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Sustaining Friendships

For happiness she required women to walk with. To walk in the city arm in arm with a woman friend (as her mother had with aunts and cousins so many years ago) was just plain essential. Oh! those long walks and intimate talks . . .

Grace Paley, "Midrash on Happiness"

Perhaps it's a function of being eighty. But somewhere in the middle of writing about the Feminist Press, I realized that I was leaving out half my life, the half represented by the many people who had made the life I led possible. The entire list is long, but there were four women who were especially close to me over a significant period of time. When each of them died—Elaine Hedges in 1997, Tillie Olsen and Grace Paley both in 2007, and Marilyn French in 2009—grief set me to writing about them. Tillie and Grace both thought of me as a writer, one who should cease being an activist-publisher and begin writing. Marilyn French encouraged me to write this memoir.

Elaine Hedges

Elaine and I were best friends for forty years, though I left Baltimore in 1971. Together we worked on feminism at the Modern Language Association and on the development of women's studies, the founding of the Feminist Press, and its restoration

of women writers. Through my chaotic, peripatetic life, especially after my father's death in 1966 and my mother's move to Florida in 1972, I regarded Elaine's houses—in Baltimore and New Hampshire—as my “homes.” She was the only person who knew the circumstances of all my marriages and who had actually known my last two husbands. By the mid-1990s, we had begun to talk about growing old together, perhaps even living together. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, in June 1997 she became critically ill, and I rushed to Baltimore, where, the morning after I arrived, I held her hand as she died.

From the first, I was attracted to Elaine because she was both brilliant and beautiful. Through our long friendship, I often envied her looks and especially her figure, which seemed effortlessly slim. When she told me that she had not dated all through her college years at Barnard, where she was a nonresident scholarship student, because she couldn't bear having some man take her home to Yonkers, I assumed that we had working-class shame in common, that her childhood had been as impoverished as mine. But I was wrong, for both her father and mother were high school graduates, and her father worked as an auditor for the Yonkers Board of Education. So the shame had some other source, and though she never told me what it was, I can see now that it might have been alcoholism. After her death, Elaine's sister wrote that Elaine's head “was always in a book,” even through meals, separating her from the rest of the family. We had both escaped from our families, it seemed.

Elaine graduated summa cum laude from Barnard and went on to become the first woman to hold a teaching assistantship at Harvard in the History of American Civilization program where, in 1950, she met William Hedges, a Second World War veteran and the only son of a prominent historian at Brown University. They married in 1956, the year I married E. Elaine went on to have two babies—Marietta in 1961 and Jimmy in 1963—yet managed to finish her dissertation before the end of the decade. Thus she fulfilled the mandate I had set for myself but never achieved. She had the babies *and* the PhD. I had the job. What might have divided us didn't, for I loved her babies as though they were my own. We joked



often, with a kernel of truth, that I'd rather have had the babies and she'd rather have had the job. Very early on, she named me as godmother to both children, and in her will named me as the one legally responsible for them should she die.

I always assumed that her marriage was a perfectly joyous one, but I neglected to consider that she might resent Bill as much as Goucher for the loss of her Wellesley job. In 1969, dissertation in hand, she took a job at Towson State University in Maryland. In 1972, she developed and became head of Towson's women's studies program, even as I was beginning a program at Old Westbury. She became a full professor in 1973 and for the next twenty-five years devoted herself to building both the English department and the women's studies program and to turning the Towson campus into an important regional center. Upon her retirement, her Towson colleagues gave not a party, but a conference, to fete her contributions to the university and the region. After her death, her colleagues called her fierce, loyal, brilliant, tireless, determined, unflappable, giving, intense.

She was present at the founding meeting of the Feminist Press, and once we had *Life in the Iron Mills* in hand, she brought us *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, insisting that it was Gilman's only great literary work. Along with Tillie Olsen, Elaine was the press's most important literary advisor. In the mid-1970s, we went together to visit The writer Meridel Le Sueur at her daughter's home in Minnesota and to talk with Meridel about an anthology of her work we wanted to publish. True to her reputation, Elaine spent five years researching an extensive biographical and literary introduction, much of it at the Library of Congress, and editing the book that became *Ripening: Selected Work*. Even while Elaine was working on *Ripening*, she was also editing—with poet Ingrid Wendt—another groundbreaking Feminist Press book, *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*. Both works came out the same year, 1982. In *In Her Own Image*, Elaine first described her vision of women's sewing as creative and liberating on the one hand, and as oppressive and confining on the other.

By 1996, she had completed the text of a monograph called

Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts, and American Society, and we planned to spend half the summer of 1997 together, she on her book and I on a history of women's studies and perhaps on my memoir. I had planned to urge her to begin writing her own memoir.

It would be hard for a sixty-nine-year-old woman, who had been fighting a mysterious anemia for twenty years and who had been a heavy smoker and for many years also an alcoholic, not to be thinking about her own life during that period. She said more often than I liked that I would survive her, that my response to "shame" had been healthier than hers. Perhaps she was right in the sense that, among friends, I could say that I was ashamed of my overweight family and had long ago decided I would not be fat like them, no matter what it took. And though I've written very little about eating in this book, my journals are filled with references to overeating, to trying new diets, to exercising, to admiring thin people, and to loathing every pound I gained and insisting that I would take them off. If Elaine was ashamed of her parents' alcoholism, she countered her shame by hiding her own drinking.

It was not difficult, for she was, even here, well organized; her chosen medium was gin, which could be seen as the "water" she might need as she lectured or spoke at meetings. She ate peppermint candy to disguise potential odors. The level of alcohol usually in her system did not disturb her teaching or her work with colleagues. Only in the evening, after martinis with Bill and then more drinking through dinner did her speech become somewhat slurred. Of course, the children knew, and Bill knew.

She could not bear Alcoholics Anonymous because of the religiosity that, she claimed, reminded her of all she had escaped from in her Irish Catholic family. She made several valiant attempts to change on her own or with medication, but nothing seemed to work until she made an appointment to enter a rehab program. I took the train to Baltimore for the occasion, and Bill and I drove her to the rural Maryland residence, where she would not be able to have even a coffee or a Coke. She was allowed only cigarettes, books, and writing materials.

The program was successful, but she emerged worried about her

increased smoking, feeling certain that lung cancer would kill her early. Instead, she had more bouts of anemia sometimes so severe she needed transfusions. But no one suggested the kind of blood workup that would have examined the content and quality of her major arteries. And so, in general, Elaine and the rest of us grew accustomed to her bouts of short-term illnesses.

In December 1996, for example, she was so weak that she stayed in bed much of the month, volunteering to edit the twenty-fifth-anniversary issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* because she needed "something to do." She sorted through the hundreds of photocopies I sent her, selecting the best pieces. She told me she enjoyed thinking about the history of the previous twenty-five years, during which she had been one of the chief pioneers of women's studies in the nation and eventually in the world. We talked often on the phone, and she was feeling so much better by February that she came to New York for a Feminist Press meeting.

So when she called on June 4, 1997, to say she was in the hospital for at least a day, neither of us worried. We chatted about her chief anxiety: that she was to give a party on Saturday for one of the young women in her department who was getting married, and she wanted everything to be perfect. What if she had to stay in the hospital longer than a day?

"You know how to organize," I joked. "Just assign all the jobs to your friends, and you won't have to worry about doing it all yourself."

"Yes," she said, "I'm going to begin right now."

I said I would call the next day, but I spent that morning at City College looking at our new space and making arrangements for telephones and computer lines. I was back in the office by eleven, in time to prepare last-minute things for the board meeting scheduled that afternoon. At eleven thirty I phoned Elaine's room, and a Dr. Lee answered and asked whether I was "family."

"Yes," I responded, "you could call me that."

He asked me to get in touch with Elaine's husband and children, saying that she had "taken a turn for the worse" and was being transferred to intensive care on the fourth floor. "You should come

at once," he added.

I called Bill, who headed straight off to the hospital. He told me he didn't want to call the children yet, and I agreed with him. That was a terrible mistake.

When I arrived at the hospital that evening, Elaine was enveloped in tubes and machines attached to her body. Her eyes were closed, and we could see that she was bleeding heavily into a catheter attached to her stomach while another machine replaced the blood she was losing. I got to sit with Elaine by claiming I was her sister. Bill and I talked several times with her doctor, who knew I was not Elaine's blood sister but accepted the ploy since she saw I was keeping Bill going and also that I understood the seriousness of the situation more clearly than Bill, who was consistently optimistic, thinking that Elaine would rally.

I too had thought that she might recover until I arrived in Baltimore. When I saw her late at night, without sedation so that we could communicate, and when she acknowledged our presence only by shaking her head a couple of times, I knew she wouldn't survive. Still, Bill and I agreed that the doctors should try to find the source of Elaine's bleeding. They performed a procedure that produced a view of the arteries between her stomach and small intestine, and several hours later we had a conference with two surgeons who came in to look at the results and to examine Elaine. They were in tuxedos, and I wondered about the festive evening they were bound for. They posted Elaine's films on the wall, and one of them pointed to the three obstructed arteries around her stomach. I asked whether they could operate to clear them out, but surgery would kill her, one of them replied: she was not healthy enough to endure the surgery. The only advice they offered was to wait to see whether the bleeding that was shocking her system might stop of its own accord.

Bill was so rattled that, when they had finished talking, he asked, "And when, then, will you begin the exploratory?"

But the doctors ignored him and asked about Elaine's age. Their shrugs when I said she was sixty-nine triggered my rage. I shouted at them that Elaine was a vital person, intellectually the most gifted

person I had ever known, and that she had twenty years of valuable work left in her. "You need to save her body for this work." Even as I spoke, I thought of her poor body under all those tubes and the bubble of plastic warming her, and I knew she would die.

Back at the house, I tried to tell Bill what the doctors had left unsaid, but he kept hold of the idea that Elaine was going to have surgery the next day. He called the children to arrange for them to come.

Her primary doctor called early in the morning, reporting another turn for the worse. We raced to the hospital, where Bill went in search of the doctor and I held Elaine's hand and watched as the lines on the machines connected to her body moved less and less energetically. At nine twenty, the waves slowed and then vanished, and Elaine Hedges died. The children arrived at three that afternoon.

I stayed in Baltimore for nearly a week with Marietta, Jimmy, and Bill, helping them to deal with the shock and prepare for the funeral. Jimmy and Bill were lost souls that week. They sat around staring into space. Marietta and I worked, cleaning out Elaine's closets. Marietta wanted a few pieces of Elaine's jewelry and very little else. I took two of the scarves she loved and the brown leather handbags she had carried. Then we sorted books and packed those for ourselves and for libraries, leaving only the quilt books and files for later on. Eventually, I arranged for Brown University to take them.

One of the books I found open beside her bed and clearly marked in Elaine's hand was Ann J. Lane's *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. In it she had heavily underlined a question about the "mask" Gilman presented to the world: "how to overcome the struggles of the private life in order to achieve public good?"

For all of us, Elaine's death was unbearable. We would have to learn to live without her at our center. She was sometimes brilliant, sometimes frustrating, but for me she was always there, not only Tillie's ideal "true" reader, but a true friend. She was my oldest continuous academic friend and colleague. She was also the person

I depended on when I was in trouble or when I didn't know what to do at work or in my life. She was our best and most responsible reader at the Feminist Press. And she always said what she knew I needed to hear, never peddling her own particular biases. I, in turn, was the person with whom she could discuss her marriage, her children and their lives, and the pleasure and pain of her work at Towson.

Right after her death, I went in her place to a conference devoted to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where I talked not about Gilman, but about Elaine's devotion to Gilman and about her other scholarly work. Later in June I went to several other conferences in Elaine's place, talking about her and her work. I spoke often of her work in developing women's studies and noted how important it was to her that feminists continue to "recognize the importance of group efforts in the early years of women's studies, rather than anyone's singular contribution."

Through these painful months and the years that followed, I held on to a few moments of comfort. In 1988, the press had honored Elaine at an event that also featured Tillie Olsen, Elizabeth Janeway, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. I was comforted also by knowing that Elaine valued our friendship as much as I did and cared deeply that I had chosen to spend many summers with her rather than anyone else. In 1972, Elaine had written, "Work must be respected: this was one of Gilman's basic tenets." And in a volume of Emily Dickinson's letters, I found the following, marked by Elaine: "I work to drive the awe away, yet awe impels the work." Both describe the joy Elaine's work-inspired life had given her.

The summer of her death it was at first impossible for me to work on anything. I went to New Hampshire for several weeks to live in the small cottage across from the house in which she and Bill usually stayed, and where Bill now was alone. Through those solitary weeks, as we took meals together and planned the memorial we were to have for her, Bill, usually a reticent person, talked nonstop about Elaine. We agreed that after the memorial I would join Bill and the three children in scattering Elaine's ashes on Rust Pond, near their home.

When these plans had been settled, I began a project that occupied me for the rest of the summer. I was able to complete it only with the help of Elaine's friends all over the country, with funds from Bill, with design and editorial assistance from Feminist Press staff, and with the assistance of email, to which I was a very new adherent. Elaine had been nagging me for two years to learn how to use email and, ironically, the day before she died I had written my first email to her—a surprise that she never received. But email made possible the production of the memorial pamphlet about Elaine's life and work, with contributions from family, colleagues, former students, and friends, and with some small glimpses as well of her brilliant mind. Holding the pamphlet, printed in sepia on cream and with Elaine's beautiful face on its cover, calmed me so that I could once again begin to think about the future.

Tillie Olsen

It was a beautiful spring day in 1971 for a taxi ride from the San Francisco airport to 1435 Laguna Street where Tillie and Jack Olsen lived in a multicultural cooperative they had helped found thirty years before. At their building, I was buzzed in the front door at once. Clearly, I was expected. On the first landing, I met someone coming down, a good-looking man in a fedora and a brown tweed jacket who said, "I'm Jack. You must be Florence. Welcome. Tillie's upstairs. She needs a heating pad for her back—it's boiling on the stove. I'll be back." Astonished, I said nothing and walked up the second flight of stairs, knocked lightly on the slightly open door, and entered.

Tillie Olsen appeared as a blue-clad body on a blue-carpeted living-room floor, her legs up on a chair. "Hello," I said. "I'm Florence."

"Yes," she said, looking up at me then closing her eyes and speaking softly: "Please get me the heating pad boiling on the stove. There's tongs . . . and a towel. . . ." Her words slid away. She seemed to be barely breathing.

I dropped my bag where I was standing and left my purse and



jacket on an armchair. I walked into the kitchen where I found a large pot of boiling water on the stove, with a fat gray pad inside. I lifted the hot dripping pad with the tongs and set it on the towel, then wrapped it. I turned off the gas and carried the wrapped heating pad over to Tillie.

“Please help me . . . under my back.”

When I got down on the floor beside her, I could see the pain in her clenched face as she raised her back a bit so that I could slip the pad beneath her. When it was done, we both sighed, and I felt able to breathe again. I sat down in the armchair and looked around at the comfortably worn furniture, the many shelves of books and records, and the art I could see on the walls, dominated by a pair of huge etchings hanging over the couch—were they Emily Dickinson and Katherine Mansfield? I felt shy about staring at Tillie on the floor, a small woman, whose bright blue eyes now smiled up at me.

I wondered how I could stay in this apartment if she was ill. When we had talked on the phone weeks earlier about meeting to work on her afterword to *Life in the Iron Mills*, she had insisted that I stay with her, for she knew Feminist Press money was scarce. She said that she and Jack were used to having guests. Perhaps I should now offer to find a hotel nearby.

Fortunately, Jack arrived at that point. He had forgotten something and said he thought I should come with him now that Tillie was resting on the heating pad. “Let her take a nap,” he said. “You can help me decide about dinner.”

He was easy to talk to; his handsome, open face invited friendship. “Have you met Tillie before?” he asked, as we headed down the stairs.

I said we had met in the library at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she was visiting her cousin, Arlyn Diamond, a faculty member I knew slightly. And, of course, I had read *Tell Me A Riddle*. We walked down Laguna Street into Japantown to the grocery where I couldn’t resist the salmon and asparagus. I looked wonderingly at the huge artichokes but was too shy to ask for them since they were so much work to fix. As we walked back,

I asked him what life with Tillie was like. He said, "It's not easy living with a genius. I've read Leonard Woolf, and I think about him whenever things seem difficult." He explained that her back problem had a long history, but that they were hopeful that a new doctor and a new massage therapist might make a difference. "I'm sure that when we get back she'll be on her feet and ready to talk with you," he promised.

He was right. Tillie and I talked incessantly for the next four days, sometimes alone, sometimes with Jack present. When we discussed her afterword, I had no questions about her prose style, but I was puzzled by some of the footnotes she had written. One of these contained a long quotation from the 1848 Seneca Falls document produced by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but not in the language I remembered, and when I checked, the language was different.

"Have you found another version?" I asked Tillie. "I'm sorry, but this is not the version I know."

"No," she replied. "I thought I could make the language more forceful, and so I revised it a bit."

I was startled, embarrassed, and worried—all at the same moment. Where to begin? How to explain that one could not "revise" a historical document? How to tell someone almost two decades older than I what every college sophomore knows? I fumbled my way through an explanation, feeling uncomfortable to be the cause of Tillie's embarrassed confusion. But then she resolutely put it behind her, assured me that she was glad to be in my hands if I would continue to check every note and save her from error. Through several more visits in 1971, we continued to work on her text, her notes, the language of the title page, and the design of the cover.

During these first visits, the Olsens began to show me San Francisco, a city they loved, driving me to each of San Francisco's hills, along the way recalling each area's history. They were full of information, little of which I was able to absorb. But I was absorbing something else very important to me. Sometimes we'd stop for ice cream cones at one of their favorite places, where Tillie often knew the server and would beg shamelessly for "more" of everything and

where Jack would pretend embarrassment—"I don't know that lady," he'd say—and then he'd pay for the cones. Their relationship seemed exalted to me, though, of course, I never said anything to them directly about my feelings for them. Perhaps they could read my face, or perhaps it didn't matter. I had never before been in the presence of people near the age of my parents who openly loved each other and were respectful of each other's needs and work.

I'm certain that their relationship attracted me at first even more than their activist history in Left political movements. For when they told me bits about their own movement work in and around San Francisco, and their membership in the Communist Party, I could not even ask intelligent questions. They were both surprised that I knew nothing about the history of the Left and the making of trade unions, and they were, of course, curious about my life.

To my surprise I found myself telling them about my father, who had killed himself only five years earlier. "He was a taxi driver," I said, "and he loved to argue with me about politics. I miss him still."

After a long silence, which they didn't interrupt, I told them that I blamed my mother for his death. She didn't want to take care of him and didn't pay attention to my warnings that he needed to be watched. I told Tillie and Jack that I should have stayed in New York that week and seen to my father myself. Although I was furious with my mother, I was more angry with myself.

"Of course you are going to grieve for a long time," Tillie said, "since you loved your father and miss him." I had told them how much he loved to hear about my travels, and that I would return from trips to discuss every detail of the road or the flight with him. We had a long discussion then about suicide and guilt, as they attempted to comfort me. I was astonished that I had told them, for generally I never talked about my family and certainly not with comparative strangers. But as time went on, I told them even about the years before I was twelve, a history I had always hidden, part of which made me feel connected to the young child in Tillie's story, "I Stand Here Ironing." I think I even told them about my nine months in a hospital when my mother could only visit from behind

glass walls.

Tillie and Jack wanted to know about me not because they were simply curious. They could not put together the person who had dared to begin a “feminist press” with the person in hiding. They knew I had been one of the founders of the Committee to Resist Illegitimate Authority and assumed, therefore, that I was an educated Lefty. I told them that I was a gut-driven Lefty. The word *unfair* had colored my childhood after my brother’s birth when I felt either ignored or treated as a servant. I told them that “unfair” actions, lying, and greed drove me into activism, not political theory. To illustrate my ignorance of American history, I described my stupidity during the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, when I had told young women that they were “selfish” to argue about fixing coffee and sweeping floors, when racism was the issue of the day. I told Tillie and Jack that I had now learned enough women’s history to understand that I had repeated a nineteenth-century error.

From the start, I felt that I could trust Tillie and Jack with the truth about myself. I could tell them about my childhood shame when my overweight, badly dressed mother came to school to see me receive a prize. The other mothers were young and pretty and wore elegant dresses. I had no idea that, in my description, I reminded Tillie of Agnes Smedley’s experiences in *Daughter of Earth*, which she told me to read, and which the Feminist Press then published in 1973.

Often Jack would speak to the heart of my torments. “You say you were ashamed of your mother,” he’d begin, “but she must have been strong to keep going through years in which she couldn’t buy herself clothes. Where do you think your strength comes from?”

“But she was so mean to me,” I’d plead in response. “The clothes she bought for me were ugly, and before she bought anything at all for me, I had to bear her meanness, her continually saying no to anything I asked for.”

Neither Tillie nor Jack ever chided me for the remarks I made about my parents or my brother, some of which now seem very stupid to me. They were kind and caring, as though their lives as well as mine depended on getting a clear picture of who I was.

In the process, they helped me to see my life in some perspective other than as an escape from my family into a world I wanted to be part of. I began to understand why I have always felt at home everywhere and rooted nowhere. I began to understand that it took strength even to be silent, and that I had learned some of that silence from my mother, whose life had been so difficult and who ultimately retreated into silence or fantasy.

Some of these conversations occurred while walking, for once Tillie's back mended, she took me on long treks, lecturing me often about taking care of my body. Her agile and energetic floor exercises seemed elegant to me and difficult, since I had none of her flexibility. But I could walk, and she taught me to stretch before and after. My favorite walk was to the Presidio Shoreline, a long four miles to and from the Golden Gate Bridge. If we went on Thursdays, we'd meet up with a group of men, some of them older than Jack, mostly veterans from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who had fought in the Spanish Civil War at the end of the 1930s. I felt proud to be introduced to them as Tillie's publisher and friend. She never allowed me to think of myself as her "daughter," though with Jack I knew I could feel that he was my father.

Perhaps on my third or fourth visit I felt comfortable enough to ask questions about their lives, especially about their relationship. How had they met? When had they married? I'd learned that they'd lived together without being married, raising their daughters, until Jack was about to ship overseas in the early 1940s. They married so that Tillie might have his army insurance in the event of his death. They described the wedding in a San Francisco cathedral in the presence of three of their four daughters—Karla, Kathie, and Julie. Laurie, still an infant, had been left with a babysitter. I never asked how two Jewish people could get married in a cathedral.

When Tillie and Jack accepted my invitation to come to speak at Old Westbury, my political stock rose slightly, since the Olsens had defied Senator McCarthy's committees although they had left the Communist Party, like many others, because of Stalin. Tillie read from *Tell Me a Riddle* to a large audience, and she talked with smaller groups of students in writing and literature classes. As a

reader, she was magnificent, never stumbling over a line. When she answered questions afterward, she often stuttered, something I had not noticed in conversation. Jack offered workshops on labor history and in several classes talked formally about the history of the Left. Faculty sometimes sat in, for it was clear that no one on the faculty knew as much about the history of unions as he did, and his knowledge surpassed books alone. Even more than Tillie, his modesty also illuminated his character. One could see why groups had trusted him to speak for them wisely. I tried to sit in on everything and learn as much as I could from each of them. And they, attracted by the unusual mix of Old Westbury students and the unconventional curriculum, returned several times through the 1970s to give talks.

Not surprisingly, our relationship also had its moments of pain, one of them in 1973, a year after the publication of *Life in the Iron Mills* and just as *Daughter of Earth* was about to appear. Tillie was with me on Long Island when Jack called to say he had just come across an old manuscript Tillie had written in the 1930s and that he was mailing it to us in New York. When it arrived, I could see that it had been typed on paper that was about to fall apart, so I offered to retype it. I assumed that the Feminist Press would publish it, though we did not get to the point of discussing a contract. Tillie said only that she was eager to reread it. And, of course, I read it as I typed, growing more and more certain that it was publishable just as it had been found. Why had it not been published in the 1930s?

But soon after I had finished the typescript, Tillie told me that she had to give the book—*Yonnonidio*, she said she would call it—to Sam—Seymour Lawrence, her publisher at Delacorte. She explained to me that in 1961, when he had published the collection of four stories called *Tell Me a Riddle*, Sam had signaled his belief in her by giving her an advance of ten thousand dollars for three books of fiction. *Yonnonidio* would be the third, for she had only one other book he had agreed to accept, though it was a nonfiction collection. That book, *Silences*, appeared in 1978, by which time Tillie's books were selling very well.

Sam called me up once to thank me “for making Tillie famous.” He said, “No amount of paid publicity could have done what you have. You have sold thousands of her books.”

Outraged, I responded, “How insulting you are to Tillie! Her books sell themselves because she is a great writer.”

He laughed and complimented me for being so loyal a friend.

By then, Tillie had become far more than a friend. Though she refused to be my “other mother,” she was exceptionally caring about not only my mind but my health and well-being. She’d call several times a week and open the conversation by asking me, “What have you done for your body today?” She knew that swimming would ameliorate depression as well as arthritis. When I came to California during the years she was living some of the time in Santa Cruz, she would make appointments for me with her wonderful masseuse who had solved many of her back problems.

Tillie and I saw each other frequently, both in California and New York, and we talked on the phone often. Tillie was, she said, proud that I had published so many Indian writers and that I was going to Africa on still another huge project. Still, she urged me to turn the Feminist Press over to someone else and begin to write. She insisted that I was really a writer and that I had better begin before it was too late. And she described off and on through these years how it was for her as an older writer. She had once been fluent, she told me, but the flow had become a trickle. Now she could write only when Jack was not present, which meant either Santa Cruz or writers’ colonies. She urged me to begin before it was too late.

Then, just as she was almost finished revising the second half of “Requa” (the first half had been published in the *Iowa Review* in 1970), Jack fell ill. I called daily, though Tillie insisted it was “only a cold.” Then, when he was taken into a hospital, I was traveling and calling from phone booths, telling Tillie that I could take a plane from Washington, DC, and be there in several hours. “No,” she said. “Really, it’s not serious.”

I continued to call daily, and then, when she called me to tell me that Jack had died, I remember the anger that welled up so strongly

that I couldn't speak to her. I hung up in disbelief. She called again later. Probably neither she nor the daughters ever understood how I had felt about Jack. I can understand now that they wanted to be alone with their beloved, that the loss would be huge for them. But none of them have ever understood—why should they?—what the loss meant to me.

I never got to say goodbye to Baba or Zaida; I never got to say goodbye to my own father. I wanted to be able to say goodbye to Jack.

In 2000 at an especially festive Feminist Press gala, I introduced Tillie as the “mother” who had given us *Life in the Iron Mills*. It was a year after my mother's death and the year I was to retire as director-publisher. We had invited many writers who had become our authors upon Tillie's recommendation. Tillie came with two of her daughters, Julie and Kathie, and it was clear that she needed some special care. The evening was Tillie's last visit to New York, and I soon realized that the evening also marked the beginning of her physical and mental decline.

At first there was only a small diminishing that followed her moving out of her beloved apartment in Japantown to a small house behind her daughter Laurie and son-in-law Mike's house in Berkeley. She could take only some of her books and very little furniture. She lost the community she and Jack had helped bring together some fifty years earlier when they and others founded the coop. She lost the San Francisco walks, her activism with the library and other kinds of city politics. Still, Tillie could no longer live alone; her daughters recognized that she needed care.

Tillie's illness began with seizures that doctors were able to control medically. Occasionally she was hospitalized, mainly for tests. At the same time, she was answering her phone and agreeing to speaking engagements. I remember hearing about one in Texas she had insisted on fulfilling. After she had finished reading to a large audience, she fainted and had to be taken to a hospital. And then there followed—whether connected to the seizures or not no one would ever know—the memory loss that bespoke Alzheimer's.

I visited twice or three times a year while she was still living in Laurie and Mike's little guest house. These were calm, quiet visits of two to four days. Tillie's back was bothering her again, and so walks in the neighborhood were punctuated with her backing up at poles or trees to rest and relieve the pain before she could walk some more. Her spirits were usually good, and most of the time she was working on her papers, bound for Stanford's archival collection.

During several visits, we talked about her "blueies." These were typed or occasionally handwritten notes on blue pieces of paper, which, during some periods of her life, she had written daily as a kind of warm-up exercise. She wanted me to produce a kind of "writer's diary" from them, but she wouldn't let me take the folders out of her hands. I was excited by the idea of such a project, but when I looked at some of the scraps of paper, I felt less certain that a book would be possible, since nothing was dated nor were locations mentioned. I said that such volumes were usually organized by theme, place, or time. She insisted that I would be able to figure it out, and sometimes I could, but often the bits of paper were a mystery. There were several other problems as well, among them her insistence that she control the content. She was not willing to include, for example, a scrap depicting her pain following a quarrel with Jack. And when I mentioned that I still had the work of *Women Writing Africa* before me, Tillie took that as a signal that I did not want to undertake the project. As I think about how I might have been more patient with her, how I might have attempted to go through a pile of pages with her, labeling them if she could recall when she wrote them, I know I am forgetting how easily she tired, how little I could rely on her memory.

Tillie's chief caretakers were Laurie and Mike and their son, Joshie. Others pitched in, but those three were there all the time. When I was there, I could take over the medications and prepare food, even help Tillie dress and undress. And, of course, I could simply be with Tillie for the twelve or more hours she was awake. Like others so afflicted, including my mother, Tillie soon declared the toaster, the microwave, and the television "broken," because she could not remember how they worked. So someone had to heat her

milk and toast her bread.

For her ninetieth birthday in 2002, members of Tillie's extended family gathered to celebrate. During the party, Tillie shone, talking with everyone and singing in her usual manner. Few would have guessed that she was ill. For that glowing evening, I could forget my worries about her.

On another visit, some time after that birthday, I found her talking with an older man, to whom she introduced me as "a famous writer from New York."

"No, Tillie," I said. "You're the famous writer. I'm your publisher." She ignored me, and so I was very surprised when on another day during that visit she caught sight of the Feminist Press's edition of *Silences*, picked it up, and waved it in my face, saying, "How dare you publish this without my permission?"

Laurie happened to be in the room and said, "Mama, you signed the contract and I did, too." And Tillie calmed down.

Soon after, Tillie moved to a new residence in Oakland built especially for Alzheimer's patients. It was expensive, and money had to be raised from family and friends to cover costs. On moving day, all four daughters walked with her into her room, which had been furnished with her own bed and chest, her own pictures on the walls, her own quilt on her bed. Julie wrote to me afterward, "Mama said, 'This is hard.' And we said, 'This is hard.' And then we all cried." All of them slept on the floor in her room that night.

I still visited twice or three times each year, staying with Laurie and Mike and continuing to search through Tillie's papers, now in their attic, hoping to find the "Requa" manuscript that I believed Tillie had finished. I never found it, though I found an unpublished story.

In January 2005 when I came to visit, I found her in a room at a large table with other people, all of whom were waiting to go downstairs to a music program. Tillie was clutching *Tell Me a Riddle* and, after greeting me, opened to the middle of "I Stand Here Ironing."

"That story was very important to many people," I said. "Many women iron and worry about their children, but no one before you had written a story about that. It was wonderful for women to be

able to read this story.”

“That’s not why I wrote it,” she said.

And my heart leaped. A real conversation like in the old days. “Why did you write it?”

“I just wanted to write a story.”

With that brief sentence she began to read aloud, and she read—in an oracular voice—to the end of the story. No one at the table but me was listening. But she knew I was listening, and that was seemingly enough.

In the large sea of old people in various stages of illness, Tillie seemed to be able to focus on one person at a time. She liked to hold hands, and she continued to be very affectionate. She appreciated being visited even if she couldn’t quite place the person visiting. She loved getting mail, which she would read again and again, either to herself or out loud to another visitor as though for the first time, and then she would put the card or letter into the book she happened to be carrying. On another of my visits, she read aloud from a slim volume of Emily Dickinson’s poems for more than an hour, pausing now and then to comment, “That’s a good line,” and it always was. I treasure that particular visit, for Tillie seemed both content and critically observant, as though a piece of herself had been preserved, untouched by her illness.

Not very long afterward, I returned for a small birthday party in January 2006 held in a dining room of the facility. Julie, Kathy, and Laurie and Mike were there, several grandchildren, and a few friends, including her former assistant who came with her large black dog. Tillie seemed to be enjoying the moment, and I tried to find the resources to enjoy it with her, rather than mourn the loss I continued to feel. That evening she knew by name all who were there to celebrate with her.

My final visit, some months later, began on a particularly beautiful day on which I had imagined taking Tillie for a walk in the park across the street. I found her sitting on a love seat in the spacious common room. She welcomed me with a hug as though she knew me, and so I was unprepared for what followed.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

I thought she meant where was I coming from, and so I responded, "I'm coming directly from home."

"Where is your home?"

"My home is in New York, Tillie. You know that."

"I like New York. I plan to visit there soon." She handed me a scrap of paper and a small pencil. "Write your name here."

I froze, but I obediently wrote my name on her piece of paper and handed it back to her.

"You have to write your address and phone number. How else could I find you when I go to New York?"

I remember nothing from that moment forward until I lay on the leather couch back in the Berkeley house with a splitting headache. I did not return the next day, a decision I've regretted, for I should have known that she might have known me another day. But I could no longer bear to see her as she was. During her final weeks in a hospital, her daughters and her beloved grandchildren stayed in her room day and night. They told me they sang to her and that sometimes she sang with them.

Tillie died on January 1, 2007. The daughters planned the memorial for February so that I might be there on the day before I was to leave from Florida on a cruise that Helene Goldfarb had planned for us more than a year before. I had flights arranged that would take me from New York to California on Friday, and then from California to Florida on Sunday morning. I set out especially early on a bright, sunny Friday in New York to catch my plane, only to be told at the airport that there would be no flights to California or anywhere else until Monday or Tuesday at the earliest due to flight cancellations several days before. Only those people whose flights had been cancelled were getting on flights Friday or even Saturday. I tried for four hours to get someone to listen to me, but finally I had to go home, without a flight to the memorial for Tillie or to Florida. I still feel sad that I had not been able to say a public farewell to the woman I wished had been my mother.

Grace Paley

I met Grace on marches and in political meetings. She was the only other woman to attend Resist meetings in Cambridge in the 1960s. But our friendship grew specifically in relation to the Feminist Press. Her generosity was as boundless as her energy, and she spoke at fundraisers, signed fund-raising letters, and wrote blurbs for our books. She also supported me personally. When she knew I was alone out in the Amagansett cottage and depressed, she called every day to ask what I was doing. Once, I replied that I was trying to get several mean blue jays to stop badgering a balding jay.

“Are you saying that you can tell one blue jay from another?” she asked.

“Yes, of course, they’re all different,” I responded.

“Well,” she said, “that calls for an assignment. You must write a poem about blue jays. I’ll call tomorrow, and you can read it to me.”

At one point, I wanted to do something for Grace, and she suggested that she’d like to meet Tillie, who was by then coming to New York regularly, often staying in my apartment. I was excited about introducing them, the comic Grace and the tragic Tillie: How would they greet each other? The actual meeting occurred in the early 1980s in a slummy green staircase in Lower Manhattan outside the second-floor apartment of Hannah Green, a writer and Tillie’s beloved friend. Hannah was late getting home to meet us, so we three sat on the stairs, with me positioned above Tillie and Grace to observe. Before ten minutes had passed, they were laughing so hard they didn’t hear Hannah coming up the steps.

What I remember most clearly about Grace was the way she strode energetically onto a platform, a middle-aged woman wearing a loose jacket over a midlength skirt or a pair of trousers, no garment very bright except perhaps a scarf. Her gray hair was unfashionably piled somewhat carelessly on her head. But her smile shone so that you could see it even if you were sitting in a back row. She would have a book in her hands, and she’d begin by saying, “Folks, this is what a feminist looks like,” and the crowd would laugh and relax.

At the end of the 1980s, she came to see me, saying I could do something for her. She had a small collection of prose and poetry,



along with paintings by Vera B. Williams, some of which were first published by the War Resisters League as a datebook called *365 Reasons Not to Have Another War*. Vera's paintings, Grace carefully explained, were not illustrations. They were antiwar art, just as the stories and poems were antiwar art. And they needed to be included in the volume, which she and Vera had worked on together. The problem was that most of the paintings were in color and no publisher, not even the esteemed Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Grace's own publisher, would take the volume on. It was a slim collection: designed, *Long Walks and Intimate Talks* came to seventy-eight pages when the Feminist Press published it in 1991 in paperback, with a few hundred hardcover boxed volumes signed by Grace and Vera.

Until her very last days, Grace's mind was clear. The cancer that had taken one breast had metastasized to her bones. She managed for some four or five years to write, give readings, and speak for political causes in between blood transfusions and other kinds of care. She never talked of her illness, nor did she complain, but it was clear enough to all who saw her thinning face and increasingly frail body.

In the spring of 2007, a few months before her death, Grace was in my living room with a television crew. Board member Laura Brown and I were trying to interview her about her achievements. "How did it happen," Laura asked, "that your stories were published to wide acclaim in the 1950s, long before there was any women's movement or any interest in women writers?"

"I was lucky," Grace said simply. "That's all."

I wasn't supposed to say anything, but I couldn't let that go by. "Grace," I said, "how could you claim luck? What about the quality of your writing?"

"Lots of people were good writers," she said, not giving up her point.

"Yes, but you had something they didn't. What was that?"

"Humor," she said with a tilt at the end as though we were in a classroom and she was the student trying to get the right answer.

Oh, how sad I felt at that moment. And I knew the interview

was useless. Grace was not interested in dissecting the past, and we should not have bothered her. What she could do, and she did, was to read a poem for us and the television cameras.

Bob Nichols, Grace's husband, was also in the room that day. We were about to publish a 2 X 2 volume by them. Tillie had never seen her volume, which I knew would have pleased her enormously. Grace and Bob enjoyed the idea of their volume and had worked on it with their close friend, Marianne Hirsch, who wrote the introduction. Together, they named their volume *Here and Somewhere Else* to call attention to the increasingly connected and disconnected world we live in.

On July 21, 2007, exactly a month and a day before Grace's death in August, I drove to Vermont to stay in Grace and Bob's extra cottage. They were both pleased to see me, and I thought I could be useful, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and relieving Bob from his caretaking duties for Grace, who was quite ill by then. I hoped to give Bob several hours a day either to relax or work on his novel. On the afternoon I drove up the long, curvy hill to their substantial two-story house, another friend was in the kitchen preparing pasta pesto and beets, broccoli, and snap peas from the garden. As we sat down to dinner, Grace's daughter, Nora, arrived with her adopted daughter, Siena, who, like my daughter, Alice, was African American. Nora wanted to hear news of Alice and her two children, Jack and Florence, and Siena, too shy to ask me directly, asked Nora if my daughter was "as dark brown" as she, to which I responded, "darker." Grace seemed happy at dinner. She ate a bit, and I could see that having people present cheered her even though it might also tire her.

After people left, Grace was worn out and went directly to bed. Bob questioned me about my return to the Feminist Press. He enjoyed the drama around the forced cancellation of the Russian trip. As I washed dishes, Bob bounced around the kitchen, a high-spirited man in his early eighties who was very caring and tender toward Grace. When he wasn't writing upstairs in his study, he was doing physical labor on the extensive property. Ritually, he would lie down after lunch and dinner for twenty minutes.

When I awoke the next morning to a bright Vermont day, I went up to the house where I found Bob asleep on a couch in the main room, and Grace just emerging in a bathrobe from her bedroom. She seemed livelier than the previous night, and we began to assemble breakfast. We sat down to eat, but Grace soon grew weary and said she was not feeling well and had to lie down. I tried unsuccessfully to get her to take her pills until Nora called and told her to take them, at which point she said, "Florence will see to that." After she went to bed, I washed more dishes and tried to tidy up inconspicuously and wondered whether the friend who had left had done so because she couldn't bear the chaos. I could hardly bear it myself, but I was determined to be of use. Bob was no housekeeper. The books and papers alone were all over the place, and when you added food and clothes, it seemed overwhelming.

Many times that morning, Grace walked from her bedroom into the main room, saying, "I don't know why I feel so bad." She'd stay for a few minutes and then go back to bed, only to reappear within five minutes. Bob had gone upstairs to his study when she came out and said she'd like to go for a walk, asking me to go with her. I assumed she meant around the property, perhaps into the woods behind the house, but when we stepped outside, she headed swiftly to her car. I was sure she was in no shape to drive and tried to get her to go in my car.

"No," she said, "you don't know the way."

"Do you have your license with you?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I don't need it."

For a second I assumed she would be stopped by the absence of keys, but she reached for them on the floor of the front seat. Impatient now, for I was still trying to delay her, Grace commanded, "Get in the car."

I really began to worry when she took the curves on the hill much more swiftly than I would. When we emerged into traffic, my worry turned to fear, as she brazenly crossed lanes directly into the face of traffic. Once we were on small rural roads between great fields of grain, with no cars to dodge, I relaxed, simply watching Grace, who was clearly enjoying every moment. Just as I wondered

whether we were lost, Grace uttered an “aha,” and we emerged onto a road filled with traffic that seemed to dissolve before her beat-up car. She parked in front of a huge farm stand. Grace got out of the car, smiling and saying hello to people whom she greeted by name. She chose some vegetables and then we walked into a new coffee bar behind the farm stand, where we sat for ten minutes or so, until she felt ill again and I suggested leaving. She drove back much more slowly and directly.

Several hours later, when I was reading a newspaper and Bob was resting, Grace said she was going out to get some basil from the garden. But fifteen minutes later, when historian Marilyn Young called to make sure that Grace felt well enough to come to dinner that evening, Bob and I realized that she hadn't returned from the garden. When we went out to look for her, we saw that the car was gone. Bob called Nora, thinking she might have gone there, but no, she had not. Bob told me that Grace was not allowed to drive, that her license had been taken away, that the police knew her, and that local drivers tried to stay out of her way. He could hardly be still for a moment, and, of course, I didn't suggest the obvious: keep the car keys in his pocket and not on the floor of the car.

Fifteen minutes later, Grace walked into the house, looking chipper and very pleased with herself, carrying a stack of mail and magazines. “Someone had to go to the post office,” she said as she went off to bed.

Bob, relieved, commented to me, “She feels rotten. And she doesn't want anyone to tell her what to do.”

Grace said she felt well enough to go to Marilyn Young's dinner, where there were lots of jokes about her driving, and I was congratulated for my courage and endurance. I said I thought she was actually a good driver when she wasn't cutting in front of people, but clearly I was the only one with that opinion. Grace ate very little and drank hot tea. She complained of the cold, though she was wearing four layers of clothing, but she didn't want to leave until everyone did.

As Bob walked me to the cottage that evening, he said that, if I had come thinking I could “help” Grace, to forget it, since she got

angry with anyone who tried to help her. I told him that I was probably just an extra nuisance for both of them and that I would leave the next day.

I spent the next morning with Bob, both of us aware that Grace was feeling worse and worse. At one point, Bob said to her, "Perhaps you had better lie down." Grace went to her room to do so, but was soon up again. Eventually, she settled into some restful sleep for perhaps half an hour and when she awoke, she felt good enough to sit outside in a chair in the sunshine, facing her beloved view. She rubbed her stomach while Bob patted her back, trying to make her burp, and thus ease some of her discomfort. I took a couple of photos of them and then kissed them both goodbye. I knew I was not useful and that they wanted to be alone more than they wanted some third person to "help" what could not be helped.

If, as I wrote in my journal that night, living is hard, dying is harder still. But the Grace Paley I saw a month away from her death was still in charge of her life. I had never before thought of Grace as formidable. But she seemed so to me when I drove off.

Marilyn French

Marilyn and I met on the lecture circuit during the 1980s, and I was sometimes invited to the lavish book parties that Summit Press gave for her at the Four Seasons, especially since I had accepted the daughter of her publisher as an assistant one summer. And after I had hired her daughter, Jamie, for a brief period of work at the Feminist Press, Marilyn invited me to a huge holiday party in her elegant duplex on Central Park West. But we never had a meal together until after she had written a glowing essay about the Feminist Press in the first *Ms.* magazine edited by Robin Morgan in the early 1990s. I called to thank her for the piece, and she invited me to dinner where we talked about Women Writing in India, the major focus of her essay about us. She never told me that she was working on a history of women in the world, though those were the years in which she had begun that project.

One Saturday morning in the summer of 1992, at the Femi-

nist Book Fair in Amsterdam, Marilyn came to the Feminist Press booth and invited me to lunch because she had something important to tell me. At lunch, she insisted that we order first, and then she began to describe the medical tests she had been through and their probable result, which she would hear on her return to New York. She had, she said, esophageal cancer, and she'd been given three months.

"Three months for what?" I asked stupidly. I saw only the beautiful, vibrant woman before me. Then she placed my hand on the side of her neck so that I could feel a golf-ball-sized hard mass. I could say nothing. I think she appreciated the silence.

Soon after, Marilyn suffered through long periods of chemotherapy and radiation. When I asked whether I could be helpful, I was told that she had three friends with her all the time—Gloria Steinem, the writer and broadcaster Carol Jenkins, and the writer Esther Broner—as well as her son, Robbie, and daughter, Jamie.

In 1996, I attended what would be the last party Summit would give for her at the Four Seasons to celebrate the publication of *My Summer with George*, the novel she began to write as soon as she could sit up in bed. She told me afterward that the writing had saved her life, for the chemotherapy and radiation had killed her immune system, destroyed her bones, and weakened her heart. As soon as she could, she returned to more difficult projects, a memoir about her illness and the four volumes of history.

In 1995, she had agreed to become a Feminist Press board member, and we began to have regular nights out together, generally in Lower Manhattan near where she then lived. She would arrive via car service, and I would see her into a taxi later that evening. Each time I met her, I was shocked by her appearance. The glamorous woman had become a frail old lady. The cane she used was not enough. She had dizzy spells and needed to be supported by a strong arm. No one could have imagined that we were the same age. Still she controlled the evening: she chose the offbeat theater or film, the restaurant, and especially the time. Since it was her habit to sleep until nearly noon, she liked to eat dinner at 10 p.m. Getting home at 1 a.m. was hard on me at seventy, since I had to be at

work at 9 a.m., and so my one request was for Friday or Saturday nights.

She was as inventive about restaurants in Lower Manhattan, as Mariam Chamberlain had been about Midtown in the 1980s. And there was always the ritual of the malt scotch, difficult for Marilyn to ingest because of her delicate esophagus. She'd order her favorite brand, asking that it be served straight, along with two other empty glasses, one filled with ice. We always laughed about the varieties of responses we accumulated to this request. Marilyn would fill her empty glass with ice, pour a tiny bit of the scotch over the ice, and hand me the remaining scotch, which I poured into another glass of ice. She was always pleased that there was no waste, for I liked the scotch as much as she did.

These were heady evenings for me, as her conversation sparked mine and hours passed like minutes. Her mind reminded me of Elaine's, and she was as well-read in literature. She was interested in the books we were publishing and, when I asked her for an opinion, she made time to read material we were considering. She wrote the introduction to the book we published on the occasion of our thirtieth anniversary, when we gave her an award for service to our work.

From time to time, when I'd ask about her own writing, she'd tell me about her publishing problems. But it was not until I was no longer publisher at the Feminist Press that she gave me the manuscript she called *Friends*, but which we published under the title *In the Name of Friendship*. Charlotte Sheedy, her agent, had not been able to sell it to a US publisher, though it had sold well in the Netherlands. Marilyn also told me about the four volumes of the history of women in the world she had titled *From Eve to Dawn*. These books had had several contracts, but they had been cancelled when publishers saw the size of the books, even after Marilyn had made cuts.

In 2002, the Small Press Center asked Marilyn to present its Poor Richard's Award to me for my contributions to independent publishing, and she wrote and delivered a talk I treasure, in which she said, "There is no award I know of, designated for giving the



mute a voice, for resurrecting the dead, for valorizing the forgotten and belittled of the earth. But surely we can stipulate that this award . . . must carry that connotation.” She also wrote a fine recommendation for me to Bellagio, and, when I returned in 2008, we talked often about the memoirs we were both writing. At one point, we had typed the same number of pages, but Marilyn was not quite to her seventeenth year and I was past my fiftieth. She had no notes, she said, but amazing recall. I had less recall, but a huge number of journals.

Early in 2009 she called to tell me that she had bone cancer. “No,” I said, “Marilyn, that doesn’t make sense. Did your doctor actually say that?”

“No,” she said, “but I know it’s cancer.”

So I offered to go with her to the specialist her doctor had chosen. The specialist said that in fact she did not have bone cancer, but that she was producing insufficient red and white blood cells, which made her lethargic, too tired even to eat, much less to write. Her system would need to be stimulated with hormones. I continued to meet her at the doctor’s for the injections that would encourage her bone marrow to produce new cells, and we would usually have lunch afterward. The effect of the injections was incredibly slow, and I suggested urging the doctor to shift treatment, but he counseled us to be patient and offered the possibility of a transfusion, which Marilyn rejected.

I was touched that she wanted to be present at the small celebration of my eightieth birthday in March. Sitting in her wheelchair she insisted on hearing exactly where my friends Don and Jorge had bought the halibut and how they had prepared it, for she said it was her favorite fish and she had prepared it many times but never had it tasted as wonderful as that evening. Cheered by her demeanor, I believed she was improving. And she might have, had it not been for an accidental fall in her apartment as she tried to get to a door that she had mistakenly locked. The fall sent her into the hospital. Even so, when I last saw her a day or two before her death, she was enjoying the vegetable soup I had brought in for her.

Why these four women? What sense can I make of these relationships? Two of these women were close contemporaries. Elaine was the person I wanted to be. She had the two babies and the completed dissertation I did not. Marilyn had these as well. And though Marilyn was famous as a novelist, she was as much a scholar as Elaine, while I had chosen to discard my scholarly potential. Their minds seemed razor-sharp to me, as mine had been in the years after graduate school when I was still working on Bloomsbury and Virginia Woolf and even when I was working in archives on the history of women's higher education. When I was with them, I was learning.

Two of these women were the writers I thought I could not become. Still, Tillie read my speeches-turned-into-published-essays and declared me a writer. Unlike the poet who had once said of a poem I had shown her in the 1960s, "You should stick to prose," Grace encouraged me to write poems. Although I gave hundreds of lectures and, on request, turned scores of them into polished essays, some published in a wide variety of venues, from the mass-circulated *Saturday Review* to the scholarly *College English* and *PMLA*, I did not consider myself a writer even though, as early as 1984, Indiana University Press published a collection of my essays in a volume called *Myths of Coeducation*, a high compliment to my talents as an essayist.

I viewed Tillie and Grace, both almost a full generation older than I, as a race apart. I never told them about my allegedly absent "creative bone." Nor did I ever explicitly tell them that, since I couldn't be a creative woman writer, I would spend my life publishing creative women writers who had been rendered invisible by the dominant patriarchal lens.