

A LAB OF MY OWN



Volume 212

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a volume in

Lived Values, Valued Lives

LVVV

Richard T. Hull, Editor

Neena B. Schwartz

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TWO

A BLANK SLATE

*Try as I like to find the way
I never can get back by day
Nor can remember plain and clear
The curious music that I hear*

Robert Louis Stevenson
"The Land of Nod"

*Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.
Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."
I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.*

Cuntee Cullen
"Incident"

How much of one's childhood needs to be known to understand where the adult comes from? As a woman unexpectedly in science, and a lesbian, what do I need to understand about my family, my upbringing, the events of my childhood, to understand how I got to where I am? As a biologist I have encountered nature vs. nurture controversies frequently. But within my own life, deterministic causes don't impress me. How much of life is a random response to everyday events, rather than an inevitable path taken after a cataclysmic or even an unnoticed happening?

The years I remember started when I was five years old, when my parents had a mom-and-pop grocery store in a predominantly black neighborhood in downtown Baltimore. During the entire time I attended school in Baltimore, grade school through college, the schools were segregated. That meant that while we lived with the store, my white schoolmates were not my neighbors and our neighbors did not develop into friends. As I look back on my life there, I see a child isolated from the rest of the world except my mother and father and brother.



Neena, Dad, Pearl, Leon
Atlantic City, 1936.



Leon, at Bennett Pl. store, 1936
(Mom in windows).

Both my parents had been born in Russia in 1903. My dad, Paul Schwartz, came to the United States in 1912, with his parents and an older brother, my Uncle Norton. Their oldest brother, Ben Schwartz, helped bring his parents and brothers to Baltimore. Dad went through public school up to the second year at Polytechnic High School in Baltimore, leaving in his junior year to work in Norton's grocery store. I never asked him why he left school before graduating, nor did he ever tell me.

Dad played basketball in the Jewish leagues of Baltimore as he grew up. But his mother thought it was "foolish for boys to run around in short pants" so he hid his uniform in the back shed where their outdoor toilet was. I am sure that the reason Dad encouraged my brother Leon to play basketball and football in high school and college, in spite of our mother's misgivings, was because he had missed out on this as a teenager.

I loved those stories Dad told of his early life growing up in Baltimore. It seems funny to me now that he never talked to me about his years in Europe. I think he put that all behind him and became the consummate American. He really bought the American dream—he worked hard, loved sports, and enjoyed this country for its free and easy way of doing things.

My uncles on both sides were openly cynical and critical about the American focus on sports and business. But all his life, my father enjoyed sports, taking my brother Leon and me to watch the Baltimore Orioles play when they were in the International League. He was obviously proud of my brother's talent as a runner, football player, and basketball star in high school and college.



Mother (Ethyl or "Pep" Shulman Schwartz) was born in 1903 in a small town—Mlynov, a *shetl*—in what is now Ukraine. In contrast to Dad, she told me many stories while I was growing up about her life on the farm and in Warsaw where she attended the "gymnasium."

"While I was in Warsaw I lived with a gentle family, so I ate only vegetables and fish."

I remember being impressed with that since I didn't like either fish or vegetables while I was growing up. Although Mom's family had a farm, her father also worked outside running a logging camp. She liked to read so much that her family worried that her eyes would become "weak." So she read up in a tree or in the attic of their barn. One book she particularly liked was Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she read in Russian translation.

"I cried so much when Little Eva died, my family took the book away," she told me.

As I grew up and began going to the Baltimore Public Library myself, Mom asked me to pick up books for her, best sellers or sometimes Russian

books in translation. Once I brought her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in English. She read it, but I do not remember her crying.

Mother's family left Russia for America in 1921. They rode by train to Belgium to board the boat for America. She was in her late teens. She and her parents, a brother and his wife, and her two sisters, along with the fiancé of one of them, traveled together to New York. They left her two oldest sisters, Lisa and Nechumah, who were already married and settled with families, behind in Russia.

Mom developed measles just before they were to board *The Lapland* in Antwerp. Her face was flushed and severely broken out, so my grandmother Pearl powdered her face to hide the rash and she was able to board. Once the boat took off, she was sent to the ship's hospital, where she spent the rest of the voyage below decks. They arrived at Ellis Island on 5 June 1921. Mother wasn't allowed to leave with the others for Baltimore; she was kept in the infirmary to make sure she had only the measles.

"While I was in the hospital one of the doctors fell in love with me and wanted to marry," she told me.

"Why didn't you?" I asked, excited at the thought that I might have had a different father and grown up in New York City! I have often wondered how different her life might have been had she stayed with him in New York. But instead, after she recovered, she took a train to Baltimore to join her parents and siblings.

Every day, Mother took the streetcar to work in a factory that made union suits—probably a "sweat shop." She was the typical immigrant working in a factory and taking two-week summer vacations in the Catskill Mountains of the Blue Ridge Range at Camp Louise, run for young Jewish women. Dad took the yellowing photographs we have of her climbing a tree there; he was courting her while she was at the camp. Everyone in the family went to night school to learn English and to prepare for citizenship in this country that they loved.

Somehow, they got along; her two sisters married, and she began dating my Dad. But Mom's mother, Pearl Shulman, and Dad's mother, Yenta Schwartz, were sisters. The family opposed their romance, but they had fallen in love and threatened to elope. They were married in January 1926—"on the same day as Irving Berlin married" Dad always said—and they went to New York City for their honeymoon.



I was born in December, 1926. My first memory of a house was above the mom-and-pop grocery store they bought in the early 1930s, on Bennett Place in downtown Baltimore, in a neighborhood changing from white to black. I was about five when we moved there and my brother Leon was a year and a half younger than I. We lived next to an Irish family, the Dolans. Their

daughter Nancy was destined to become a schoolteacher. She practiced on me; she taught me to read before I started kindergarten.

Mother spent a good deal of time working in the store, especially when it was busy on Saturdays. We had an African American woman, Lily, who worked for us, doing laundry, some of the cooking and cleaning, and taking us for walks in a nearby park. I have a vivid memory of that park: it was so small and had so many kids playing in it that the entire rim of it was ground down to dust or mud depending on whether it had been raining recently.

Mom's cooking was quite Russian to begin with: cabbage borscht, boiled chicken, and soup with *knadels*, but Lily taught her to make fried chicken and hamburgers.

Mom bought rye bread at the bakery, but as we began to grow up and see the lunches our classmates brought to school, my brother and I began to want sliced white bread. Later, after we moved to the suburbs, Lily continued to come to our house, but I started doing the cleaning up after dinner so that she could take an earlier streetcar home.

Being the child of parents who owned, lived on the premises of, and ran a small grocery store was like being in a family living and working together on the farm or in a home where a trade was conducted, like a blacksmith or a tailor, baker, or artisan. We felt very close to what our father did to support the family.

The house/store was a large, three-story building. The store, of course, was on the first floor; behind the store was the entrance hall to our living quarters. The first floor had only three rooms in our living space: an entrance hall, a very large kitchen and a living/dining room area.

Strangely, I have only a few memories of the last room, which is where the family spent most of its time when the store was closed.

I can still remember Dad buying the parts for a crystal radio set and putting them together. Leon, Mother, and I sat close to him, all of us oohing and ahing as the first wonderful crackling sounds emerged.

I can also still picture sitting at the table with Dad at my side, going over my arithmetic homework, working through a formula. I can remember sitting and fidgeting in the morning before school while Mother tried to get me to eat a soft-boiled egg. I was so worried that I would be late for school.

As I think about those times, I realize how compulsive I have always been about being "on time"—a necessary attribute for a lab scientist as it turned out!

Finally, Pearl was born in 1935; Leon and I both remembered seeing her when she came home, lying in a portable carrier.

Those are the only memories I can dredge up of a room where I must have played and eaten and tread for hours over six or seven years. That seems odd to me—why are those years so blank?

On the second floor of the house were a bathroom, three bedrooms, a laundry room, and a back porch. The third floor was spacious but empty when I remember it. Members of our extended family lived there when they were between businesses. When our cousins came on Sunday to visit, we would all go up to this floor and play tag or tell ghost stories to each other.

I slept in a small room in the back of the second floor; the room contained a bed, a nightstand with a lamp, and a chair. The room was hardly private since it had three doors, one leading from the bedroom shared by Leon and my grandfather, one to the back stairs and laundry room, and a third to the only bathroom in the house except for an outdoor toilet in back of the store. This meant everyone in the family had to go through my room to the bathroom. I do not remember feeling a lack of privacy; maybe I enjoyed all the movement.

The fourth wall of the room had a window looking out on Fremont Avenue and a tall tree grew outside the window; a saloon was across the street. A streetcar ran past at regular intervals, and a street lamp shone through my window. Sometimes I would see the lamp go on as I sat at the window. I would feel secure and recite softly to myself, "*I wish when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do, O Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you.*"

The room and street were noisy with the rattling of the streetcar, people passing under the window, and the occasional loud conversation as the patrons of the bar emerged into the street. But I slept soundly and had no problems until we moved to the suburbs when I was ten. There the silence at night was oppressive in the beginning. A couple of months passed before I stopped waiting for noise other than crickets and began sleeping soundly through the night.

But in many ways the store was the most important "room" in the house. I knew this was what supported us and I liked the clerks who worked there. The butcher Phil, would occasionally cut me a piece of cheese. Arthur was the African American general man about the store who put away groceries and helped keep things cleaned up; he named his kids after me and Leon. We loved him; he took us to school in the car occasionally and talked about his family with us. Then there was Murray, who was also a butcher and Dad's chief clerk. Finally, there was Jim—an ancient African American who shuffled about with a broom. Dad didn't really need his help, but had "inherited" him with the store. He let Jim continue to work there so he could get his groceries free along with a small salary. I remember Dad quietly adding to Jim's shopping bag when he had forgotten to put a loaf of bread in it. The guys who worked in the store were like part of our family to me.

At the age of seven, I said I wanted to work in the store, so Dad let me come out and sell candy. In those days, while some candy was wrapped, a lot of it was loose, people bought it by the ounce or piece. I remember going to my father with five pennies and telling him, "I made a nickel." He took them and explained that I had not really made a whole nickel.

"I paid a penny and a half for that, and I have to pay for electricity and salaries for the clerks." My first lesson in economics!

As I got a little older, I would sometimes sell cigarettes. People could buy six cigarettes from an open package for a nickel. One day, I was selling cigarettes to a man, and another man standing by said to me, "In Canada, it's illegal for an underage person to sell cigarettes." This really scared me—I was afraid that my father and I would be arrested. I told Dad about what the man had said. He told me not to worry about it, as I wasn't really employed by him to sell in the store. But it worried me, and I stuck to candy, bread, and canned goods after that on the occasional times I "worked" in the store.



My mother was anxious about the safety of her family, particularly her kids. She had come from a country that had just gone through a war and then a revolution. She was living in a neighborhood surrounded by unfamiliar African Americans, who were not as soft spoken as she was. She was self-conscious about her Russian accent and felt socially inferior because she was living with her family in back of and atop a store in the center of the city instead of in a suburb. Yet with all of her anxiety, she had great confidence in her intellectual ability and that of her kids. She always assumed we would not cheat, steal or be disrespectful of our elders. My parents assumed that their kids were honest and would behave well, and for the most part they were right. But I clearly also caught her discomfort about where we lived.



When I started kindergarten, Baltimore schools were segregated, which meant that I had to go about six blocks to a "white" school. I loved school and still remember Miss Carey, my homeroom teacher, and Miss Jennings, who taught geography. When I was very small, Dad or one of his clerks would drive me there, but by the time I was nine, I was walking and taking my brother Leon with me.

It is a tribute to the way a southern border city like Baltimore used to be that I walked through black and poor white neighborhoods without fear. However, I did not become close enough to any of my classmates to invite them home or to see them outside of school in their homes. I have wondered since then why this was so.

If I felt lonely, I would read a book. I know that my mother felt diminished because of where we lived, and I guess I picked up from her a sense of not belonging or not being "good enough," or maybe, heaven forbid, I felt better than my classmates! What a terrible thought! It occurs to me because Mother frequently gave me the feeling that "we are superior." I think it came from her sense that her father, a very educated man, made the family special.

Mother enrolled me at the age of six at the Peabody Institute for piano and a rhythm class. I didn't want to practice, and I resented the dark hallway in the house on the second floor above the store where the second-hand upright was installed. I also hated the rhythm class where we had to move in time to the music. I was very uncomfortable with my body and was uncomfortable with myself physically.

But a picture of me at about two or three running around on the grass exists. I think it was in Patterson Park, when we had gone there to see the fireworks. I look so carefree and spontaneous, as though I was having fun! So what went wrong for me? Perhaps it was the constraints I felt from my mother about where we lived.

Twice later in life I returned to playing the piano—while I was in college and years later in Chicago. I loved playing but was frustrated by the discrepancy between what I heard in my head and what I played. When I started attending yoga class during the last twenty years, I found I had lost my self-consciousness about moving in front of people and remembered the young awkward, self-conscious me.

My rejection of the piano while we were living in Baltimore seems indicative of all that was wrong for me in the city. Music is now such a major factor in my life; it has been since I first listened to the Metropolitan Opera on Saturdays after we moved to the "burbs."



Dad helped me with homework, particularly with arithmetic and later with more advanced math. My mother always felt self-conscious about her English and hesitated to correct my grammar and syntax. My memories of that early schooling are scattered and I do not remember my classmates well. This contrasts with my brother, who continued to know his school friends as they grew up—even after we moved to the suburbs. Since I also essentially broke off with my Baltimore friends after I left for graduate school, my pattern seems to be that I was not to feel connected. Certainly this was true after I came out as a lesbian when I began to feel very much the outsider.

But I loved school itself; I caught on very early to the pleasure of learning new things. My memories of the elementary school are dim, but I was avid for learning history and geography. I do not remember learning any science, but I read every novel I could get my hands on. In fact, unlike many female scientists, I was not particularly an animal lover, nor was I interested

in plants or natural habitats as a child. The science I turned to years later was a total surprise and seemingly a real break with my past. As an adult, however, I have become a birder, a dog and cat aficionado, and the owner of a house in the woods.



On some Saturday mornings, at around 4 or 5 a.m., I would go with Dad to the wholesale market to buy fruit and vegetables, or down to Baltimore Harbor to meet the watermelon or cantaloupe boats up from the south. I watched him sound the watermelons, thumping them and holding them up to his ear, and bargaining over the price. I learned to tell how ripe cantaloupes were by pressing them on the ends and smelling their fragrance. These trips seemed like great adventures to me and much more exciting than traveling by streetcar with my mother to downtown Baltimore to buy clothes or go to a movie.



During the time my parents had their store on Bennett Place, they were visited one day by an inspector from the city of Baltimore. He came late one Saturday afternoon, when the store was crowded and had been busy all day. They had not yet cleaned up. The Inspector said the store was dirty and he would report them to the city, which would force them to close. They protested that they had not yet had the time to clean up after the Saturday rush, but he left on a threatening note and said he would be back. My mother was scared, remembering Czarist Russia with its Cossacks and a Communist Russia with its stringent controls.

But Dad said, "He's just trying to get me to pay a bribe. He has done it with other stores in the neighborhood."

Mother was shocked—"I didn't come from Russia to pay bribes to a crooked government official." On her own, without telling anybody, she boarded a streetcar that week and went to City Hall to see the mayor! According to her, she saw him and he said that he could see that she would not keep a dirty business. "You and your husband will never be visited again by an inspector," he said, and they were not.

Was the story true? It felt true to me, and it delivered a clear message that I have, for better or worse, never forgotten: if someone is being abusive or unfair or dishonest, don't let it go—do something about it. Leon and our sister Pearl also integrated this message into their lives.



My sister Pearl was born in 1935 and did not get to do many of the things Leon and I did. Partly this was because my mother's mother died (my sister

Pearl was born shortly after and was named for her), and Mother was quite depressed for some years. Then the Second World War with gas rationing intervened; this meant we could not take our weekend trips to the beach or the hills of Pennsylvania, or drive to Washington D.C. on Sundays to visit the Smithsonian Museum, or to see Lincoln's tomb. Soon after my grandmother died, my grandfather, Tzadik Shulman, came to live with us, which he did until he died in 1948.

My brother Leon was my closest playmate when we were very little. Since I was older, I was the leader in games. Dad brought us boxing gloves and I apparently knocked Leon down and out the first time we fought. This was easy then since I was taller and heavier at that time. We would act out books I had read, adventure stories where we were shipwrecked or adrift in a boat or camping in the north woods. All of these adventures we acted out on the porch behind the laundry room or in the empty third floor rooms. Until the move to the suburbs, none of them took place away from our house.



When I was about ten and a half, our family doctor told my mother that I would soon begin to menstruate. She was apparently too embarrassed to talk with me about it, so she asked one of my older cousins, who was about fourteen at the time, to talk with me. Betty was shy, but she managed to get me a booklet, which gave me the right information. Later, I learned about sex from my classmates and friends. But as my sister approached her menarche after we moved to the suburbs, I decided to tell her about it myself. So at the age of sixteen, I went to the library, checked out some books, and gave them to her to read—and then we *talked* about it. I was the academic even then! Perhaps it comes as no surprise that when I taught a freshman seminar years later at Northwestern ("Menstrual Cycle: Fact and Fiction") the first essay I assigned to the students was "How I Learned about the Menstrual Cycle."



My father was quite busy in his store in downtown Baltimore—but on Wednesday afternoons, he took time off while my mom worked in the store. He was the one who took me to the library. Since we lived in downtown Baltimore (Fremont near Mulberry), he would drive me to Baltimore's main library located on Eutaw Street. The children's section was in a kind of basement that could be entered separately from the adult library. There was a fishpond at the entrance. I still remember vividly when he took me to get my first library card. I cannot express what a major event that was for me, because it gave me unlimited access to books. Each week, he would take me back to return books I had read and get new ones.

In 1986, when I went to my niece Nancy's wedding, which was held near the Peabody Institute in downtown Baltimore, I walked after the wedding down to the library where I had not been for forty years or so. I was shocked to see the fishpond drained and the separate children's entrance looking shabby and derelict. Even though Baltimore has gentrified its downtown harbor area, it appears to have forgotten about its central library.



Dad also sometimes took my brother and me fishing on Chesapeake Bay on Wednesdays. Then, every Wednesday evening, my parents went out to dinner and a movie or to a play without the kids. In the summer, Sunday was the day for the beach. The store was open on Sunday until around 1 p.m. Then we bundled into the car, Daddy and Mother, Leon and me. Mother made a salad and carried rolls, hamburgers, and pickles for a picnic in the park. We would drive out with the crowds to Bay Shore beach on Chesapeake Bay.

I still remember the salt air, the smell of lotion in the dressing rooms, the women with their thick bodies yelling at their children, who dressed as fast as they could since they only wanted to run out on the beach and into the water. We would go into the water also, but we never learned to swim, although both my parents swam. So we could go into the water, but only with them. I don't know why they never taught us; was it my mother's anxiety about our safety? In the days of the polio epidemic when we were kids, public swimming pools were considered dangerous, so Pearl, Leon, and I all learned to swim in college.

For several years, in the summer while we lived downtown, Mother took Leon, Pearl, and me to Atlantic City. Her two sisters and their kids joined us. We would stay for several weeks, using the beach, walking the boardwalk, and sitting and watching passersby.

All of us would go to the Steel Pier to watch the horses dive into a tank. Mother and her two sisters did not drive, so we had to wait for one or more fathers to drive north from Baltimore if we were going home.

Dad sometimes stayed with us from Monday to Thursday or Friday and then he would head back for the busy weekend in the store. When he came back on Sunday evening, he always carried one small paper bag each for Leon, Pearl, and me—with five shiny pennies in each. We would take a long time to spend them, stretching it out throughout the next week. It seemed wonderful to me then, and still does now, that he took the time not just to hand us a nickel, but to get the pennies, always new.

On Sundays, when we were not going to the beach or driving to spend the day at Loch Raven Falls or Washington, D.C., the aunts and uncles on Mom's side got together for a poker game. Grandfather Tsadik loved Penny Ante poker, and we kids would sometimes hang around to watch the game. Other times, we would put on plays, borrowing "costumes" from closets from

whoever's house we played the game. But poker stayed with me; I have always loved the game. While I was living with Rue, a medical sociologist, in Chicago during my early days of teaching at the University of Illinois, we would sometimes play poker with friends.

My mother came to Chicago every year by the overnight B&O train, even though she disapproved of my living arrangements. She arrived to spend her usual week one Saturday morning, and I picked her up at the station. "We are playing poker tonight with friends," I said; "would you like to join in?" "I might play for a little while," she said. When our friends arrived, they looked somewhat bemused by this mild looking woman with a Russian accent, about 5'1" in height. The game started, and within an hour, my mother had all of the money and announced she was tired and going to bed.



Mother and I would take the streetcar downtown to shop for clothing for the family. Eating lunch together in the Read's Drug Store was my treat—I always got a tuna fish sandwich and a milk shake—and sometimes we would go to a movie. As we sat one day watching a movie, she remembered a day she had been in that theater with her mother seeing a live group of Jewish drama actors doing a play when suddenly a cry of "Fire" broke out. Mother was sitting in the cheaper seats in the balcony, above where her mother sat in the orchestra. Mom says she saw people begin to panic and run. She called down to her mother to sit still. A number of people were injured from being trampled and she always felt she had saved her mother.

Once, Mother and I saw Molly Picon in a Yiddish language movie. In 1960, on my first trip to London, I saw Molly Picon in a play with Robert Morley and I bumped into her on Haymarket Street. Like a groupie, I gushed that I had seen her "years ago with my mother." She was gracious but probably not pleased at the reminder of the years between our "meetings."

I would also go with Mother to the Lexington Market to buy horseradish for grating and fish for chopping for gefille fish for Passover. After we moved to the suburbs, I was trusted to go downtown alone to the market by streetcar for the horseradish; I was only eleven and felt very responsible and grown up.

Mother kept an orthodox kosher home. Every Friday at sundown, she lit the Sabbath candles and we always stood around to watch. Until I was a teenager, I had never knowingly eaten anything that was not kosher.

We walked to the old synagogue downtown on holidays, and Mother was the sisterhood secretary. I don't remember being bothered as a kid by the separation of men and women during the Orthodox services, but later, when I was a teenager, it began to bother me. As I began eating out with friends in high school and college, I started eating unkosher food. My grandfather taught us to read Hebrew and Yiddish, but he did not focus much on religion per se.



Dad was quite good at making a living in a retail store, but he wanted to get out of the business. In 1937, he went into a partnership with a man who owned a wholesale meat business. But just after he had sold the store, when we had already bought a house in the near suburb of Liberty Heights but before we had moved in, disaster struck.

I still remember waking in the middle of the night to hear Mom talking to my grandfather in whispers in the next room. I heard her say, in Yiddish, "Paul's brother, Ben, was shot and killed by robbers in his grocery store."

My uncle, Ben Schwartz, left two daughters and a wife, my Aunt Hannah. He also left some debts for loans, which Dad had cosigned. So, just as Dad was starting in a new business, with a new home, he was saddled with having to pay off a rather large amount of debt. The death and the debts overshadowed our first years in the suburbs. Dad's new business did not do well, and he eventually went back for a few years into partnership with my uncle, Paul Shulman, in a retail grocery store in a white Catholic neighborhood.

Leon worked in the grocery as a delivery boy on Saturdays. As Dad would tell his customers, "I want Leon to see how tough this business is so that he will do something better with his life." Later, Dad again left the retail grocery business to go into a wholesale grocery business as a partner; he worked there until he retired.



It seems clear to me, looking at my early childhood, that I felt loved by both of my parents, whom I respected, and I picked up their assertiveness. But I unfortunately picked up my mother's uneasiness about our living situation.

On the last day at the elementary school, which I had attended since kindergarten, I stood on the corner waiting for Arthur to pick me up. Two of the girls in my class came over to say goodbye. We knew it was goodbye because I was moving all the way up north to the suburbs. I had never visited their homes, and they had never come to mine. I don't remember their names, and I don't feel connected now. But they must have felt connected to me—they brought me two tops to perfume bottles in gold-colored metal. I kept them for years.

Why did I not acquire and keep friends? Did I not feel good enough, or did I just really prefer my books? I felt very constrained physically, somehow afraid to do things on my own, away from home.

During the last summer we lived downtown, Mother signed me up for a day camp north of Baltimore. I did a little hiking there, but I didn't want to learn to swim or play softball. After two days, I begged Mom to let me stay home. My brother loved the camp and stayed for the week.

But then we moved and my world opened up.

Study Questions

- (1) Neena opens this chapter with the question, "how much of one's childhood needs to be known to understand where the adult comes from?"
 - Discuss your answer and reasons upon which you base your conclusions.
- (2) After describing a paltry few memories of the living/dining room area in her first home where she lived for eleven years, she asks "why are those years so blank?"
 - Based on the first person account offered in this chapter, discuss whether Neena's memory of those early years or only her memories of that room appear to be blank.
 - Discuss reasons for your answer.

Three

LIBERTY HEIGHTS

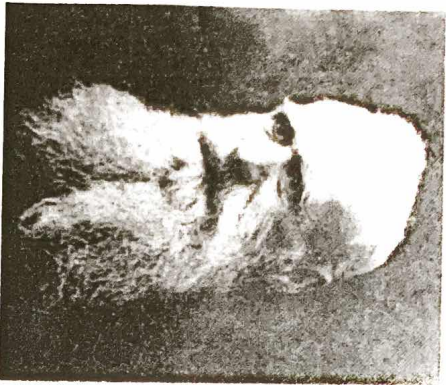
*And I have known the arms already, known them all . . .
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?*

T. S. Eliot
"The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

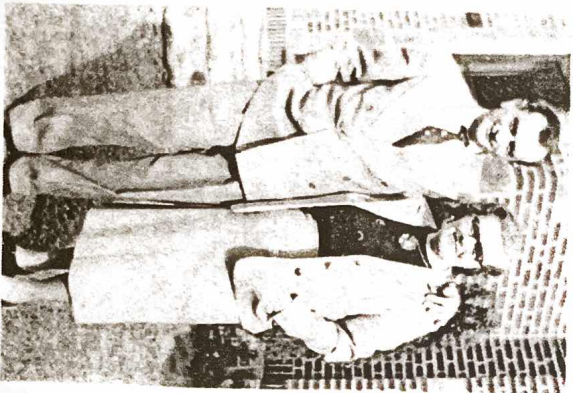
I was in the sixth grade in November 1937 when we moved from the center of the city of Baltimore to a new house in the nearby suburban area called Forest Park, which opened off Liberty Heights Road, of Barry Levinson's movie, *Liberty Heights* fame. The following eleven years spent in that area made a crucial impact on the rest of my life. I learned the rudiments of being "social," I discovered that I was lesbian; I enrolled in college as an English major and graduated as a nascent scientist.

The house we moved into was on Callaway Avenue, in a row of stand-alone brick houses, which had been newly constructed in this older, predominantly Christian (and, of course, white) neighborhood. Strangely, I don't remember seeing the house before the day we moved in. Is it possible that my parents never showed it to us kids?

When I walked up the steps to the house and opened the door, I saw all new living room and dining room furniture that I am sure I had not seen before. A couple of paintings I had never seen were hanging on the walls. I felt as though I was stepping through the looking glass with Alice. In fact, in the living room, a looking glass did hang over the mantel; when I saw myself reflected in it for the first time, I was not sure who I was. Had I changed magically to go with our new house? It felt like that to me—in a way I had.



Grandfather, Tzadik "Zadie"
Shulman 1925.



Dad and Mom in front of their new
house, Forest Park, Baltimore, 1939.

I started attending elementary School 65, about half a mile from home, walking with my brother. At first I was placed in the second class of grade 6A probably because the school assumed that since I was from an inner city school I was not well prepared. But in February, the principal switched me to the first class of grade 6B.

I graduated from my new elementary school with excellent grades in June of 1938. I was offered the chance to go to School 49, where I could complete junior high school in two instead of three years. Getting into "49" was highly competitive, since it drew from all of the elementary schools in Baltimore. My family and teachers assumed I would attend, so I signed up. This meant that in September, I would not be walking to Garrison Junior High School, four blocks from home, but would be taking a streetcar to downtown Baltimore.

All summer I kept thinking about 49, and decided not to go there. Since my decision meant I had to transfer to the nearer junior high, I had to justify this decision to the principal of the school I was not attending, as well as to the principal of the school I wanted to attend. I did both on my own. Both principals tried to change my mind, telling me what a privilege I would be missing, but I stuck to my guns. Both my parents accepted my decision.

What moved this eleven-year-old kid to make this rather heavy decision on her own?

Life in the city had felt closed in to me, filled with concrete pavements, Baltimore's white stoops, and lots of traffic noise except when we had gone to the park or the zoo, away to the Chesapeake Bay, or the ocean in Atlantic City. But the books I read were filled with space: secret gardens and mysterious forests. That the suburbs seemed like a dream came as no surprise.

At night I could sit on the side porch listening to crickets and hearing other night noises. A couple of blocks away, was a small wooded area, about an acre, where I could walk among the trees, by myself. The world had opened up for me. No wonder that I did not want to go back into the heart of the city for junior high school!

But I had another reason. I felt, without ever being able to express it in words, maybe not even to myself, that I needed the social life of the neighborhood and I saw no reason to skip the year. Life had suddenly opened up for me.

This decision proved to be very important to the breadth of education and leisure activities I began to acquire. It was a good choice for me. Garrison gave me a chance to learn to play volleyball and tennis and to write for the school newspaper. It changed me from the loner I had been before into a more social, more comfortable teen. I even began to walk to school every day, stopping to walk with classmates as I went past their houses. It was a major transition. I must have picked up my mother's relief at being in the suburbs. She felt it was more fitting for her than living with a store downtown. She was now "okay," and so was I.

While the new neighborhood meant the real beginning of a social life for me, as well as for Pearl and Leon, it also meant for my brother the initiation of his life as an athlete, which partly dominated his life in high school and college. For my sister, who was three when we moved, it was the start of many friendships still meaningful to her after sixty years.

Although I made friends with schoolmates and neighbors, I have not kept up many contacts, partly because I have been away from the city for fifty years and, as well, because I began to feel estranged from them after I realized I was lesbian.

After our move, Leon and I asked for two-wheel bikes, which we had not had in the city. Our parents agreed after telling us that it would not be easy for them to find the money. Years later, I was going through a drawer in Mother's dresser looking for something and came across a canceled contract Mom had signed for the time purchase of the bikes; she and Dad had paid a quarter for each bike weekly until they were paid for! Leon and I had not pushed them hard and had accepted their initial reluctance, but obviously they had talked it over and agreed we should have them.

The second day I had the bike, I fell in the gravel up the street and seriously tore up my left knee. Mom wasn't home when I limped in, bleeding badly. Leon was mad at me because he was afraid our parents would take our bikes away. Lily cleaned me up a bit, and I sat through supper with my knee hidden under the table. The next day, Mother discovered what had happened and took me to our doctor. He removed some of the gravel, cleaned my knee up, and gave me a tetanus shot. We kept the bikes, which I finally learned to ride, but for many years, bits of gravel kept coming out of my knee.

While I was in my early teens, Mother developed an occasional very rapid heartbeat and was told to go to bed when her heart began "fluttering." I later learned it was called paroxysmal atrial tachycardia. I wound up learning to make simple meals for the family during this time—sandwiches, hamburgers, potatoes, and vegetables. Dad was quite tolerant of the food I provided and bawled my brother and sister out if they complained. The responsibility was good for me and started me on a lifetime of enjoying cooking. But sometimes when I came home from school and found my mother lying in a dark room in bed, I felt sad and down. Maybe this marked the beginning of the intermittent depression I have experienced over my lifetime.

Our grandfather, Tzadik "Zadie" Shulman, continued living with us until his death in 1948. We kids loved and respected him.

Our new house had three bedrooms. My sister and I shared one, and Leon and Zadie shared the second, with my parents in the master bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. Zadie continued telling us stories into our teens of his time in the army and his life in Russia. He taught us Hebrew and we learned to read and speak Yiddish. When Leon was thirteen he had a Bar Mitzvah; Tzadik wrote the following letter to him in Hebrew:

"Mazel Tov!"*

April 26, 1941, Baltimore, Maryland

Today is the 5th day of the Parshah Acharai-Kedoshin in the year 570. My Dear Grandson, Moshe Leib!

Son of my beloved son-in-law Perez and my beloved daughter Ethel Schwartz. Today my dear child, you have become a Bar Mitzvah, you have thus become a responsible person for yourself and like all the elders, you have the fortunate opportunity to observe all the rules of the Torah, the true Torah of Moses which I have the joy of presenting to you, the Tanach which was the Bible, five Books of Moses and nineteen prophets.

Study the sacred writings and review them, review and study. There you will find everything.

And when you will ask wisdom of God, obey the words, and God will grant you wisdom. Fear God for this is the first love and binding yourself to him, is the beginning of belief. When you pray use a pure Hebrew, not like the fashion to read like a parrot.

Love your neighbor as yourself! Think not that only you are entitled to life's blessings. Help him when it is possible. Envy him not when he is wealthier than you. Respect older people. Honor your Father and Mother. This applies to both of them. Honor your Father and you will enjoy long life. With your lips and with your heart, honor your Father and your Mother, and then blessings will come to you.

Therefore my beloved child, my heart is filled with blessings but unfortunately I cannot find the vocabulary, neither the words to express my feelings nor the space to include everything.

Therefore, I wish you, my beloved child, a long happy life. Your life should flow in peaceful waters and not be troubled. This is the wish of your loving grandfather.

Tzavik Shulman

*Translated by Rabbi Martin Halpern, Shaari Tfila Congregation, Silver Spring, Maryland, 7 April 1971.

This letter says everything there is to say about this man. His influence in the household was enormous. Somehow we always understood that our Dad was the head of the house, but I believe that having our grandfather live with us was a major determinant of how we three turned out. He was tolerant, humorous, warm, and loving. He liked to walk around our neighborhood. He had a beard, and on his walks before Christmas, he was frequently approached by young gentle kids who thought he was Santa Claus. He would

stop and listen to them tell him what they wanted and would nod and pat them on the head as he walked away.



When I was about twelve, a new and overwhelming set of emotions entered my being. I began to have fantasies about becoming intimate with girls at the same time that my mother was encouraging me to take care of my appearance and to "dress up" to attract boys.

All my friends were talking about sex and dates, while I developed a crush on my Latin teacher in the seventh grade in junior high. She was a young blonde woman whom I thought was very attractive. (Later, during high school, when I worked at the department store in downtown Baltimore, she came in to buy her trousseau. I remember being pleased to see her but disappointed about her upcoming marriage!)

I was also very taken with a girl who lived down the street from our home, and I hung around her house talking with her. I don't know if she felt the same longing for closeness that I did, since we didn't talk about it. But we rode our bikes together and went to the movies together, and I felt warm and happy in her company. One of the neighbors with whom my mother played Mahjong began being friendlier to me, and I crossed the street many times to go to her house to talk about "deep" things. In retrospect, I realize that she was coming on to me, but I never recognized it, and nothing ever happened between us.

My fantasies about women started out as rescue stories. I would go to the rescue of someone (girl or woman) trapped by a natural disaster or by someone wicked. Certainly, I myself was never trapped, only to be rescued by a prince or a frog or even by another woman.

We are in the mountains, an avalanche occurs, and SHE is missing. We had met at the ski lodge and talked over the fire about our lives and our futures. I race out to the mountain to find her and she is unable to walk. I help her to a derelict little cabin in the woods, light a fire, and make some hot milk—I have no idea where I found the milk!—we sit close together, and I hold her hand.

Other fantasies of mind revolved around an illness, undefined, which left me weak and in pain. A female figure would come and give me food, love, and tenderness. These fantasies were not openly erotic, although they involved physical closeness and tender feelings.

The closest I ever came to living that fantasy was in a cabin in Western Pennsylvania with a lover and a fireplace and a copy of my uncompleted doctoral dissertation: No avalanche—just a bottle of wine, *La Boheme* on the portable record player, and, for a crisis, the dissertation, which I needed to finish writing. I didn't that weekend.



On Sunday, 7 December 1941, when I was fifteen, we heard on the radio that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. The following day, we students in the Forest Park High School, which I had entered in the fall, were called into the auditorium to hear the radio broadcast by President Franklin Roosevelt declaring war on Japan and Germany. The army classified my father 3A: in good health with three kids. As an alternative to being drafted, he trained as an air warden, the chief for our geographic sector.

I was old enough to take a Red Cross emergency course and a course to become an air raid messenger. After the courses, I was fingerprinted, and I received an armband, a helmet, and a gas mask. Thus, when the sirens sounded, I picked up my helmet and mask, first aid kit, and arm badge and went off to meet my warden, who was a woman who lived one block away. She and I patrolled several blocks together, in complete darkness, all streetlights and house lights being turned off. We checked to make sure all houses were completely blacked out.

Walking in the silent darkness felt exciting; I felt patriotic, brave, and important. Occasionally, an "incident" occurred: a flare was dropped with a note, fictional but plausible, about damage or injuries and I would have to carry messages back to sector headquarters, our basement. All the alarms proved to be practice sessions, although we did not know it at the time the sirens sounded. My mother was quite anxious about my doing this, but for me, it was a way to be independent, and I absolutely loved it. My thirteen-year-old brother also had a responsibility; the street lights in our neighborhood were still lit by gas, and he shinned up the poles to shut off the gas in our block when the sirens blew.



In spite of the ongoing war and the draft, which began to affect the fellows in our high school, I entered the dating game, which felt awkward, uncomfortable, and unreal. It was strange from the beginning. It felt as though I was just playing a part, observing myself speculatively from a distance.

I had not been a tomboy, whatever that is. I had not played boys' sports; I wasn't brave about getting into mischief, and I never played with boys' toys. (These traits were standard criteria in the psychosocial set during the 1940s and 1950s for defining tomboys.) But I also had never played house or cared about dolls. I never fantasized about being married. My unformed dreams of the future were of living in or near a forest, of being out of doors, of traveling. The only reason I dated was that I was expected to, but it always felt faked.

During the war, I volunteered at the USO at the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA) in downtown Baltimore, where lots of guys could



be found to "make out" with. I danced and dated some of them, and I even drove out to Fort Belvoir with my parents to see one of them. He and I corresponded while he was overseas. Poor guys—they went to Europe during the worst part of the fighting, and I was doing my best to make them feel better about it, but it was a charade for me and I began to know it.

When I was sixteen, one of the girls in my high school class loaned me a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* by a British woman, Radclyffe Hall. I don't remember talking with my classmate about the book; I guess I understood that this was forbidden stuff, not to be discussed. I still don't know what instinct led her to give it to me; it's too late to ask now since she died several years ago. The book stunned me—I was not the only person in the world with feelings about other women and it was possible to do something about it, although I learned from the book that happy endings were not to be expected. The story was about a young "masculine"-looking British woman named Stephen, who fell in love with a more feminine-looking woman, and went to live with her in France. Eventually, the other woman married a man and Stephen went on "alone."

The book was banned in England for a number of years because of its focus on lesbians, but by the time I read it, the book was available in most bookstores. In fact, it was the only serious fiction available on the subject as far as I knew. The book started me thinking about unexplored possibilities, even though the thoughts made me feel guilty and I kept them to myself.

After all these years, I find it hard to remember why I started with a sense of guilt about all this. Was it a general attitude about sex and "naughty bits" that I had picked up from my family or society in general, or was it more specifically related to homosexuality? I do not know. One has to remember that during the 1940s, the movie censors did not even allow married couples to be shown together in a double bed; open discussion of even conventional sex was not common, much less "deviant" sex.

At the beginning of the semester, in the eleventh grade, one of my classmates, Alicia, walked into our homeroom and smiled shyly at me. She was feeling self-conscious because she had had a nose job during the summer. It didn't make a lot of difference; her face was not conventionally "pretty." I had scarcely talked with her during the year in tenth grade. But I looked at her, maybe really for the first time. My bowels stirred. I had fallen in love for the first time, and with a woman.

We talked for a while after school. Alicia had a car to get between Forest Park and upper Park Heights Avenue, where she lived in a big, expensive house. We started going to the movies together and rode our bikes together across town to Gwynn Oak Park or down to Druid Hill Park in Baltimore. Alicia was a dancer, and a violinist, and I loved looking at her when she

danced, her body was so beautiful. Our conversations became more and more intense, and I began wanting to touch her, oh so much! But we did not talk about it; it seemed taboo—sick and wicked.

One weekend, Alicia's parents went out of town, leaving her and her younger sister at home. She asked if I would like to sleep over to keep them company. I had never done anything like that before. I had slept over at my cousins' houses, but not at a friend's house. In fact, I had never been to or given a pajama party. I nervously asked my mother if I could go. She was thrilled at the idea of a developing friendship with this wealthy Jewish family. So one Friday afternoon after school, I put some clothes in a sack (I didn't have a real suitcase) and boarded a streetcar and then a bus for Alicia's house. We talked for hours, trying to keep away from her kid sister, who was thrilled to be there alone with two practically grown up women.

On Sunday morning, Alicia picked up the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper from the front stoop and invited me to share her single bed to read the funnies together. We had pajamas on, but our hips and legs touched. I felt feverish and we finally dropped the paper and began touching each other shyly but in earnest. Thus, I had finally openly declared that I had sexual feelings about women. I had "come out" at least to myself and to one other person.

Alicia and I were able to make out to a certain extent in her car. We traveled to New York City to see some plays, staying with her uncle's family. We experienced the joy and freshness of walking up Broadway together, touching hands every once in a while, and sitting in the theater holding hands. That feeling is still with me. God, I loved her and I still do. She was sweet, warm, sensual, and caring.

During the war, Alicia's older sister lived in Atlantic City, where her husband was a psychiatrist at the veteran's hospital. She and I would go up to New Jersey to spend time at their home—walking on the beach together, reciting poetry, and gazing out at the Atlantic Ocean in an adolescent paroxysm of love and intensity. We both decided to stay in Baltimore for college, me out of financial necessity and she because she wanted to stay near me.

In 1946, my mother discovered a letter Alicia had written to me. (I was living at home while going to Goucher College.) She was traveling with her parents and wrote about what she was seeing, and she told me how much she missed kissing and touching me. Stupidly, I had left the letter near the front table where our telephone was. Did I want to be discovered? Perhaps.

Mother confronted me and asked, "What does this mean? Do you know that this is wrong?" She went on.

"You must stop this relationship. It will ruin your life and you will never be happy."

Mother started me on a life-long guilt trip. I still have to fight. My lover's family, as well as my mother, blamed me for this *unnatural* behavior, much to Alicia's chagrin. But they couldn't keep us separated, since we attended college together and both had access to cars and a little money. I remember a

magical Thanksgiving dinner out in a country inn in Maryland with candlelight and wine. By our senior year, she began dating a guy and I drifted away, but we stayed best friends, even occasionally double dating.

By now, many people have written about what the 1940s were like for homosexuals. All I could find to read then, besides the Radclyffe Hall book, were the Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing books in the Goucher College library about "sexual inversion," as it was called then, and the paperback novels I examined covertly in the drugstore. As I look back at these novels so many years later, I am appalled, albeit somewhat amused, by the sub-titles which appeared on the covers of books I read or looked at furtively when I was seventeen. "The gripping story of Hilda, whose twisted desires led her to the brink of degradation," or, "It is like a beautiful spider's web waiting to lure escape," or, "One twist of fate—must it keep a woman forever chained to forbidden deviation?" or, "Twisted passions in the twilight world."

Unquestionably, I felt guilty and ashamed about my sexual feelings. One of the toughest things in my life has been trying to defeat that sense of shame. I spent years and a lot of money in psychotherapy after graduate school trying to "change." The current trend of the Christian right conservatives to get homosexuals to change is laughable—and tragic. I know lots of people out there feel guilty and will try to change, and some will get married. How happy will they be? Well, I have not always been happy, but this is the only way I can be.

I was also doing other things with my time, aside from carrying on an intense love affair. An important part of junior high school for me had been joining the staff of my school paper, writing news and special features. I also became increasingly captivated by English literature, becoming quite the Anglophile. After I had entered Forest Park High School in September 1941, I continued writing and editing for the school newspaper.

When I had started on the paper, we had a male advisor who believed in allowing the student staff to run things pretty much on their own. He left a year later to work in a factory associated with the war effort. Angela Broening, head of the English Department, took over. She immediately called a meeting of the staff at the beginning of our senior year. In her autocratic way, she announced that she would run the paper the way *she* wished saying, "anyone who disagrees can get up and leave." I immediately rose and left, assuming everyone else would follow. No one did, and so I found myself off the newspaper staff. This incident became one of many during my life when I have found myself swimming against the current, many times by myself.

Despite this, I very much enjoyed Forest Park High School. I had many friends, played tennis, read a lot, really enjoyed my English and history classes, and took science only when required. I did well in tenth grade math, but I elected not to go on to algebra and calculus. My teacher told me I would be sorry later, and as it turned out, she was right. But I was still only focused on literature.

The greatest gift my mother gave her children was a love of reading books; Leon, Pearl and I were all voracious readers. When we moved to the suburbs, we walked or cycled about half a mile to the local branch library. When I was young, my friends' mothers would try to get them to stop reading and go outside to play, but my mother never did, because she hated to be interrupted while reading. In the evening, we would all be in the living room reading, stretched out on the sofa or floor, and if we laughed aloud, we had to read the passage aloud.

On my sixteenth birthday, my first cousin, Mel Shulman, presented me with three books as a birthday present: the *Standard Book of Verse* (an anthology), a complete Shakespeare, and Dorothy Sayers' anthology of mystery short stories. For some years as I was growing up, when my family visited Mel's parents (his father was my mother's older brother Simon), I would go up to Mel's room to talk with him about art, literature, and philosophy, and watch him carve a chess set. He had started Johns Hopkins University already and was sharing what he was learning with me—and I was an ardent listener.

Mel took me to my first symphony concert at about the same time. He was remarkably sensitive to my need to expand my life. He was a wonderful older brother I never had. Reading poetry and mystery stories and listening to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra have remained in my life, fortunately. Mel went on to Medical School, eventually becoming a psychoanalyst.

As soon as I could get a driving permit at the age of sixteen, I started working to save money for college. My first job was as a sales clerk at a department store in downtown Baltimore. I reached the store by streetcar from our home in Northwest Baltimore. During the school year, I worked on Thursday evenings from 5 to 9 p.m. and on Saturdays all day. During the summer, I worked six full days a week. As a part-time worker, I was shuffled from department to department, wherever extra help was needed. I worked selling inexpensive summer hats, candy, and boy's clothing.

One incident from the summer when I sold cheap women's summer hats stands out in my mind. A woman came by with her daughter, who was about my age. The daughter picked out a small white piqué hat which was designed just to sit on top of the head and needed to be kept in place by a hat pin. As I put it on her head and stuck the pin in, I pricked my finger and involuntarily said "Ouch."

The woman looked up, asking in a concerned voice "What happened?" "I pricked my finger," I said.

"Don't get any blood on the hat," she replied.

The job was a real learning experience for me—I had discovered that some people treated their perceived "inferiors" badly, which had not struck me before, since I had never heard my parents talk that way to anybody.

Although I kept asking to be put in the book department, it never happened. After I had worked there for a while, one of the female managers in personnel asked if I would like to continue after college in a managerial training position. I knew I did not want to do this. (It is interesting that our father was a terrific salesman and none of his three children went into sales as a life's work.)

During the war years in college, I switched to selling on Thursday night and Saturday in a small variety shop owned by our neighbors, the Levins, and enjoyed that much better. They paid me more and trusted me to run the store myself when they needed to do other things.

At Christmastime during high school and early in college, I worked additionally at the post office sorting mail, a job I hated, but it paid good money, particularly at night. I would do it with friends from school, and we would talk while sorting. We felt contemptuous of people who did something as routine as a career, with all the arrogance of youth. Then in 1945, the summer between my sophomore and junior years at college, I worked for the federal government in a nursery school for children of men and women in the armed forces or working in defense plants in the Baltimore area.

The kids came at 6 a.m. and many stayed until 6 p.m.; we caretakers worked 8 hour shifts. It was tough, but it paid very well. As the youngest caregiver, I was given responsibility for the two- and three-year-olds—getting them to eat lunch, showing them how to tie their shoes, following them around on the playground.

I remember sitting on the edge of the sandbox reading the *Baltimore Sun*, on a warm day in August 1945, while watching the kids playing, on the day after we dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima. The news stories overwhelmed me and I started shivering in spite of the hot sun. By that time, the American army had also entered all of the concentration camps in Germany and discovered the stacks of unburied bodies and the terribly emaciated prisoners. The pictures of the starving prisoners and of the survivors of the A-bombs haunted me and contributed to the slowly growing anxiety and depression I began to experience.



While Leon and I were growing up, our parents always said, "Neena will go to Goucher, and Leon will go to Johns Hopkins." These were the two "prestige" colleges in Baltimore. At the time, Goucher admitted only women and Hopkins only men, and that is what happened. I received a partial scholarship and with the money I had saved, I was able to pay my way to Goucher College starting in September 1944. (Leon went to Hopkins on a four-year athletic scholarship two years later.)

I intended to major in English and immediately joined the staff of the *Goucher Weekly*. In my English classes, I enjoyed reading nineteenth-century novels, Chaucer, *Beowulf*, and American and English poetry. But I was never comfortable reading with a critical eye. It became tiresome for me and began to interfere with my enjoyment of reading. A course on Shakespeare proved to be the final straw. I loved the plays but hated the droning, endless interpretations made by my classmates. Professor Beatty told me that I was not doing well in the class; he asked whether I knew I was making a C.

"Do you usually get C's?" he asked.
"No," I said, "I do not."

Internally I was bored and felt trapped. I knew this was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

So I knew I did not want to be a critic of literature or drama, nor did I want to analyze the meaning of literature. This was well before postmodernism, political correctness, and feminist analysis. But something else happened; in one of the writing courses, my teacher told me that she felt my writing was not very imaginative or highly creative. Secretly, I agreed with her, but I felt devastated anyway. I had done well as a reporter and features writer for school newspapers when I had a specific assignment, but I knew that constructing stories from the beginning was tough for me. I felt awkward at it. I thought about journalism, which I enjoyed doing, but it wasn't what I wanted to do as a career.



I enrolled in the basic physiology and hygiene course at Goucher, to satisfy a distribution requirement in science. I was turned on by the textbook, A. J. Carlson's simplest text. What hit me suddenly was that the ideas and explanations in physiology were *creative*; maybe this could satisfy the urging inside me to do something creative.

I was particularly hooked by learning about feedback controls. For example, if a person goes to high altitude, say Denver or the Andes, where the oxygen content of the air is lower than it is at sea level, the heart rate speeds up and breathing rate increases. This permits more air to be brought in to the lungs and blood stream, and thus more oxygen can be delivered to the brain

and muscles. Physiologists discovered that detectors (receptors) for oxygen level in the blood stream detect the low oxygen and send neural signals to the brain, which causes signals to be sent to the heart and rib cage muscles, which then speed up breathing and heart rate, thus taking in more air and delivering the oxygen faster to the organs where it is needed. I learned that this was not a conscious process but a reflex.

Physiologists could study such processes and devise explanations for these compensations and investigate whether these explanations were correct. Wow! I had just finished a course in philosophy and read William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Over one weekend, I felt a tremendous excitement and realized that I wanted to be a scientist—a physiologist. The professors in the physiology department were skeptical when I showed up wanting to be a physiology major.

The then department chair, Jessie King, said, "But you haven't had any college math, physics, or chemistry." I didn't tell her that I had not even finished high school math. But I persevered and went ahead, determined to do what I needed to do to become a physiologist.

I started making up the background science courses I lacked. The physiology department professors insisted that I take a position in a lab for the summer between my sophomore and junior years to make sure I really liked what I was doing. I applied for a summer job with Professor Curt Richter, a well known physiological psychologist, at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He hired several Goucher undergrads that summer; the other girls worked on experiments with the rats. He assigned me to a project measuring sweating in human beings as a way of assessing dermatome distribution.

Dermatomes are areas of the skin innervated by specific spinal nerves. A rise in body temperature causes a reflex sweating over skin dermatome areas and this cools the body (another reflex). If a nerve leading to a dermatome is cut, that specific skin surface area does not sweat. Before drugs that control high blood pressure were available, many hypertensive patients had spinal nerve branches cut to treat the condition because these branches contain nerve fibers that regulate blood pressure in addition to sweating.

The patients were brought to my lab on the top floor of the psychiatry building, and I tested their skin areas for sweating to assess the accuracy of the surgery. I also saw patients with "mysterious" diseases of unknown etiology, such as hardening of the skin or scleroderma. While the work was challenging, I did not like working with sick people and I hated Richter for his put-downs of black patients. He would come into the lab after I was finished with the tests to check the results.

I would say, "Dr. Richter, this is Mrs. Smith."

He would look over at the hospital record and say "Well, Myra, how are you today?"

I recognized, as a quasi-Southerner, that this was not friendly behavior, but an act of putting patients in their place, and I hated him for it. He also

The conundrum of lethality in the homozygous yellow (referring to the fur color) mouse has continued to interest embryologists and biologists in general. Later work (Johnson and Granholm, 1978) revealed that the early embryo develops to the multicellular blastocyst stage, but then the embryo cells fail to push their way across the enveloping membrane to implant in the uterus, suggesting that the uterine environment *per se* is not at fault.

Actually this was a confirmation of my negative findings in 1947, which were never published. While the heterozygous yellow mouse, with just one yellow gene, implants into the uterus and eventually is born, it is obese, having two to three times the body weight of the ordinary mouse. With the current concern about increasing obesity of our population, this mouse has become an interesting model for studying causes of obesity.

The ability to follow a biological/clinical problem year after year as knowledge and methodology change is what makes it so exciting to be a scientist. Knowledge accrues, answers come, new questions arise, new methodologies are invented, questions can be revisited at a new level. What an exciting career I found myself having.



My summer in Maine was not all work, work, work, although I certainly was busy. I hiked all over Mt. Desert Island with the other students. Early one morning, a group of us climbed Mt. Cadillac to see the sunrise, the earliest in the United States, and I rode my bike everywhere. My mother had not allowed me buy blue jeans before I left Baltimore (she thought they were not proper for ladies), so one of the male students took me to a Sears store and bought me my first pair.

We students lived in tents behind the lab and we had a very active social life. We had clambakes on the beach and swam together in the ocean and the lakes. Among nine men and nine women, I, of course, spotted the one other lesbian in the group—Barbara.

We circled around each other for a week or two, and then finally decided to climb one of the mountains together one evening. We wound up making love, on a wet stone surface, and then climbed down in the dark. The next morning, I discovered that my rear end was blue from my new jeans. Tired of the mountain climbs, we finally rode our bikes over to the other side of the island and spent one night in a Bed and Breakfast Inn in a real bed. She was working in a lab at one of the national laboratories at the time and we corresponded for the next year. Barbara was very bright, but painfully shy; she was a first rate biologist, with whom I later lived for several years in Chicago during graduate school.

When the summer ended, I went back to Goucher for my senior year, now hooked on science for life. In June of 1948, I graduated from college with a major in Physiology, as editor in chief of the *Goucher Weekly*, and

with enough courses in English to satisfy—or close to it—a major in that subject. In addition, I received honors for a paper I wrote on my previous summer's experience.



I went back to Bar Harbor, this time as a paid research assistant, where I again worked with Meredith. The preceding fall, just after my summer there ended, a forest fire had devastated the Jackson lab. It not only destroyed the tents and most of the lab building, but also killed many of the precious genetically inbred mice, like the yellow mouse, which were, therefore, being saved for breeding rather than being used for experiments.

Meredith asked me to find out about the control of timing of the postpartum ovulation so that he could time insemination and fertilization more closely for his developmental studies. I used a standard non-inbred strain of mice for this experiment.

The background to the experiment he suggested was that, within twenty-four hours after the delivery of a litter, the female mouse releases a new crop of eggs and mates. If a male is present, the female becomes pregnant again. (This is a marvelous mechanism for reproducing in a small vulnerable species in the wild, which keeps them pregnant during the brief annual breeding season).

Meredith had shown that the timing of this post-partum ovulation depended on the *time of day* of the delivery. The time interval between giving birth and ovulation varied systematically throughout the twenty-four hour day. The time intervals decreased from eighteen hours, when parturition occurred at 11 p.m., to twelve-thirteen hours when parturition occurred at 7 p.m. This is an example of a circadian or twenty-four hour biological rhythm in timing of hormone release.

Meredith set me to the task of determining whether the circadian variation in this interval depended on a variable time of pituitary release of Luteinizing Hormone (LH) after birth or a differential latency of the ovary to an invariant time of LH release. LH is the pituitary hormone that causes ovulation in all mammals, including human beings (see Chapter Five, figure 5.1).

At the time I was working with Runner (1948), it was not possible to measure LH in the blood because no methods sensitive enough had been developed yet, even for use in human beings. That was not possible until 1968! He suggested that I remove the pituitary gland at different times after delivery, and look for the *latest* time when this would block ovulation. If the delay in ovulation lay in the time of pituitary gland release, I should be able to remove the gland later after delivery in the mice that had a longer interval between parturition and ovulation. This would indicate that the latency between LH secretion and ovulation was the same in all mice, and that the delay in ovulation was in the timing of the release of the LH from the pituitary.

refused to spend any time answering my questions about the science behind what I was doing and sent me to the library to look it up myself. This was not a totally bad idea in the long run, but I needed a start at least. Also, I guess I needed someone to show some interest in my need to learn. My teachers at Goucher were always eager to help with questions.

Fortunately, I met Harry Patton in the library, then a postdoctoral fellow in the physiology department at Hopkins, later chair of physiology at Oregon. He saw me looking through some books with a puzzled expression and asked what I was looking for.

"I am trying to find out more about the sympathetic nervous system," I told him.

He directed me to appropriate books and encouraged me to learn more by guiding my reading and answering my questions. He was the first of a series of marvelous mentors for me.

At some point during the subsequent fall quarter after I had returned for my junior year in college, Dr. Richter called and asked me to come back at Christmas time to help pull together all of the data which I had gathered. I agreed after the reluctantly agreed to pay me per hour what I would have made at the post office.



During my sophomore year at Goucher, I began to suffer from overt depression. I began having difficulty studying. Before this, I had studied at home in the evenings in the basement of our house, alone so I could concentrate. However, I found myself feeling anxious when alone, and so I studied in our living room with the rest of the family while they were reading and listening to the radio.

During my junior year, I saw Dr. Grace Baker, a psychiatrist at Goucher, about my depression and guilt over my lesbianism. She urged me to get away from Baltimore the following summer, which I believe was very good advice. I looked for an opportunity to work elsewhere in a lab, and Gairdner Bostwick Monnet, Chair of Biology, suggested that I apply for the summer student program at the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Thus, in the summer of 1947, I went to Bar Harbor as a summer student. This was a hardship for my parents, since I would not be making money, but instead had to pay to transport myself to Maine. I also needed tuition for the program and my parents generously agreed to provide the tuition for my summer and pay for a train ticket to Bar Harbor.



My God, was the Jackson Lab was a positive experience! It influenced the rest of my life as a scientist. I worked with Meredith Runner, a developmental

biologist. He described the project he wished me to work on: the infertile yellow mouse. He wanted me to determine whether the failure of their embryos to implant in the uterus was due to a failure within the fertilized eggs or within the uterine lining. He proposed a strategy for testing the uterine lining hypothesis that entailed getting mice "pseudo-pregnant" and then using an electrical current to stimulate the uterus to respond with a deciduoma.

A deciduoma is a model for the genuine placenta, which forms from uterine and embryonic tissue after implantation. Pseudopregnancy in the rodent occurs when the cervix is stimulated by coitus with a male whose vas deferens tubes have been tied (as in vasectomy in the male human). It occurs in female rodents because a reflex from the cervix through the spinal cord to the pituitary gland releases the hormone prolactin, which then preserves progesterone secretion by the corpus luteum in the ovary.

The female becomes "pseudopregnant" rather than pregnant, of course, because no sperm were released and no embryos are produced. The progesterone from the ovary prepares the uterus for the expected embryos, which, by burrowing into the uterine lining, elicit a placental response. I was to elicit the deciduoma, or false placenta, and quantitate the threshold for a positive response in control and "yellow" mice.

I remember going back to our dining hall and asking the other summer students what a deciduoma was! They directed me to the appropriate books and I immediately researched the topic.

So I planned the experiment, went back to Meredith with my protocol, and carried out the research. This is the way I always ran my own lab during later years—starting a student with a little background, a reference or two, and asking for a protocol. This then becomes a good starting point for a discussion of controls, timing, doses, and rationale.

I found no difference in my ability to get deciduomas between the infertile yellow mouse and control mouse, which indicated that the uteri of the two strains of mice were not significantly different. So I discovered that that hypothesis was incorrect. However, I did observe a real difference between the threshold nearer the cervix than near ovary; the one nearer the cervix was much easier to elicit.

The mouse uterus, as in many mammals, is divided into two horns, and each fertilized egg implants on the side near the ovary, from which the egg was ovulated. The mouse ovulates a multiple number of eggs, from seven to fifteen. This was not only my first lesson in negating a hypothesis but also in the value of serendipity.

Years later, as a faculty member at the University of Illinois, I suggested to an undergraduate medical student that he repeat this experiment in the pseudopregnant rat for his Master's thesis. He showed that the two ends of the uterus did not differ in their ability to form deciduomas in the rat, revealing an interesting species difference.

So I started learning to take out pituitary glands from mice without killing them, while I was also checking the cages of the pregnant females every four hours to see when delivery occurred.

As part of my stipend from the lab, I also had to work in the student dining room—I set the tables at 6 a.m. for breakfast before checking the mice, and cleared tables after dinner.

A long time passed that summer before I was able to do the surgery without killing a mouse—when I became adept at it, I started the experiment. Since I was anesthetizing the mice for the surgery with Nembutal (a barbiturate), I also ran some controls, sham surgeries (surgery but leaving the pituitary in), and with anesthesia alone.

I checked for ovulation by examining the oviducts under a microscope; when ovulation occurs you can actually see the eggs floating in fluid within the swollen oviduct. To our dismay, anesthesia itself blocked ovulation!

Those were the days when the relation between the adrenal cortex gland and stress were first being elucidated; an endocrinologist visiting the lab suggested to me that the mice were being *stressed* by the anesthesia and that was what was blocking the pituitary from secreting the ovulating hormone.

The problem remained and was not answered until two years later by two endocrinologists at Duke (John Everett and Charles H. Sawyer), who showed in 1950, in the rat, that pentobarbital (Nembutol) blocked the brain from releasing its hormone (Gonadotropin Releasing Hormone or GnRH), which was responsible for making the pituitary secrete the ovulating hormone LH.

Incidentally, this was a good lesson for me in the vagaries of doing research and the absolute necessity for doing adequate controls. Furthermore, the observations that anesthesia affected ovulation in rodents brought in the idea of the central nervous system controlling reproduction in animals. This eventually led to the discovery of GnRH, secreted by brain cells, into a portal system directly into the pituitary gland. Eventually, scientists discovered that a number of reproductive and other diseases in human beings, which had been assumed to be pituitary in origin, were actually due to a failure of neurons to secrete the factors necessary to maintain pituitary function.



At the end of that second summer, Meredith asked me if I would stay an extra week after the other students left, for which he paid me, to finish up some data summaries. He had been such a good mentor and teacher for me, I said yes. I stayed on by myself, as the other students returned home, continuing to work in the lab as the autumn leaves started turning. I saw my first Northern Lights, a treat I have occasionally had at my house in Wisconsin.

I called home and suggested that my sister Pearl, who was thirteen at the time, meet me in New York City for several days, since I needed to change trains there on my way south to Baltimore. She had never been to the city

before, and Mom agreed and put her on the train from Baltimore. I met her train, and we "did" New York. We saw the Bowery, Bronx Zoo, and the Statue of Liberty, ate in an Automat and her first French restaurant, and saw Ethel Merman in *Arnie Get Your Gun*. Neither of us has forgotten that trip. We had been friends before as well as sisters, but that trip solidified our relationship, and we have taken many trips together since.



By the time I finished my undergraduate education at Goucher, I had had a remarkable set of experiences in science, working with patients at Johns Hopkins and with mice at the Jackson Lab. I had learned how to collect data and summarize it, how to do surgery on mice, how to find eggs in an oviduct, how to inject a mouse without getting bitten (usually), how to search for original journal articles in the scientific literature, and how to read and comprehend a scientific paper.

I hope that Meredith was as pleased with my enthusiasm for learning science as I have been by the dozens of undergraduates I have had in my lab at Northwestern.

I started graduate school in September 1948, at Northwestern University Medical School, in the Department of Physiology. Although I had applied and been accepted with financial support to four physiology departments (Northwestern, Yale, Rochester, and Columbia), I wanted to travel as far as I could from my mother, because she continued to talk with me about my lifestyle; so I opted for Chicago.

I knew that I could not remain near home and be myself. I had decided, because of my work at Bar Harbor, that I was interested in hormones and endocrinology, and so I became a student with Allen Lein, whose field was thyroid endocrinology.

Study Questions

- (1) Offered the opportunity to attend an accelerated middle school for high achieving students, Neena decided not to attend in favor of attending her neighborhood school. She asks, "what moved this eleven-year-old kid to make this rather heavy decision on her own?" She then gives her reasons.
 - Discuss whether a child of this age should have been allowed to make this decision independent of her parents.
 - Discuss your reasons upon which you base your conclusions.
- (2) Neena mentions that she found it notable that despite her father being a great salesman, none of his children went into sales careers.
 - Discuss whether you find that odd.

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