence in these pages that does not reflect her exquisitely subtle ear and eye. My writing has been permanently altered by the experience of working with her.

Finally, I want to say something about my parents, Max Maynard and Fredelle Bruser Maynard. Some dark and troubling aspects emerge in my portraits of them. To convey on the page two such complex and conflicted characters without those elements would have required the kinds of compromises my parents taught me to question, even as they found themselves forced to make many such compromises in their own lives. As painful as parts of this story may be, particularly to people who knew and loved my parents, I believe my mother and father would understand and even celebrate my having found, at last, the freedom to write as I do now. I cannot tell the story of our family, and the extraordinary and sometimes damaging way my parents raised my sister and me, without recognizing that if they had raised me differently, I might not possess the tools to tell this story. My father taught me how to see. My mother put the pen in my hand. I love them fiercely and deeply forever, for this and many other reasons.

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY *loves you, then you become Real."*

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

—from THE VELVETEEN RABBIT *by*
Margery Williams

Introduction

When I was eighteen, I wrote a magazine article that changed my life. The piece was called “An Eighteen-Year-Old Looks Back on Life.” It was published in *The New York Times Magazine* with a photograph of me on the cover. In it, I described growing up in the sixties, expressing a profound sense of world-weariness and alienation. I spoke of wanting to move to the country and get away from the world. “Retirement sounds tempting,” I wrote.

Among the hundreds of letters I received after the article ran was one expressing deep affection for my writing, and concern that I might be exploited in the months and years to come. J. D. Salinger wrote to me from his house, high on a hill in the country, where he had retreated many years before.

I embarked on a correspondence with Salinger that spring. I fell in love with the voice in his letters, and when school got out, I went to visit him. Within a few months I left college to move in with him. For most of that year I lived with him, in extreme isolation, working on a book and believing—despite the thirty-five years separating our ages—that we would be together always.

Shortly before the publication of my book, *Looking Back*, the following spring, J. D. Salinger sent me away. I remained desperately in love with him.

For more than twenty years I revered a man who would have nothing to do with me. J. D. Salinger was for me the closest thing I ever had to a religion. What happened between us shaped my life in many ways long after he left

it. But I put the experience away, just as I'd put away the packet of letters he'd written me.

I endeavored to move on with my life. A month after I left Jerry Salinger's house, with the money I'd earned from the sale of *Looking Back*, I bought a farmhouse on fifty acres at the end of a deadend road in a little town where I knew nobody. I lived there alone for two and a half years.

I got a job as a newspaper reporter in New York City. I fell in love and married. My husband and I had a child, and then two more. We built a pond on our land where, winters, we would skate together in the moonlight. My husband made paintings, sometimes of me. Then he didn't paint me anymore.

I published magazine articles and books. I worked hard, drove carpools, cooked meals, went to hundreds of soccer and Little League games, read to our children and played with them and sat on the beach with my eyes locked on the tops of their heads in the water. My husband and I fought, and struggled to stay together.

My father died. I wrote a lot of magazine articles and newspaper columns to support my family. I cared for my mother when she was dying, and fought so bitterly with my sister about our mother's care that I could not attend the funeral. That week, my husband and I parted.

I left the house at the end of that dead-end road. My husband and I didn't fight over the house, but we went to war over custody of our children. I fell in love again, and when that love affair ended, I loved other men. Some of them were good choices, at the time. Some terrible.

I made a new home. I made good friends and lost some. I wrote another book. My sons taught me how to throw a baseball. My daughter hung roses over her bed, and taught me by her own example what it is to be a hopeful and optimistic person who greets the world with open arms.

I planted flower gardens. We got a dog. I taught many women, and a few men, how to bake pies the way my mother taught me. I swam long distances across many New Hampshire lakes and ponds, with the crawl stroke learned from my father.

I turned forty. I sold a book I'd written to the movies, and worried about money a little less for a while. I wrote another book. Now and then I still got so angry about some relatively minor frustration that I would dump a gallon of milk on our kitchen floor. But it didn't happen as much anymore.

My sons grew taller than I was. My daughter knew some things I didn't. I sold the house I'd bought after my marriage ended, and laid most of our possessions in the yard, had a giant tag sale, and then moved with my children to a town in California where we didn't know anybody. We made a new home and new friends there. That was two years ago.

Because I have frequently made myself a character in my work, I wrote about most of these experiences. More and more over the years, I learned to trust my readers with the truth. I published stories and articles about aspects of my experience that some people would have considered shameful or embarrassing. I wanted to tell the story of a real woman with all her flaws. I hoped, by doing that, others might feel less ashamed of their own unmentionable failings and secrets.

Two years ago my daughter Audrey turned eighteen, the age I was when I left home to go to college, and the age I was when I got that first letter from J. D. Salinger.

Audrey was a high school senior. We were still living in New Hampshire. After that year I knew it was unlikely my daughter would live at home ever again.

I had always believed in encouraging my children's independence. But now, out of nowhere, I felt a wave of terrible anxiety for her. All through the years when so many

of my friends had fought bitterly with their adolescent daughters, Audrey and I had gotten along. The year she turned eighteen, we didn’t.

She was breaking away from me, and I saw myself turning into a hovering and controlling woman. What if I hadn’t taught my daughter everything she needed to know as she ventured into the world? I had only a handful of months left. I wasn’t ready to let her go.

When I was Audrey’s age, I had suffered from eating disorders. It had been a very long time since I had last stuck my finger down my throat or binged on a whole carton of ice cream. Now I found myself looking at my own beautiful daughter and panicking if I saw her turning to food for escape or comfort. “You’ve eaten half that container of Haagen-Dazs,” I’d say, my own stomach tightening, and reach across the counter to put the carton away. One day I started shoveling the ice cream into my own mouth so she wouldn’t eat it, all the while believing I was trying to save her.

I stood on the sidelines at her cross-country track meets, waiting for her to cross the finish line, and realized I was breathing with her. I watched the slow ending to what had been an extremely tender and long-lasting relationship with her boyfriend and wept, myself, at their parting. Once when she was at school I entered her bedroom and started to read her journal—the very thing I had vowed, when I was twelve, I’d never do to any child of mine, because my mother did that to me. I stopped myself, but I couldn’t control the frantic feeling.

“I just don’t want to see you get in situations where you might get hurt,” I told her.

“The only situation where I’m getting hurt,” she said with unfamiliar sharpness, “is the one you’re creating. *What’s happening to you?*”

Many things were happening. My firstborn child, my only girl, was nearly as old as I was when everything changed for

me.

In my senior year in high school, I left my New Hampshire public school to enroll as a day student in Phillips Exeter Academy, a highly competitive prep school with a hundred-and-ninety-year tradition of educating boys. Unable to face meals in the dining hall, and filled with anxiety about college, about boys, about pleasing my parents, and my teachers, I took to eating little besides peanut butter and chocolate, and gained 10 pounds. My mother—a lifelong dieter herself, who had always taken pride in my skinniness—remarked on this. I began to diet and exercise so rigorously that by the spring of my senior year I weighed 88 pounds.

I sent applications to Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. I spent days bent over a legal pad, refining my answers to the essay questions. I never truly asked myself: Did I want to attend these schools? I only knew I wanted to get in.

My daughter is nothing like the driven young woman I was then. A good but relaxed student, a young woman with a healthy body who's smiling in nearly every photograph I have of her, that college-application season she spent her weekends riding her snowboard in the mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont with her many friends. She had no interest in attending Ivy League schools.

She wrote her college essay one afternoon when the snow conditions were lousy, and said maybe she'd polish it up if she had the time. I said her writing needed work. There was nothing I knew better than how to write an essay like this. We'd work on it together, I said, as my parents had done with me.

My daughter kept putting this off. The deadline was approaching, and everything in her applications was complete but the essay question. Not a day went by that I didn't ask her: When are we going to work on it?

The week the applications were due, she was still putting me off. Then it was the final day for getting her applications in the mail. “Come home after your first class,” I told her. “I’ll be waiting.” I was trying to sound more casual than I felt.

Noon came and went. One o’clock, two o’clock. She wasn’t home. At two-thirty I turned on my computer and typed her essay myself. At three-thirty, the new version was mostly done. A little before four my daughter walked in the door. She took one look at what I’d done and her face was neither relaxed nor smiling.

“How could you?” she said, looking over my shoulder at the computer screen.

“These aren’t my words. I am not you,” she said, taking me by the shoulders. “I’m not the Girl Wonder who writes her autobiography when she’s eighteen. I don’t even want to be.”

“I only wanted to help you,” I said. “I wanted to spare you pain. I wanted to keep you safe. I wanted you to go to a college where you can be happy.”

My daughter was as angry as I’ve ever seen her. “You stole my voice,” she screamed. “You’re trying to take over my life. *Get out Get out*.”

I knew she wanted to hit me, but she couldn’t. When I reached to hug her she pushed me away. We ended up on the floor, wrestling, our legs wrapped around each other. Our arms gripped each other’s shoulders. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said. “But you have to stop this. I’m stronger than you now.”

We were evenly matched. She was younger, and had been running cross-country all that fall. But I had given birth three times, and had a kind of endurance and capacity for pain she couldn’t know. We rolled around on the floor for several minutes until we were both dripping with sweat. Then at the same moment, both our bodies went limp, and we lay there in each other’s arms, weeping.

That night Audrey completed her essay without assistance from me. She mailed her applications the next morning, one day late.

The blurring of boundaries between my daughter and me is a lifelong problem between us, as it had been for my mother and me. But it wasn't until Audrey turned eighteen that I became so confused trying to keep our two stories straight.

I know what triggered the crisis between my daughter and me. It was observing her extreme trusting nature, her lack of defenses against injury, her seemingly inextinguishable hopefulness. I found myself reliving my own dashed hopes when I was that age. Her face became my mirror. Her body, my body. Her nineteenth year, mine.

We survived it. Audrey took a year off before college to work at a ski resort and go snowboarding. I left the state of New Hampshire where I'd lived all my life and moved, with her younger brothers, to Northern California. But something had changed in me that year. I had caught a glimpse of something in my daughter's face that haunted me.

I don't tell them everything, but my children have heard enough to know I lived with enormous worries, growing up. When I was their age, I was already sending my stories to magazines. I spent my Saturday nights, more often than not, in the company of my parents. I never slept late. I knew I had to get up early and start writing.

More than anything, I wanted to raise children who would have a different kind of childhood from mine. Even when I was still a child myself, I reflected on the kind of mother I would be. I wanted my children to have a home that felt like a safe place for their friends to come, with no fear that an alcoholic parent might come careening into the room and deliver a lecture on the hopelessness of the human condition, or that their mother would inquire into the intimate details of their sexual lives, as mine used to, in the

guise of interviewing them for some magazine article she was writing.

Maybe it was faith I wanted to give them. Having grown up, myself, with a bone-deep sense of separateness, I wanted my children to feel at home in the world.

The lives of my three children have included their share of sorrow. Still, all three appear to possess the belief that life is more likely to go well than badly. It's something of an amazement to me that I am related, by blood, to three people who see things with a fundamentally optimistic attitude.

"Sometimes it seems to me life is an endless series of goodbyes," I said to Audrey a while back.

"That's funny," she said, looking genuinely surprised. "To me it seems more like a series of hellos."

For years I'd made daily deals in my head: *Let my children be safe. I will ask no more*. And still, terror that one day one of them might be hurt clutched at my stomach. Now I imagined what I'd feel if a literary legend thirty-five years her senior asked of Audrey what was asked of me when I was her age. I pictured my daughter living through the kind of devastation I had experienced at nineteen, and the shame that had followed it.

For all those years, I had never looked critically at Jerry Salinger. I had always believed I owed him my never-ending silence, loyalty, and protection. It came to me as a new thought that the girl he had invited into his life with that first letter he wrote deserved certain things, too.

All my life I had been trying to make sense of my experiences without understanding a crucial piece of my history. I couldn't have said, two years ago, what it was in how I had lived before meeting Jerry Salinger that made his power over me so vast and enduring. I couldn't have said how the events of that year I spent with Jerry shaped what I went on to do with my life. Now it was hitting me in the

image of my daughter. All these years, I had been holding on to secrets that kept me from understanding or explaining myself. I knew it was time at last to explore my story.

Chapter One

THE HOUSE WHERE I grew up, in Durham, New Hampshire, is the only one on the street with a fence surrounding it. That fit. Our family—my mother, my father, my older sister, Rona, and I—never belonged in that town. Or anywhere else, it seemed to me, but in that house, with one another, like a country unto ourselves, a tiny principality with a population of four. Arguably three, since my sister tried to remove herself as much as possible.

There was a phrase we used in our family: “one of us.” We didn’t use it often, but what it meant was that we’d encountered a person who might get inside the fence and enter the fortress of our family. No one ever did, fully. The only ones who were truly “one of us” were ourselves.

My father comes into my room just after six every morning and wakes me with the snap of my window blinds. “Time to get up, chum,” he says. Four decades since he lived there last, you can still hear England in his voice. Years later, when I’m in my thirties and beyond, and he’s long dead, I will sometimes be at a movie and Sir John Gielgud appears on the screen, and, though he looks nothing like my father, the sound of his voice will be enough to make me cry.

There’s no unkindness in the way my father wakes me. He simply believes it’s an unconscionable waste to stay in bed when the sun is shining. Or even if it’s not. My whole life, I have been unable to sleep late.

Every morning, my father brings my mother coffee in bed, then comes back down to make his breakfast. He’ll be eating it when I come down the stairs. Porridge, maybe, or

an egg. He always reads while he eats breakfast. It might be the letters of Harold Nicolson, or the journals of Simone Weil. Although he knows *Paradise Lost* by heart—eighteenth-century literature is his field of specialty, and he teaches it at the University of New Hampshire—he may still read over a passage from Milton that he'll be lecturing on today. Sometimes my father will read the Bible at breakfast—another book he knows well.

My father's parents were British Fundamentalist missionaries who left the Salvation Army because of its excessively liberal teachings to join a sect known as the Plymouth Brethren. The second to last of their seven children, my father, Max Maynard, was born sometime around the year 1900, in India, where his parents had come to proselytize. Of the many mysteries that surround my father's family, the first concerned the date of his birth. He claimed his parents told him they were so occupied with the Lord they hadn't written it down. I never met my father's parents, or any parents so consumed with God that they'd forget the year of their child's birth. If nothing else, the story told me something about my father's perception of them.

As a small child, my father had loved to act and sing, but his deepest passion was for painting. He had known for a long time that he wanted to make art, but hadn't dared ask his parents for paints. When he was ten, he finally got himself a paintbox, which became his most treasured possession. He painted and read constantly, and with so much reckless abandon that he broke the inviolate rule of his household, to observe the Sabbath with no activity but reading of the scripture. His older brother saw him painting and reported the news to their parents.

His father called him to his study.

"Bring me your paints," he said, and when my father delivered them, his father placed them in his desk drawer and slammed it shut. "For one year, Max, you shall not paint," he said.

My father broke with the Church and with most of his family when he was a young man, having emigrated from England by now and settled in British Columbia. While most of his brothers and sisters pursued a life within the Church—one, Theodore Maynard, becoming a moderately well-known Catholic theologian—my father took up with a group of early modern artists in Victoria who were regarded as a radical bunch. One, a much older woman painter named Emily Carr, would become the mentor and inspiration of a group of young modern artists in the twenties and thirties. Several among this group would later become celebrated in Canada, part of what was known as the Group of Seven.

From the little I've been able to gather of those early years of his—decades before I came on the scene—my father led a bohemian life: making art, making love, making poetry, and waking up with a terrible hangover the next morning. He was a handsome, dashing man—blue-eyed, blond-haired, compactly but athletically built, with the broad shoulders of a powerful swimmer. He had a cleft chin and a strong jaw, but what probably melted the hearts of women, more than his good looks, was his ability to draw and write for them. He could dash off light verse or a romantic sonnet in flawless iambic pentameter, illustrated with a funny or erotic drawing of a couple in mad embrace, or a caricature of himself, on bent knees, holding out an armload of flowers.

When I was sixteen I learned my father had been married once before his marriage to my mother. Although that news came as a terrible shock, the stories of my father's many flamboyantly romantic escapades in Manitoba and British Columbia were almost a source of pride and legend in our household. I think my mother actually derived some pleasure out of the sense of my father's romantic and rakish past. He used to say she had probably saved his life; it was all so reckless and undisciplined before she "whipped him into shape."

He met her in Winnipeg, where he had fled, on the lam from some romantic disaster. He was hired by the University of Manitoba as a last-minute replacement for another professor—the only reason he could have gotten an academic job with no more in the way of credentials than a bachelor's degree.

His lack of formal training in literature hardly kept him from establishing a reputation as a riveting lecturer. My mother—at nineteen, in her senior year as the English department's top student—was assigned the job of being his assistant, with the task of reading student papers. Partly, it was supposed, she was serious and sensible enough to withstand his attempts at seduction. She had already earned a reputation as a single-mindedly driven young woman, headed for a brilliant academic career.

My mother labored over her first batch of essays with elaborate corrections and comments. After she'd delivered them, he stopped her outside his classroom to compliment her on the job she was doing.

"But you mustn't trouble yourself with tracing plagiarisms as you have," he told her.

"I didn't trace them," she said. "I recognized the sources."

Where my father's story has tended to be murky (relatives we never meet; an ex-wife I learn of only well into my teens; vague talk of a former career as a cowboy, a radio announcer, a diving instructor), my mother's is so well known to me, from her own rich retellings, it has taken on the aura of mythology.

She was born Freidele Bruser, the second daughter and last child of Jewish immigrants who fled the pogroms of Russia for Canada in the early part of the twentieth century. Her father was a shopkeeper and a dreamer—a tender-hearted, not particularly practical man who once opened every box of Cracker Jack in his store to give my mother the particular treat (a tin ring) she longed for. The store—a

whole series of them, always named The OK Store—went bankrupt regularly.

My grandmother, a woman of fierce ambition and pride in her children, particularly my mother, launched Freidele in the study of elocution, the oral presentation of poetry, popular in rural areas during the Depression. From the age of four, my mother was hustled to the front of grange halls to recite verses—sometimes comic, sometimes sentimental and tragic—in a voice that was not simply loud but strikingly clear, and capable of bringing the crowd to great laughter or tears.

All through my growing up, my mother recited poetry to me. In the middle of dinner or driving to the store or hearing me describe an incident that happened on the playground at school, she plucked lines from her head—maybe Shakespeare, maybe Milton—that referred in some way to what was going on in our lives. For as long as she lived, whenever I needed a line of poetry for a paper, or a debate speech, and, one day, for my wedding, I only had to ask my mother.

There was more to my mother's encyclopedic knowledge of literature than the fluke of her photographic memory. She loved poetry, most of all reciting it out loud. Even when she wasn't quoting poetry, its rhythms were present in her speech, as they were in my father's.

For both my parents, I think there was a sensual pleasure in shaping the words of Keats or Donne or Yeats or Dylan Thomas or Wordsworth. Neither one of my parents played a musical instrument. For them, language was music. They loved the sound of the human voice delivering the best the English language had to offer.

They loved rhythm, meter, timbre, inflection. They were performers who knew instinctively when to take the breath, when to lower the voice very slowly, or pause, or linger over a syllable—and they did it so well, even a person who didn't

speak a word of English would know, just listening to them, that this had to be poetry, and pay attention.

My mother won the golden Governor General's Award at the age of sixteen for being the top graduating senior in all of Canada in the year 1938. That earned her a full scholarship to college at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. She'd lived in small prairie towns all her life.

My mother was eighteen (Fredelle now, not Freidele) when she met my father in Winnipeg. He called her Fredelka and courted her with sonnets he wrote her, sketched beautiful drawings of her, and the most elegantly humorous cartoons of himself on his knees, beseeching her to accept his suit. But she was Jewish; he was not. Her parents had told her she must never marry a Gentile, and she had never disobeyed her parents.

But the same qualities in my father that made him such an unacceptable candidate for a husband in her parents' eyes were, no doubt, part of what drew my mother to him. He was a dark and dangerous character who distrusted conventions of every sort, and the most romantic man she'd ever met. He introduced her to modern art and classical music. All her life, she'd been the good daughter. He was the Bad Son. She fell wildly in love.

My mother was my grandmother's favorite, and as the favorite, she carried the responsibility to heap honor and glory—the Yiddish word is *naches*—at her mother's feet. Because her mother sacrificed everything for her—so she could have her elocution lessons, so she could go, as her older sister did not, to the university—it went without saying that my mother's mother was entitled to complete loyalty and devotion in return. Her life, her accomplishments, her successes, belonged not to her alone, but also to her critical and hugely demanding mother.

Every summer she returned home to the prairies of Saskatchewan to work in her father's store. My father began

courting her by mail, but her parents withheld his letters to her. He got himself a radio show in Winnipeg, and read poetry to her over the airwaves, under the pseudonym of John Gregory. But his voice was unmistakable. On Valentine's Day, 1943, he sent her this:

Not all the loveliest words will go
In rhyme with "dear Fredelle"
But all the fondest thoughts I know
Are subject to that spell.
Like honey dripping from the comb
In streams of amorous sweet they come.
My lily flower, my luscious peach
My pretty octupus, my leech
My swordfish whose sharp-pointed dart
Runs precious panic through my heart
My biblio-vandal whose least look
Rips all the pages of my book,
My dazzling jewel by whose glare
The very sun is in despair,
My arching sky, my curving earth,
My death, my life, my second birth,
My sun-warmed field, my shady tree,
My time and my eternity,
My cigarette, my nicotine
My coffee, tea, and whole cuisine
My loaf of bread, my jug of wine
All this and more, sweet valentine!

Knowing she had to find a Jewish husband, she went to graduate school in Toronto to put some distance between herself and my father. A young Jewish man, recently back from a distinguished career in the army, courted her. He was intelligent, kind, deeply in love—a man who had all the signs of becoming an excellent husband and a good father. But there was none of the romantic excitement with Harold