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Then Again

Travels in search of my younger self

Irma Kurtz

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Then Again: Travels in search of my younger self

Аннотация

For fans of Lorna Sage and Paula Fox, a unique memoir from Irma Kurtz, the acclaimed author of 'The Great American Bus Ride' and internationally renowned agony aunt."A girl of indisputable gifts, she should of course use them someday to make a beautiful home and raise a family in elegant surroundings…" School psychologist's report on Irma Kurtz, 1950.In 1954 eighteen-year-old Irma Kurtz left New Jersey to travel across Europe, intent on transforming herself and changing the world. She looked to the Old World for an alternative destiny to that mapped out by the traditional expectations at home. On her post-war Grand Tour she found what she believed in: Art and Culture and Beauty and Love, and some horror as a Jewish girl encountering the seat of much of her family's destruction.Years later, sifting through a cardboard box filled with memories at her mother's house, she rediscovered the journal of her first journey, the one that marked the beginning of a life of writing and living abroad. Gripped by intense recollections of sailing across the Atlantic, and intrigued by the exuberant remarks of her adventurous younger self, she decided to leave her London home and retrace her footsteps, this time with herself as a guide.Testing her theory that older women

are invisible, Kurtz's journey is peppered with acute observations of human behaviour, not to mention some sharp advice for her ghostly travel companion, a teenager who thinks she knows it all, yet is blind to what lies ahead of her. Part-memoir, part-travelogue, this unique book contrasts the experience of two very different travellers, offering an insight into what has endured, and what has been lost, in the life of one woman and the altered environment of Europe at the dawn of a new millennium.Beautifully written, moving and funny, Then Again is time-travel at its best, revealing the pains and pleasures of growing older and wiser.

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THEN AGAIN

Travels in search of my younger self

Irma Kurtz

Copyright

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One

One way or another, the journey will end where it began. If the last stop does not return the traveller to the start, if it strands her somewhere strange, the beginning will come looking for her. And it will find her, too: in dreams, in madness, in rogue memories that thunder out of the blue, and in things. Individual memory tends to be a self-aggrandising, over-edited branch of the human imagination; those of us existentialists, however, whose nature is to live hard and fast in the here and now, are afflicted with gaping forgetfulness, recollection sieved, chronology all to pot. A small compensation for bad memory is an acute sensitivity to things. The walls of my flat are albums; my wardrobe is an archive; a ticket stub at the bottom of an old suitcase can stop my heart. Things more than aid my memories; things contain them. A name and number scribbled in the margin of a yellowing page; a hotel bill from years ago marking my place in an abandoned book, bronze iris or moss roses from the past blooming in a current garden; music, measurable too after all and a kind of thing; scents and flavour: these and countless other objects of virtue can return me instantly to points along the journey and where it all began.

I came across the old notebook on my last trip home. It is curious, after so much water under the bridge and so many keys on the ring, still to call the place I left three-quarters of my

life ago 'home'. But home sticks to where the traveller leaves her mother and America must always be my homeland because it is my mother's land. I had no say in the matter. Practically every morning of my school years I stood shoulder to shoulder with others in my class and pledged allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stood, flapping in the dank breeze off the New Jersey marshland where we first-and second-generation Americans were growing up. And some of us, not many of the girls, outgrowing that place too, faster than we outgrew our patent-leather shoes called 'mary janes', gleaming under us like the hooves of circus ponies. You don't often see patent leather on the feet of children these days, only occasionally in Latin cities where families walk out together on Sundays; there are fewer and fewer of such cities and such families. Right, left-right, left: those shoes were made for skipping. In my case for skipping town. When the leather cracked over the toes it showed buckram underneath. What has become of buckram? And taffeta, and starched cotton and faille, and all the stiff fabrics of a post-war childhood? My old notebook too is not a thing found easily today. It has a hard cover bound in black library tape that has not yielded or split in the half-century since I bought it for a nickel. What a nickel bought in the early 1950s costs around $3 now. On the other hand, what was an hour then passes now in fifteen minutes: illogical sums of ageing that make old folks fumble at checkout counters and turn up way too early or too late for buses and trains.

Nearly thirty years ago, when my mother was almost the age

I am now, my father twelve years older than she, they sold our holiday house in the country and the flat in Jersey City where my brother and I had grown up, and they moved to a sheltered community near Princeton, New Jersey. On one of my visits not long after they had settled in, my father strolled out with me to have a look around. Mother had long before stopped walking to no purpose or destination, but my father's body was strong and had outlived the full vigour of his mind by a decade or so; it was just the two of us trudging along side by side, more attuned in silence than conversation. Streets of the gated square mile were empty as usual, more or less identical cottages were laid out along them like pieces on a board game for players with fixed incomes and shrunken ambition. A few cars passed, driven slowly by white-haired women on their way to the community clubhouse or the cottage hospital or the shop; they put on speed in shows of bravado whenever they saw us trying to cross a street ahead of them. A group of chattering dowagers in shell-suits came towards us, a few of them were swinging mallets, apparently heading to the croquet green.

My father gripped my arm. 'Look, Irma, you see the kind of place this is,' he whispered in a kind of panic, 'only the men die here.'

It was the last walk he and I took together; not very long afterwards he went ahead to prove his point.

Once my mother arrived at an age when she could no longer reach or stoop to the top or bottom shelves of her cupboards,

they remained crammed with things that provide poignant forage when I visit home. There is practically none of my father, no notes in his oddly dainty script, no letters, even the flyleaves have been torn out of books he inscribed to his then beloved when they were courting: *The Thoughts of Epictetus, The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. What mother has destroyed and thrown away, I imagine in a single vengeful frenzy, is evidence, too, of anger and disappointment as fierce as love. It was not a marriage made in heaven; it was made, in fact, in Indiana. They met there at university, the fatherless local girl and the handsome man from the east. A few photographs of him have escaped, but there are spaces, too, crusted with old library paste on the black pages of ancient albums where his image once was. Repudiated as husband, he incidentally became nobody's father.

It was at the bottom of one of mother's domestic oubliettes that I found my old notebook two years ago, languishing among curling papers and postcards in a cardboard box. The moment I saw it my breath caught and there I was again, eighteen, exultant and trembling on the deck of the Italian ship, *Castel Felice*, about to embark on a journey that was going to effect the romantic transformation of my life at last. Years earlier when I was ten or twelve I had started sometimes to feel a sense of something other ahead, something adventurous, something more than a future of prosperity, fidelity and motherhood for which I and every other girl in my class was being designed. It was no gift of birthright that animated my daydreams, I knew I was no changeling;

I certainly had no outsized sense of self-importance. On the contrary, what excited me was the freedom that derives from knowing myself unimportant and without status: the freedom of invisibility. Perhaps my early diffidence is why age, which throws a shabby cloak over all women, has not descended on me as an ugly surprise. If anything, to know I am of no interest to those who interest me so I can see, unseen, has increased the fun of travelling. Occasionally, and never for long, I used to indulge in adolescent self-pity and pretend to envy Marie Caso, the fishmonger's daughter, and the other playmates of my street who were free of responsibility, free of the possibilities, free of the freedom that I felt myself stuck with. By the time I turned seventeen and left for university, Marie and I lost touch; probably, she was already engaged to a nice Italian boy. And two years later, in the spring of 1954, when I bought the notebook in which to keep a journal of my first trip to Europe, it is a safe guess she was pregnant with the first of three, maybe four, lovely children.

I wish I could walk around myself as I was on the deck of the *Castel Felice* surrounded by college students from every state in America, hundreds of them, all on their dutiful six-week cultural European tours. My own group was called 'Study Abroad' and composed mainly of students from the Midwest and the east coast. I wish I could see the back of my head, watch it turn a face my way and hear my young voice answer when I ask her – you, myself – whether she suspects or hopes that she alone in

the noisy crowd is bound to leave something of her very self on that other continent. And find something. And never quite come home again.

The journal of my first trip to Europe is a typical American kid's notebook of a design that continues to be produced, though modern taste prefers the cover soft and its traditional mottled pattern seems to me over the years to have become increasingly white. The cover of my old notebook is mostly classic black, giving the effect of water seen from above on a moonlit night. I wonder if the word 'Compositions' is still being set in elegant typeface over a white rectangle on the front? Probably not. Nowadays, all but doodles are undertaken by keyboard. On the line below, in the space after 'Name' is my own, written proudly and carefully as I used to sign it when I was eighteen. By the time a body turns sixty or so, her signature is required increasingly seldom; all important deliveries have been made, their receipt acknowledged; contracts, last wills and testaments, births and marriages have been put in order, and someone else will sign the death certificate. Aged signatures become impatient and jagged with hardly any delineation between the central letters as if to say: if you don't know who I am by this time, to hell with you. Besides, in modern life even the most intimate messages are sent electronically or by phone; not many cheques need to be filled in either, not since plastic came on the scene. The day lies not very far ahead when, as before the dawn of literacy, a thumbprint or an 'X' will see most people through a lifetime.

The way I wrote my name on the cover of the notebook, so dewy and guileless, makes my aged heart go out to the young me, unknowing of what an awful lot of promiscuous signing lay ahead of her, unaware that her virginal surname was bound to remain unchanged for ever. As I opened the old notebook and started to read, I wanted more than ever to go back and find her on deck among the other American youngsters outward bound for the first time.

'If I could tell you,' I would tell her, 'for a start, you will not be especially lucky. Don't count on anything heaven-sent to happen in your life. Expect no serious serendipity. No lottery wins for you, dear. In any case, as even the luckiest bastards grow old, serendipity gives way to mere coincidence. So expect only what you yourself make happen and allow. Nobody is going to do you any favours and in that way at least you'll be lucky. Because favours are an anchor; favours are a drag. Favours are power; kindness is strength. Got that? Don't do anyone any favours either, lest you bind him to you bitterly. Give and forget, no strings attached and nothing to call in. I wish you knew now, girl, how strong you are, so much stronger than you, or I, were led to believe. I wish you had the conviction of your courage. Are you listening to me? Time is short. Very, very short.

What more? Let's see. Stay away from handsome men this time; easy conquests make them slack. And beware of childless women over forty; they take up residence in their empty nurseries and behave accordingly. Ride a low horse and stable it away from

high ones: the higher the horse the more stupid its rider. Cut your hair before you're forty. Any woman over thirty-five wearing a mane like yours is in trouble. Don't smoke. Nobody is going to tell the public for another couple of decades, but smoking kills unduly. Do stand up straight, can't you? There is much more, so much more! Oh, how I wish I could tell you. What can I tell you, after all? How can I tell you all you are going to forget? How can I tell you what I don't remember? How can I tell you all that has happened to me and must happen to you? Watch closely. It starts happening here. Look! The second gangway is being raised and when the anchor is weighed at last, a long, long time must pass before you reach a harbour to call home. You are eighteen on your maiden voyage and, appropriately, a maiden; you will return in only six weeks, changed and knowing, a maiden still; but that's a minor adjustment and it will take place on another journey out.'

Did it occur to you that half a century later you, as I, were going to study your primitive squiggles, looking for a map? Not a map ahead, oh no; ahead is all too clear at our age. The path behind is what I want from you, the one that finally led a girl from Jersey City into residence beside the Thames, where to this day she continues to survive on your nerve and wits. How it would have annoyed you to feel me breathing down your neck as you stood on the deck. What fantasy of her own, you would wonder, did this old madwoman believe you were acting out? Why was she ogling you like an owl a mouse and threatening to touch you? Ugh! You were never going to let yourself be like that, were

you? Dried up and past desiring. You intended to die young; most of us who were reading Eng. Lit. at Barnard College in Columbia meant to die young. Like Keats. Ever since you or I can remember, even as a child, we have been regularly buttonholed for reminiscences or warnings by garrulous grown-ups in the street, on buses, at drugstore lunch counters; they took advantage of your curiosity, later mine, combined with the unnatural self-effacement that was drummed into us practically from birth. Already, you knew how to back off, how to free yourself politely from the old bat, soon forgotten in the bustle of departure. The next time we met face to face – she and I, me and I, you and I – was nearly fifty years later when I rediscovered the notebook.

'Well, about time too,' cried the notebook, leaping into my hand. 'Fancy leaving me behind when you left! Letting them stash me here with worn shmottas and chipped cups, and crumbling paperbacks, and diplomas nobody has asked to see since the ink was dry! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? To forget about me! Me! Journal of your first trip to Europe, though sporadically kept, may I say, and puerile, and sloppily written back in the days when you were fool enough to think you could trust your memory. Daft child! She who did not intend to keep her journal should not have kept one in the first place. What for? "For posterity?" Honey, in case you ain't noticed, a whole lot of your posterity is behind you. The pun implicit is all yours, by the by. I've had my fill of puns thanks to your precocious appetite for the damn things in your teens.'

Merely holding the journal in my hand, before I had read a word of it, brought a vivid memory back to me: the ship had started pulling away when I saw my father break free of the crowd on shore. Alone, he walked the length of the dock and stood for as long as I could see him, waving the ancient, perplexed farewell of parents to their departing children. Already he was barely in sight, a little figure at the perilous end of the pier. A boy leaning next to me on the sticky rail was whistling 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring'. And I was swept by a wild and paradoxical new feeling, comforting and scary, sweet and painful, thrilling and melancholy: I thought it must be loneliness. And I was right.

Two

From our arrival into life, a journey that frees the spirit must cross water. No matter how arduous and dangerous, overland travel leads logically from one foregone conclusion to the next on this mapped world. But on all the breadth of oceans there is no fixed logic, no still border, no language except the one you carry on board; in all the depths of oceans there is no history but prehistory. Time itself is adrift; clocks run down while terrestrial minutes give up their ground to a celestial measure. Somehow, I have conspired to spend more of my life at sea than any woman I know of similarly constrained upbringing. And when I say 'at sea', I do mean in fact as well as fancifully.

'1954: At sea! I have only ever been on the ocean before when Dad took me deep-sea fishing once in Florida. This is different; tonight for the first time ever I will sleep at sea! All at sea! It is divine to be alone. And it was divine to walk around the ship and learn it, all by myself.'

'All by myself': favourite words since the first time you tied your shoes all by yourself, and rode the bus all by yourself, and finally when you were fourteen or so stayed in the city sometimes all by yourself while your family went to the house in the country for weekends. Of course, dear child, one of the disadvantages of keeping any sort of journal is that it presupposes some sort of reader, even if it is only oneself years later. The moment

pen is put to paper the writer ceases to be all by herself. Nor, strictly speaking, were you anything like alone on your first trip to Europe. The deck was crowded with young Americans, thirty or forty of them on the very same undergraduate tour as you. And even as the ship was leaving port, the suitcase in which you had packed your pristine journal was being tossed on an upper berth by one of four cabin mates you had yet to meet. You could be a snooty little Manhattan bitch on the quiet, by the by.

'July, 1954: They are dreadful girls from the Midwest, not with our group. We are called "Study Abroad", mostly from the east. One of them is with some sort of religious tour called "Faith Studies" and headed straight for Rome. She is called Sally or Jane or Mary. Possibly all three. She spent all the time we were pulling away playing solitaire hands of bridge. And while I was on deck, she was busy moving me out of my berth into a less desirable upper one. She had the nerve to say the steward assigned her to the lower bunk. According to the brochure, allocation of bunks is first come, first served, and Dad got us to the pier really early to secure a lower bunk for me. He was afraid when the sea was rough I might roll out of the top one. But what can I do? With a long journey ahead, I must let it pass. Hereafter, I will call her Ass-in-igned. The other two are Ruth and Ethel. They are with a group from their college. Hereafter I'll call them Nothing A and Nothing B. Sat out on deck with the Nothings until 2.30. They twittered nothingspeak about their boring college and their boring boyfriends. But my mind was somewhere else. I kept

seeing the dear old Statue of Liberty and remembering how a few hours earlier she had reversed the welcome she had given Grandpa Joe and Grandma Ida half a century before into a *"bon voyage"* for me. How do you know when you leave home for the last time? How do you know when you are leaving home for ever?'

In spite of a nod to my paternal grandparents on departing, I was not looking for my roots or expecting to find them abroad. Student tours such as the one I was on went nowhere near the misty regions of Eastern Europe whence most of my people had fled their unplumbed villages besieged by dangers rarely spoken of to their well-nourished American grandchildren.

'But why, why do you want to live there?' my father cried years later when my schooling was finished and I announced my imminent expatriation to Europe. 'All of them want to come and live here!'

I come from a tribe of tumbleweed nature; we rolled up our roots in shawls and scrolls, and ran with them before the wind. No, I was not looking for roots; I took them with me. I was looking for the source of what I knew as culture – the places where words and art and music came from – and I was looking for a good time. My best friend and room-mate at university, Marjorie, had taken the Study Abroad tour the preceding year and she promised me I would certainly find the fun.

The upper berth I complained about was next to a porthole, and it turned out to be wonderful. Movies were mainly in black

and white back then. Without colour telly, without computers or computer games, our adventures were never virtual: they had to be the real thing or nothing. True enough, books have always been able to take an imaginative landlubber out to sea, but they cannot keep her there when the ship is becalmed and she would rather be somewhere else. Besides, on a literary voyage the author has to tag along. But for one week every sunrise was all my own. Six times through the porthole with my own eyes I watched the new sun tenderly separate the infinite black round into sky and sea: six times I watched life being created again out of space and brine.

'July 1954: It is so very big. Every day or two the Captain tells us to set our watches up an hour. Columbus needed such a long time to cross the ocean going the other way, he must have accumulated hours much, much slower than we are losing them. Did he factor the slow gain into his navigation, I wonder? Did he expect to find a new time in the New World? Do I expect to find an Old Time in the Old World? What will I find there, I wonder?'

And I wonder now, deciphering my faded scrawl: did we have biros in 1953? If we did, they must have been newfangled and dear, for by the fourth day at sea I complain of losing my pen, and ink does not reappear in the journal until weeks later when the tour arrived in Venice. For all my importuning of solitude – 'O, to be alone!' I wrote near the end of the crossing, 'without another American sophomore always at my elbow!' – I have always been indiscriminately social, seeing all strangers as

diminutive nations full of curiosities and odd customs. Only in middle age did I learn how to wriggle guiltlessly off the hook of my own conviviality and walk away alone; when I was younger and hopeful of soulmates, I often found myself in too deep. After merely one day at sea a potential best friend had arisen out of the welter of college students aboard. A best friend was necessary to a smart American college girl's life in the early 1950s, as a psychoanalyst was to become a few years later and her own credit card is now. Evelyn Esposito was majoring in Biology at I forget which state university and was on the same tour as I. She was a happy choice for temporary best friend: not only did she appear, at least in the beginning, to be laid back and cheerful, she also spoke a smattering of Italian and had relatives in Genoa who were going to welcome us into their home for a few happy hours off the itinerary. She and her tall, stringy and slightly dour travelling companion, Midge, were three years older than I. For a teenager in those days, and perhaps even now, three years separated underclassmen from seniors, garter belts from girdles, and virgins from women of the world.

'1953: Like others I have met, they are surprised at my extreme youth and great maturity. Must it always be like that?'

No, you little drip, believe me, some day it will be your great age and extreme silliness that surprise them. But I must not be too hard on myself then, for judging every word I wrote, even more tellingly those I didn't, was the phantom of my journal's only likely reader, my most severe critic, my mother. Moreover,

I suffered from the inescapable pretensions of late teen years, as well as the darned and ravelling yet distinctly bluestocking standards of Barnard College.

In the days after my journal came to light I began to consider and finally to plan retracing the journey that changed me for keeps. During the more than thirty years I have lived in Europe, I have travelled out of my neighbourhood, England, occasionally and only for a purpose generally connected to my profession of jobbing journalist and writer. True enough, I often go to France, but it hardly counts as a journey for I have a small flat in the Pas de Calais; I call it the 'west wing' of my equally small flat in London. Italy? I have been only once or twice in all these decades to visit friends in Tuscany; I've been to Mexico many times more than to Holland, and to Africa twice as often as to Germany. Soon, the idea of repeating the Grand Tour of my youth started to become compelling. Now that I am coming to the end of most desires, would I rediscover the joyous excitement of my first journal? Now that I am catching up in years with the stones of Rome, would I find the same enchantment in antiquity? Now that American tourists are two a penny, not the rare birds we were in the 1950s, would there be the same dawning sense not only of discovery, also of being discovered? And with the guide and talisman of my old journal in hand could I perhaps reverse time for a moment? Could I meet myself as I was at eighteen, sitting in the Tuileries gardens in Paris, weeping because I did not want to leave? I wish I could have begun precisely as I did the first

time, sailing away from Manhattan, a jagged comb on the beach, to embark on a long, slow voyage over what I hear Americans now refer to as 'the pond'. We did not take the Atlantic so lightly in those days. Many of us had living ancestors like mine who had crossed that great sea in terror and in hope. East-coast kids with itchy feet commonly undertook a pioneering trek into America's alien inner spaces where a lot of them settled to raise local standards and money and children. Fewer of us, however, were called to a choppy crossing of the mighty ocean that separated us Americans from our history.

The *Castel Felice* was no insulated five-star liner, that's for sure.

'1954: We eat at long trestle tables. It looks like the set for a prison movie except it never stops moving and there are no attempted escapes. Where there is a strong breeze, hardly anyone turns up for meals. Ass-in-igned has hardly moved out of the lower berth and the Nothings are green. I haven't felt a twinge of seasickness yet. But I'd better not crow about that until the journey is over. The food is surprisingly awful. But the Italian stewards are delicious. While he was serving the awful soup, one of them whispered in English that he was very fond of me. Alas, I love another. The man who makes the crew announcements over the loudspeaker has stolen my heart. *"Subito, Adriano …"* he says three or four times a day. Evelyn says Adriano must be a real good-for-nothing as he is never where he ought to be. I don't know who Adriano is but isn't it a lovely name? And I envy him

being summoned to that dreamy voice.’

The *Castel Felice* was, in fact, an endearing old tub; in timorous, litigious times like these she would certainly be retired as unseaworthy. Her sort of no-frills ship for students was going to be replaced by cheap charter flights that turn the sea lanes into freeways and their crossings into airborne traffic jams. But the ‘Happy Castle’ was small enough to let us feel the Atlantic through her hull and to transmit every trill and tremor of the deep for good or very, very ill. The last person I expected to see on board such a maritime flivver was a member of Barnard’s exalted faculty, albeit a raffish one. Mr Sweet was the coach of our college drama society. I knew him on sight, of course, though he gave no sign of knowing me, or remembering my tremulous performance the previous semester when I read for Juliet. I have always been stagestruck; my main reason for choosing a Manhattan-based university was to stay near Broadway. From the time I had begun to know hazily that I had to escape the mild academic life followed by suburban domesticity on the cards for girls where I came from, the only way that presented itself as romantic, tragic, dramatic, sexy, comic, stand-up, bohemian, the only way to be all I dreamed of being without too much risk of dreaded parental disapproval, was to act the part. But I had neither the gift for acting nor the necessary determination, nor the required tolerance for repetition, and Mr Sweet gave Juliet to a more single-minded undergraduate.

Dolph Sweet still pops up occasionally on movies made for

early TV. He plays craggy villains or policemen on the edge of retirement and his acting is a trifle too big to fit the small screen comfortably. He already seemed pretty old to us Barnard girls in those days, at least as old as Shelley when he gave up the ghost. Although Mr Sweet was affable on campus and as far as the young can ascribe emotions to old men he seemed happy enough, I realise now that it was all an act. Barnard College was hell for a 'resting' thespian. The bargain-basement trip to Europe must have been a treat he promised himself after a year spent trying to persuade self-conscious scholarly young women to let their hair down and perform.

'1954: Odd to see Mr Sweet in the dining salon today. He was off to one side at one of the few small tables with a handsome Negro' (politically correct form of the day) 'who is *certainement pas sa femme*!'

The conclusion I jumped to that Mr Sweet was having an affair with his handsome dinner companion was understandable, I guess. Four kitchen chairs piled high had long before taken me to the top shelf of our bookcase at home where salacious literature was stashed optimistically beyond the reach of children. Teetering at that giddy height, I found sheet music for the 'Internationale', already in those pre-McCarthy days an inflammatory document, widely considered suitable for burning. It was crammed between Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* and Krafft-Ebing's immensely instructive *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Thanks to vertiginous curiosity and older friends, among them

plenty of young men who were queer – a politically correct form of those days for the current 'gay' – my knowledge of other people's sexual conduct was as wide as experience of my own was narrow. Moreover, like many clever, liberal, passionate yet strangely virginal women, I was an incipient fag-hag. My assumption about the Sweet menage was pretty sophisticated, I must say, for the early 1950s; too sophisticated by half, as it turned out. That very afternoon the young man told me from a neighbouring deckchair that he was on his way to meet a girlfriend in Paris, not with Mr Sweet at all.

'*Quel dommage*!' wrote this little busybody.

Mr Sweet had his share of devotees among my classmates and an unorthodox liaison would have made resonant gossip in the halls of Academe. Also, my homosexual men friends were always thrilled, though they pretended not to be surprised, when any figure of even the slightest eminence was revealed to share their persuasion. Privately and in their cups they maintained that all interesting men – Shakespeare, Mozart, Da Vinci, Rock Hudson, only not Hitler, thank you very much, and who would have imagined J. Edgar Hoover? – were that way inclined. And the more butch a guy appeared to be, the more he was resisting the inclination. I have since observed that shoe fetishists, paedophiles, mild sadomasochists and practically all erotic minorities genuinely believe that if mankind were liberated from prejudice, it would choose their way, too, to a man. And to a woman, it follows; it never precedes. I know it has become

unfashionable to the point of derision to say so, but the fact is when it comes to sex, we women have less time to fool around and more important things to do.

'July 1954: Bored! Bored! Bored! I went to sea to see the world, and what did I see? I saw the sea! Finished the book I brought with me: *The Greek Passion*. Nothing to read. Nothing to do. I guess I should have brought Boswell after all. Will these long days never end? Ass-in-igned moved out last night while the rest of us were having dinner. Where to? She hasn't jumped overboard, I guess. Maybe there is a first-class deck hidden on this ship where she's had herself ass-in-igned to live like a queen in clover.'

How I would relish days and nights at sea right now: no telephone, no television, no interruptions, no demands beyond breathing in and out the salty blue air. And now I have come to the age of rereading, how many more than one book would I pack for such a journey! What was tedious in the long, long days to spare of youth becomes on short time a welcome respite from work and a rehearsal for eternal rest.

Ass-in-igned's name was Barbara. She was from a small state college and had just turned nineteen. A pale girl, she was too plump and languid to have climbed comfortably to the upper berth. We learned later that while we were all at dinner on 7 July, the night before landfall, a steward found her in a diabetic coma. He carried her to the infirmary where she died a few hours later. Barbara's death was not announced publicly; we learned about

it on the shipboard grapevine and, as the news spread, students gathered in mutinous groups on the decks. Damn it. Boredom is an affliction of youth; death should rightly be an affliction of old age. Betrayal of that prevailing logic made us all furious at someone or something.

'1954: How could it have happened? They say the drug needed to save her was not on board because her parents had not informed the ship's doctor of her condition. How could it have happened? Because the family doctor had not told them how serious the condition was. Or so I have heard. And how the hell could it have happened? How, how, how the hell did any of it happen? Because. Because. Because. It is too stupid that she is dead.'

Only now, fifty years on and the mother of a child of my own, do I think of the dead girl with pain and melancholy instead of anger. Only now do I think of her at all. Perhaps we were less sensitive in the 1950s, before flying doctors and sophisticated medication and grief counsellors, when life was that much younger and closer to its primal cave. By the time we sighted land, the waters had closed over Barbara's memory as they have throughout the ages over graves of sailors lost at sea.

'Today is 8 July 1954. In one month, three weeks and five days I will be nineteen. Nineteen! Getting on a bit! We have been at sea for seven days and should see land any moment now. Days without end on the ocean are like long sentences with no punctuation. I told Evelyn that I thought days at sea were Henry

James without commas! She didn't seem to get it. Maybe natural science majors don't have to read Henry James? Do they have to read anything? Maybe they do it all by touch.'

Ha! Very funny! Your brother became a doctor in the end, and is he not to this day the most avid reader I know, obsessive almost? He reads for the joy of acquiring information, the more recherché it is the more joyous is he, history and biography, rarely fiction, never poetry, or so I dare say. The tale of how my new baby brother and only sibling was introduced to me sixty-odd years ago is one of my cherished false memories. As I like to recall, they brought the bundle home from hospital, plunked him into the baby scales set up on the kitchen table and said: 'Irma, meet your seven-pound-brother-the-doctor …' I was not yet four years old at the time and this had to be an invention of my later life. Nevertheless, there is no denying that conception is contaminated by preconception and parental love in general spoiled by ambition. Names given babies are tiny epitaphs in advance. My brother's name, for instance, Michael David, was a parental ploy; even after it was changed briefly to Michael Dean during an episode of Semitic collywobbles when American medical schools were rumoured to have begun imposing Jewish quotas, the poor little tyke remained stuck with the initials MD. As for me, my name, Irma, is practically an anagram of my mother's name: Myra. My middle name, Lois on my birth certificate but Louise or Leah depending on which member of my family I asked, provided the initials ILK as in: you

will be of that ILK and you will like it. When it came to my own introduction to waiting family members, in one of my rummages I found and have kept in my possession a letter my mother sent to her mother, who was still back in Indiana, announcing my birth. 'It's a girl,' she wrote in her tight, controlled backhand. 'Drat it!'

Anger has not been one of my outstanding characteristics; the moment insult enters my system it encounters my grotesquely enlarged sense of responsibility and is converted immediately into guilt and hurt. As I grow older I understand and will at last accept that mine was the final generation of females in Western society to be born into an ancient tradition that found each newborn daughter a new burden. Love your little girl if you can, but above love and, over all, keep her safe for a stranger's pleasure and another family's benefit. To that end, let her possess beauty but only to a modest degree, so it shouldn't incite desire among the goyim. As for education, an adornment for girls of my ilk, may it be decorative yet not so flashy or deep that it threatens her good sense or the vanity of her future husband, not so costly that it subtracts one penny from the more important school fees of her brothers. Margaret Mead, eminent graduate of Barnard College for Women, in the address she delivered to my graduating class in 1956 congratulated us on having accumulated great words and thoughts and poems to mull over in the future while we prepared dinner for our families and washed dishes at our kitchen sinks. Many years later I realised the lady was being ironical and provocative. But her audience was too young

for irony. Besides, we were American, weren't we? And thus we were indoctrinated from the cradle with characteristic literal thinking. At the time, her words made me unhappy and a little provoked, too. Oh, so few of us girls then became anthropologists or lawyers or doctors! Even fewer put out to sea.

The late teenager I used to be, I mean you there, intense and long-haired youngster leaning on the rail and eastward-bound, you are lacking in self-confidence, lacking in self-awareness and, to a great degree, lacking in self. I know, I remember, how you sometimes drift away to hover in a high corner of the room watching your family at dinner and hearing yourself ask, please, for the salt or water. You did not always feel all there; you don't now. But you had a strong sense that your self had not yet arrived, was waiting somewhere in the wings. The selfish years have ended now; your self dropped in, barely made herself known and is departing. I hardly knew anything about myself at all back then. I did not even realise, for example, that I was exhausting most of my lifetime's allowance of rage in battles with my father. They marked my adolescence, those screaming matches toe to toe with Daddy, and as long as each one lasted I felt an inkling of my own weight and stamina. Mother stood in the background during these struggles: has sly memory superimposed a smile on her face? Her own father died when she was barely seven; is it possible she thought this late and agonising parturition was what fathers were for? No. It is more likely that my mother believed it was not my battle I fought with the man she regretted having

married, but her own. And what were our endless screaming matches ostensibly about? About right and wrong, tolerance and intolerance, food, entertainment, what was safe and what was dangerous: all the murderous and petty strategies of revolution.

And yet, after the shouting, my father had himself to thank for my war of independence, and I thank him for it, too. When I was barely nine, and our bloodline had been mercilessly cauterised in the fascist camps of Europe, he used to take me to lectures at Cooper Union where lefties and crypto-anarchists still dared hold forth. At the end of the fiery screeds discussion was thrown open to the floor and my father glowed with pride when I stood up on a chair to squeal precocious questions at the speakers: from whom does an unenlightened, uneducated proletariat learn the precepts of self-government? How can killing people ever stop people from killing people? Is Russian a Western language? Suddenly and only now, recollecting his pride, his sorrow, his carpentry and his singing voice, I realise to what degree I trusted my father, more than I have trusted anyone. I trusted him enough to show him all my anger. And he, staunch in his love, was soon afraid: for me.

Intellectual parent-bashing was a relatively new sport in the 1950s, a kind of emotional lacrosse, played almost exclusively by girls. I was an enthusiastic amateur who never achieved the thrust and style of, say, my room-mate, Marjorie, or any other of the proto-analysands at my college. Those chicks blamed their daddies for crimes too subtle even for my imagining. But

Marjorie herself, in spite of the coaching of a Park Avenue shrink, never attempted serious mama-bashing, a sophisticated permutation of the game. Blaming mama rose to a competitive level only after the daughters and granddaughters of my generation were liberated to know that our own sex could be just as bullying, cruel, egotistical, possessive, venal and even more judgemental than men. No parent can ever get it just right or ever will. So what do you think about that, young one, squinting into the dawn for your first sight of land? Parents fuck us up from the moment we are born, it's in the nature of the beast: they are bigger than we are, they are older – our parents *have* us. You too, in your time, for all the love in the world will get it not just right. Hey, pay attention! This is you I'm talking about. It is you I am talking to. You'd like to tell me to mind my own business. I am. And we must be growing very old indeed to talk to ourself so shamelessly. Senility never lacks for company.

'1954: Land! This morning I saw land! Several rocks, beautiful, beautiful rocks, and an island called Wight that was once a hideout for pirates, and a big, proud, lonely lighthouse. Evelyn joined me and we watched the rocks slip by. English rocks! Pointed white rocks! We waved to skinny soldiers on a troopship behind us. English soldiers! Skinny English soldiers! Evelyn said they looked more worried than pleased to see us. I told her they've had a lot more to worry about recently than we have in the States. I agree, though, they did not look half as pleased at the sight of us as the Italian stewards did every

time they sauntered past while we were splashing around the little swimming pool on deck, that's for sure! And here we are! Here we are! And the formalities: my first ever formalities! The first stamp in my passport! My heart is jumping! The docks and countryside look neat, trimmed, pretty, planned, charming. The people too, perhaps? My God! They're English and in their own land. Not in a black-and-white movie on television! The English in England, at last! Through Customs. The officials are gentle and nice. The trains! The people! Pale and small! Everyone not on this train is riding a bike. No doubt there will be cars when we get to London proper. Proper London! Headline on a newspaper: CANDID ON THE DUCHESS OF WINDSOR. Outside a sign: "Entry: frontal parking". "Mind the gap"! Mind the gap! I thought of the Wife of Bath and her lecherous teeth! But what does it mean? So many people look like Alec Guinness!'

Alec Guinness, yet! Where would a girl have been in those days without exclamation marks! The pages of the notebook are slit in places by the shrieking lead of my pencil! Old excitement is contagious; it was those noisy exclamation marks that made me decide one dull day only last week to go back to my European landfall. The Needles! The Isle of Wight! To see them again! From the other side and half a century later, to take a look at my first glimpse of Europe, and with luck to stumble into a glitch of time where the ghost of my ship is forever slipping into port so from the cliffs above I can look down and see the ghost of

myself dancing on the deck. Would I know myself as I was then? What I did not know then, had never been told (for my own good) and could never allow anyone to tell me, what I can hear and admit only from the desiccation of age, and what is patently evident in the 'photograph of bearer' of my first passport, is that I was really quite beautiful. My face, a classic oval, showed fine cheekbones and a clear, balanced, starry gaze. As I recall, this old body wasn't all that bad either, toned by an energetic childhood, lots of swimming, rowing, hiking, as well as endless games of badminton in a homicidal version my brother and I invented that depended more on endurance than style. Had I known myself then to be good-looking, would it have made a great difference? Certainly, I would have expected more good things to come my way for free. Beautiful women are raised to expect a lot for nothing and to require very little of themselves, as nothing much more than beauty is required of them by others. Caretakers of the gift, vestal virgins, they soon learn to avoid hard travelling that makes squints, and hard work that makes wrinkles, and unguarded passion that makes shadows.

My first passport was not valid for travel to Albania, Bulgaria, China, Czhechoslovakia (correct spelling of the day), Hungary, Poland, Rumania or what was still the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I could not visit Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Syria, nor any portion of Korea or Viet-nam (hyphenated as it was then) under Communist control. Cuba, on the other hand, was hunky-dory. For my photo on page 4, and probably on the day of landing

in England, I would have worn the usual dark-blue nylon trench coat and white turtleneck pullover probably over blue jeans as usual. The suitcase in my cabin was full of similar costumes suitable to the star of one of the classic romances of that time: the long-haired brunette of alien origin, fast-moving, intellectual, a little dangerous, no time for wimps. Incidentally, the brunette rarely got the man back then; in American movies she walked alone out of the last reel. Also, we American girls packed enough boxes of newfangled Tampax to see us through lest the Europeans hadn't caught up with American know-how. Those of us who were not yet convinced tampons did not compromise the maidenhead and were too timid to ask for sanitary napkins in foreign languages had to cram a bulk of sanitary napkins into their fake-leather suitcases. Whether a girl of my generation styled herself after Juliette Greco or June Allyson, each of us was the star, looking for her co-star, and at the bottom of her chest packed hopefully lay the evangelical Hollywood-based tenet that one and only one true lover was out there, in search of her. And even though girls back then were shamelessly taught to tease and lead men on, she and he – he and I – were bound to know each other on sight and without brokering or pre-arrangement to make each other deliriously happy for ever after: Ginger and Fred, Katie and Spence, Bacall and Bogart. Always with parental approval, of course. Never mind the heresy we saw every day in the family home, true love was the distaff faith of my generation. I too was a believer. I knew I would find one true love, my mate

and heart’s twin. I was just as persuaded then I would end my life with a man whose mind and mine were one as I know now that I did not even come close. Even in my darkest days I never lapsed from the faith; I exhausted it.

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