

Untitled

An excerpt from her forthcoming memoir, abridged
by *Room*'s editors to suit the format of this publication

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AS A CHILD, I WROTE EVERYTHING DOWN, trying to imitate the form and onward drive of the poetry I read in the books that lined the shelves of the modest library in our own house. Although it was not the kind of grand room the word library conjures, my cousins were the only other family I knew who had such privilege. One could always expect a book from my parents for birthday or Christmas presents and my father had spent much of his childhood in the home of his grandfather and was often asked to read to him. He would say throughout our childhood that there were three things he would never deny us: food, shelter, or books. It was a holy trinity that seemed natural.

Reading was also modelled by Pa, my own grandfather, who would stand, bent over, before his large office desk at the back of the house to read the newspaper laid flat and neat, a ruler and a red-ink pen ever at the ready in his hand. He meticulously underlined every misspelled word so that by the time he was finished each page was a pattern of red dashes. He did not seem to read in order to marshal newsworthy information, but rather to prove or improve his spelling and error-spotting abilities. That said, I have no memory of him reading a *book*.

Except for my schoolbooks and a very small handful of children's books that included Hans Christian Andersen's *Book of Fairy Tales* and a children's illustrated Bible, his was not a house of books. There was, however, in a small room that served as pantry and breakfast nook, a wall of shelves, one so high that even he had to tiptoe and stretch his arms to reach the ribbed spines of that meagre collection of hardcovers. Once, upon catching me trying to pull one down, he grabbed me by my waist and shouted that I would "burst open my head," the caution heard from adults at the time.

That they were literally out of reach, re-enforced the idea that books were forbidden in his home. It was therefore my goal to hook my finger under one of the cracking embossed leather spines to nudge it outward until it fell into my hands. When I tried this manoeuvre some time later, I was appalled to discover the book an island populated by a tribe of unsuspecting silver fish who scattered as I flung it across the room. Recovering, I eased

out another and, knowing now what to expect, caught it carefully, took it down to the table, and flipped open the reluctant cover pocked with tiny insect holes, the scent of decaying insects rising off the pages.

I had discovered treasures, antiques, items so old that they were bound to fetch a fortune befitting my businessman grandfather. The pages of some of the books were as thin as tissue, but brittle, others opaque and cream-coloured, like the pajamas stained with flecks of coffee or cocoa my grandfather wore all day. But I had never seen him handle any of these books and knew there were rules if you did so. I was not allowed to write, even in the margins, or defile them in any way and he forbade me to eat and read at the same time, lest food fell and stained their pages.

In our own library, glass doors protected the contents from dust and insects and shelves ran the width of the room—one wall glowing red with volumes of *Colliers Encyclopedia*, the other brilliant with creamy *Britannicas*. Among my favourites of the “great books” was a series with full-page reproductions of famous paintings, a much-used how-to arts-and-crafts book, and colour illustrations of rare insects and birds rendered in minute detail. The most intriguing were my father’s fascinating medical texts—women with breasts growing on their legs, penises with boils, sores, and open infections.

There were also my oft-read children’s novels and poetry collections, the inspiration for all my stylistic imitations. What I wrote and intended as poetry wasn’t cryptic code for private dilemmas, but simple homages and observations. I wrote of Pa’s house and the padded footstool I climbed for easy reach to his dresser where I would shimmy open the stubborn top drawer and uncap the tubes of camphor and menthol-scented ligament balms, poke my fingernail into the jars of eucalyptus-scented ointments, and play with the silver- and bronze- coloured coins that had the sharp smell of old brass. I yearned for the comfort of the familiar even then, and my writing today still endows all I see with scent.

I wrote of deer prancing in a verdant forest, a brilliant rainbow in a cobalt blue sky, coconut trees waving gently in a tropical breeze, silhouettes and idyllic sunsets. I ended a poem with these images with the line, “Man loves man, man loves woman, woman loves woman.” I proudly read the poem

to my parents who showed first mild interest then noticeable discomfort. They explained that men don't love men, and women don't love women. There was a right way and wrong way to do things, and the right way, the socially acceptable norm, was the imperative. Otherwise, what would the neighbours say? My parents were, from the beginning, the kind of couple whose children were always impeccably and appropriately dressed. There was to be no sailor suit, no tantrums. I was seven years old, and learning that words were troublesome. I made a conscious decision to put writing away, and instead made pictures that would dazzle rather than confuse.

Though I ceased writing, I sought solace in reading. I read every book by Malcolm Saville and Enid Blyton, and was introduced to the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Cervantes, Shakespeare. When the house shook and threatened to break apart, and in an attempt not to hear too much of what was being shouted behind closed doors, I turned in those moments, not to making art, but to burying myself in fast-paced adventures in which children triumphed.

But by day, as a young professional couple, my parents ruled. They were well feted, and they reciprocated handsomely. Invitations to their frequent parties were always printed by a local printer and sent by mail with RSVP notepaper and envelopes.

On one occasion, already three days before the party, my mother was astounded to discover that only a handful had responded. Caterers had to be hired, the evening's menu chosen, a bartender and servers secured, ample food and drink ordered, tableware purchased. Since sending out the invitations, they had run, here and there, into their prospective guests, but deemed it too aggressive to ask. My father was just getting involved in politics and was often seen in the news. They both went through everything he had said and done publicly in the past three weeks, wondering if he might have inadvertently caused offense. With two days to go, having not had a single response, my mother broke with protocol and phoned one of the invitees, only to be told that no invitation had been received. My father called the postmaster general who found the mailbox full, with several months of letters that had never been picked up. The employee in charge of the route had a lot of explaining to do and the invitees were told a good story when called.

They probably didn't have a cocktail party every week, but as a child that's how it seemed. Perhaps I exaggerated the trays of delicate hors

d'oeuvres, the drinks, never the same glass refilled, my father spinning from his prized collection of LPs—Los Indios Tabajaros, Engelbert Humperdinck, Gil Gilberto. Sometimes he hired a DJ or indulged the wicked thuckathuck thuckathuck bongo drums of a live band.

Couples arrived at the house together and left together, but once in the house the men were like magnets to the bar. There they congregated, smoking, chatting animatedly, quick, solid words bowled by one, batted by another, fielded in the form of deafening laughter. In a quieter area of the garden or patio the women sat in chairs, their backs upright, the stems of martini glasses pinched tight between their slim painted fingers. Their pencil skirts curbed their crossed legs well above the ankles. The women spoke in noticeably softer tones, laughed less. As a child, watching this adult play, I paired men with men, and women with women, finding these pairs happier than the ones who came and went together.