



Rebecca Solnit The Faraway Nearby

From the bestselling
author of *Wanderlust* and
A Field Guide to Getting Lost

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for the mothers

and the wolves

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That vast pile of apricots included underripe, ripening, and rotting fruit. The range of stories I can tell about my mother include some of each too. If I had written about her earlier, the story would have had the aura of the courtroom, for I had been raised on the logic of argument and fact and being right, rather than the leap beyond that might be love. I would have told it as a defendant, making my case against her to justify myself, who stood so long accused of so many sidelong things. Some of the urgency to be justified in my existence and to survive has fallen away, though the story remains, a hard pit after the emotion has gone.

There are other stories, not yet ripe, that I will see and tell in later years. Once the apricots arrived and I began thinking in fairy tales, I shocked myself by recalling the couplet from "Snow White," "Mirror, mirror, on the wall," because that conjunction of mothers and mirrors made me recognize how murderous my mother's fury was. She was devoured by envy for decades, an envy that was a story she told herself, a story of constant comparison.

She was a great believer in fairness. At her best she stood up for the rights of the oppressed and at the worst begrudged me anything I had that she thought she hadn't had. Envy was an emotion, and she turned her emotions into reasons and reasons into facts and believed facts were obdurate, unchangeable things, even as her emotions changed again and again. Those emotions metamorphosed

tears and flying through the night, because there is also night in this sentence, and

into stories and the stories she told herself summoned emotions long after the events.

Stories rode her, she was driven by stories—that beauty was the key to some happiness that had eluded her, that she had been done out of something that was rightfully hers, whether it was her mother's favor or her daughter's golden hair. Stories were a storm that blew her this way and that, but she believed in their truth and permanence—she had always been miserable, always happy, her life had been good, had been terrible, she had never said such a thing, felt such a thing, and though she brooded on slights for decades, she could never remember her own rage the day before.

My story is a variation on one I've heard from many women over the years, of the mother who gave herself away to everyone or someone and tried to get herself back from a daughter. Early on she assured me that she had measured me as a toddler, doubled my height, and deduced that I would be five foot two, seven inches shorter than her, when I grew up and that my hair—white blond in my first years, lemon and then honey and then dirty blond streaked by the sun with gold as I grew older—was going to turn brown at any moment.

This short, brown-haired daughter she decided upon was not terrifying, and she envisioned a modest future for me and occasionally tried to keep me to it. I remained a couple of inches shorter than her until her posture sagged, but she remained preoccupied with our relative heights. Once when I came over for a family dinner she seized me at the door and dragged me in front of a mirror to make sure she was still taller, and she called me "Shortie" well into the era of her Alzheimer's disease. It was my hair, however, that was her great grief.

wings of two kinds. As though the two characters were day and night itself, or as

Her dark hair had lovely russet undertones when she was young and turned white early. She dyed it light brown for a couple of decades before I persuaded her to let it be. The first time I saw it white, when she was about sixty, I was astonished at her beauty, like a marble statue with blazing blue eyes. Having paler hair than mine changed nothing. She imagined blondness as an almost supernatural gift, one that I had no right to receive since she had not, and she brought up my hair in countless unhappy ways over the years.

My hair was dyed, was brown, was unfair, was wrong, though there were a few years when she was angry about my eyebrows instead, beginning with a moment when I'd taken her out to breakfast and out of the blue she snapped, "It's not fair you got those eyebrows." Giving her breakfast did nothing, since I would not, could not, give her or give up my arched eyebrows or convince her that her own straight eyebrows were fine.

For mothers, some mothers, my mother, daughters are division and sons are multiplication; the former reduce them, fracture them, take from them, the latter augment and enhance. My mother, who would light up at the thought that my brothers were handsome, rankled at the idea that I might be nice-looking. The queen's envy of Snow White is deadly. It's based on the desire to be the most beautiful of all, and it raises the question of whose admiration she needs and what she thinks Snow White is competing for, this child whose beauty is an affliction. At the back of this drama between women are men, the men for whom the queen wants to be beautiful, the men whose attention is the arbiter of worth and worthlessness. There was nothing I could do, because there was nothing I had done: it was not my actions that triggered

if the drinker fed on the dreamer the way the moon reflects the light of the unseen

her fury, but my very being, my gender, my appearance, and my nonbeing—my failure to be the miracle of her completion and to be instead her division.

“Resentment is a storytelling passion,” says the philosopher Charles Griswold in his book *Forgiveness*. I know well how compelling those stories are, how they grant immortality to an old injury. The teller goes in circles like a camel harnessed to a rotary water pump, diligently extracting misery, reviving feeling with each retelling. Feelings are kept alive that would fade away without narrative, or are invented by narratives that may have little to do with what once transpired and even less to do with the present moment. I learned this skill from my mother, though some of her stories were about me, and of course my perennial classics were about her. My father was destructive in a more uncomplicated way, but he is another story. Or maybe he is the misery at the root of my mother’s behavior, and he certainly made her suffer, but there were people and historical forces at the root of his, and that line of logic goes on forever.

It wasn’t only envy. When I was thirteen, my mother told me that the doctors had detected a lump in her breast. I found out decades later she had first told my father, whose lack of sympathy over this was part of what precipitated their separation and protracted divorce. I didn’t have much sympathy either; it was not that I refused to give it, but that there was none in my equipment yet, perhaps because I had experienced so little of it.

When she didn’t get what she wanted from me that day she told me her medical news, she flew into a blasting fury that I remember, perhaps incorrectly, as the first of the long sequence of furies at what I was not or what she was not getting. I can still

sun. That moths drink the tears of sleeping birds is a template for many things; it

picture the two of us in front of the terrible house painted with the tan paint that had never dried properly so that a host of small insects stuck to it over the years. Now I can feel for that distressed woman who had no one compassionate to turn to, but at the time I just felt scorched and wronged. As it turned out, the lump was benign; the relationship, however, was malignant from then on.

Thereafter, she often visited her fury at others or at life upon me. She took pleasure in not giving me things that she gave to others, often in front of me, in finding ways to push me out of the group. She thought she would get something through these acts, and maybe she got a momentary sense of victory and power, and those were rare possessions for her. She didn’t seem to know she also lost something through this strategy. In the decades that followed, I nursed her through other illnesses and injuries she kept secret from her sons, and during the worst of them, not so many years before the Alzheimer’s arrived in force, she berated me for not feeling enough for her while I was tending her.

Sometimes it’s valuable to return to the circumstances of childhood with an adult’s resources and insights, and that time around I realized that I could not feel at all. Not for her, or for myself, except a dim horror, as if from a long way away. I had returned to the state in which I had spent my childhood, frozen, in suspended animation, waiting to thaw out, to wake up, waiting to live. I thought of her unhappiness as a sledge to which I was tethered. I dragged it with me and studied it in the hope of freeing myself and maybe even her.

She thought of me as a mirror but she didn’t like what she saw and blamed the mirror. When I was thirty, in one of the furious letters I sometimes composed and rarely sent, I wrote, “You want

is a container of the familiar made strange, of sorrow turned into sustenance, of

me to be some kind of a mirror that will reflect back the self-image you want to see—perfect mother, totally loved, always right—but I am not a mirror, and the shortcomings you see are not my fault. And I can never get along with you as long as you continue demanding that I perform miracles.”

I had brought her a copy of my first book and she responded by berating me for not visiting, though I had dropped it off late at night and knew that I would have been unwelcome at that hour. Had I visited at an earlier hour she would have found fault with something I’d done when I was with her. And had I not given her a copy, another failure could be charted. There was no winning, just some decisions about how to lose and how not to play. I have seen people with charismatic or charming parents forever hovering in hope of validation and recognition, and I wasn’t waiting for those. I just wanted the war to end.

Long afterward I got asked over and over the most common and annoying question about Alzheimer’s, whether she still recognized me. Recognition can mean so many things, and in some sense she had never known who I was. Much later, when she couldn’t come up with my name or explain our relationship, I didn’t care, since being recognized hadn’t exactly been a boon. In that era, I think my voice and other things registered as familiar and set her at ease, and perhaps she knew me more truly. And perhaps I her, as so much that was superfluous was pared away and the central fact of her humanity and her vulnerability was laid bare.

Who was I all those years before? I was not. Mirrors show everything but themselves, and to be a mirror is like being Echo in the myth of Echo and Narcissus: nothing of your own will be

the myriad stories the natural world provides that are as uncannily resonant as

heard. The fact usually proffered about Narcissus is that he was in love with his own image in the mountain pool, but the more important one is that in his absorption in his reflection he lost contact with others and starved to death.

Glace, the French word for ice, can also mean mirror. Ice, mirror, glass: the glass coffin in which Snow White lies dormant, poisoned, might as well be made of ice, as though she were frozen like those bodies in cryogenic storage, waiting to be thawed when their disease becomes curable, or those mountaineers frozen into the ice at altitude. You freeze up in childhood, you go numb, because you cannot change your circumstances and to recognize, name, and feel the emotions and their cruel causes would be unbearable, and so you wait.

Ice, glass, mirrors. I was frozen, or rather thawing. I was a mirror, but my mother didn’t like what she saw in it. I think of human psyches as landscapes, and to the question of whether she was happy or unhappy, I think that others encountered her in a flower-spangled meadow that was highly cultivated, if not artificial, and I charted the authentic swamp of her unhappiness far away in another part of the landscape she herself did not care to know.

If my mother had chosen a fairy tale about herself, it would have been “Cinderella,” the story of an overlooked, undervalued girl, a delicate child made into a workhorse. My mother’s older sister was a lively girl off on her own pursuits; her younger sister was, in her account, the cosseted baby who grew up to look like her twin but was thought of—at least by my mother—as the pretty one. It was mostly confidence that made the younger girl take up eyebrow pencils and pretty dresses, while her older sister hung back; they were nevertheless close and fond.

any myth. The ancient Greeks used the word psyche for breath, for life, for the

From the time I was a small child, my mother would absent-mindedly call me by her little sister's name, so that I was cloaked in a jealousy and attachment that had been born more than a quarter century before me. My mother in her own stories was the freckled, skinny one on whom her mother leaned, the mother who sometimes kept her home from school because she was sickly, or for company, or to take care of her little sister. When my mother was ten, her father died in a construction accident and her mother had to go to work, another abandonment for both of them.

If she was Cinderella, she was forever stuck in childhood, waiting for help, for transformation, stuck in situations that had ended half a century earlier, a Cinderella for whom no prince came, except her sons, the princes she made. She was self-conscious about her size-eleven feet and her height, bemoaning and boasting about the latter in turn. She had a strikingly pretty face, but beauty is as much a way of carrying yourself as physical attributes. She was thin-skinned, prim, unsure of herself, finicky, squeamish, anxious, and fretful, even as a child, in the stories told me.

Some instinct that comes from being at home in the world was never hers, the protective instinct that attracts you to what encourages you. Instead she was buffeted between principles and fears. She took the ought-to-be for the actual and adhered to what she should like and how things should be. It was as though she traveled by a map of the wrong place, hitting walls, driving into ditches, missing her destination, but never stopping or throwing out the map. And she never stopped being Cinderella, and told her own story largely as a series of things that happened to her rather than things she did.

vital essence of life, for the soul, and sometimes for butterflies that were the

The artist Ana Teresa Fernandez recently cast a pair of high-heeled shoes in ice and stood in the gutter of an inner-city street at night until they melted and left her barefoot and free. It was a battle between the warmth of her body and the coldness of the shoes, between her own fierce will and the imprisonment of the Cinderella story. The shoes were astonishingly beautiful, strange, alarming. They were shoes that wanted to kill your feet, shoes too brittle to walk in, shoes of the kind called stiletto, as though you could stab someone with them. In the two-hour video she compressed down to forty minutes or so of ordeal, they slowly disintegrated, like a story falling apart, like a belief wearing out, like a fear melting away.

When your feet or hands go numb with cold, they don't feel at all after a while. It's when they warm again that the pain begins, just as a limb hurts not when the blood flow ceases and it goes to sleep but when it wakes up. Tall, athletic Ana told me that it was when her feet began to thaw that the agony arrived. She endured the pain for the sake of a symbolic conquest of a pernicious story and for the sake of making a work of art that expressed her fierce feminism and brilliant imagination. In "Cinderella," women deform themselves to try to fit into the shoe; Ana destroyed the shoes, making something beautiful out of the war between flesh and ice, between a fairy tale that didn't fit and her own intransigent warmth. Not everyone has the will or the warmth.

Where does a story begin? The fiction is that they do, and end, rather than that the stuff of a story is just a cup of water scooped from the sea and poured back into it, but if I had to begin the story of my parents anywhere, it would be with my grandmothers, who were both motherless. Some secret of nurture withered a

emblem of the soul, though I wonder if a moth could also be a soul and if the

generation or two before I arrived, if it had ever existed before among the poor, marginalized people on the edges of Europe from whom I descend. Both my parents grew up with a deep sense of poverty that was mostly emotional but that they imagined as material long after they clambered into the middle class, and so they were more like a pair of rivalrous older siblings than parents who see their children as extensions of themselves and their hopes. They were stuck in separateness.

I didn't realize anything was odd until I was already on my own and found out that not everyone's parents cut them off financially as soon as the law allowed. I tried to leave home unsuccessfully at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen and did so successfully at seventeen, heading off to another country, as far away as I could go, and once I got there I realized I was more on my own than I had anticipated: I was henceforth entirely responsible for myself, and thus began a few years of poverty. For that odyssey my mother would not let me take any of the decent suitcases in her attic but gave me a huge broken one in which my few clothes and books tumbled like dice in a cup. My father gave me a broken travel clock that he said was worth repairing and I kept for years before I found that it was not. These were the gifts they sent me into the world with, which might be why the apricots from my mother's tree registered so strongly.

Like lawyers, writers seek consistency; they make a case for their point of view; they do so by leaving out some evidence; but let me mention the hundreds of sandwiches my mother made during my elementary school years, the peanut butter sandwiches I ate alone on school benches in the open, throwing the crusts into the air where the seagulls would swoop to catch them before they

Greek word encompasses them too. In the tale known as "Cupid and Psyche,"

hit the ground. When my friends began to have babies and I came to comprehend the heroic labor it takes to keep one alive, the constant exhausting tending of a being who can do nothing and demands everything, I realized that my mother had done all these things for me before I remembered. I was fed; I was washed; I was clothed; I was taught to speak and given a thousand other things, over and over again, hourly, daily, for years. She gave me everything before she gave me nothing.

It was in honor of that unremembered past that I took care of her, that and principle and compassion and solidarity with my brothers. How could I not? If my mother had been my arctic expedition, I was going to finish the journey. But after the peanut butter sandwiches, before the brain disease, it was hard to respond to her occasional generosity when the other side of her might show up at any moment, so she complained I was distant.

I was distant. I studied her, I pondered her. My survival depended on mapping her landscape and finding my routes out of it. We are all the heroes of our own stories, and one of the arts of perspective is to see yourself small on the stage of another's story, to see the vast expanse of the world that is not about you, and to see your power, to make your life, to make others, or break them, to tell stories rather than be told by them.

Perhaps another kind of daughter would have fought her to a truce or been utterly destroyed, and yet another thick-skinned enough to laugh it off or hardly notice rather than be caught up in the currents of emotion, though I can't imagine anyone emerging from those circumstances with the wisdom to negotiate a real peace early on. I coped by retreating and maybe I did become a mirror, a polished surface that shows nothing of what lies beneath.

Psyche is a wanderer whose odyssey begins when she is brought to her own

We were in a looking-glass world where I knew more about her childhood than she did about mine. When I was an adult, we didn't talk about me. If I told her something went wrong in my life, she was likely to focus on my mistakes or get upset and demand I reassure her fears. For a long time, when I mentioned something eventful in my own life, she would change the subject in the very opening words of her reply. So we talked about her, mostly about fears and grievances. When I'm most aggrieved, I feel most like her, with her sense of having been shorted, of being the victim, and not being her was always my goal. In this sense I saw, late in the game, I too was seeking to annihilate.

The autumn after the apricots, when everything was at its worst, I was asked to talk to a roomful of undergraduates in a university in a beautiful coastal valley. I talked about places, about the ways that we often talk about love of place, by which we mean our love for places, but seldom of how the places love us back, of what they give us. They give us continuity, something to return to, and offer a familiarity that allows some portion of our own lives to remain connected and coherent. They give us an expansive scale in which our troubles are set into context, in which the largeness of the world is a balm to loss, trouble, and ugliness. And distant places give us refuge in territories where our own histories aren't so deeply entrenched and we can imagine other stories, other selves, or just drink up quiet and respite.

The bigness of the world is redemption. Despair compresses you into a small space, and a depression is literally a hollow in the ground. To dig deeper into the self, to go underground, is sometimes necessary, but so is the other route of getting out of yourself,

FUCK!

funeral pyre in the mountains and abandoned there. In this tale that has all the

into the larger world, into the openness in which you need not clutch your story and your troubles so tightly to your chest. Being able to travel both ways matters, and sometimes the way back into the heart of the question begins by going outward and beyond. This is the expansiveness that sometimes comes literally in a landscape or that tugs you out of yourself in a story.

I used to go to Ocean Beach, the long strip of sand facing the churning Pacific at the end of my own city, for reinforcement, and it always put things in perspective, a term that can be literal too. The city turned into sand and the sand into surf and the surf into ocean and just to know that the ocean went on for many thousands of miles was to know that there was an outer border to my own story, and even to human stories, and that something else picked up beyond. It was the familiar edge of the unknown, forever licking at the shore.

I told the students that they were at the age when they might begin to choose places that would sustain them the rest of their lives, that places were more reliable than human beings, and often much longer-lasting, and I asked them where they felt at home. They answered, each of them, down the rows, for an hour, the immigrants who had never stayed anywhere long or left a familiar world behind, the teenagers who'd left the home they'd spent their whole life in for the first time, the ones who loved or missed familiar landscapes and the ones who had not yet noticed them.

I found books and places before I found friends and mentors, and they gave me a lot, if not quite what a human being would. As a child, I spun outward in trouble, for in that inside-out world, everywhere but home was safe. Happily, the oaks were there, the hills, the creeks, the groves, the birds, the old dairy and

hallmarks of what would become the classic fairy tales of female seekers, she

horse ranches, the rock outcroppings, the open space inviting me to leap out of the personal into the embrace of the nonhuman world.

Once when I was in my late twenties, I drove to New Mexico with my friend Sophie, a fierce, talented, young black-haired green-eyed whirlwind who had not yet found her direction. We had no trouble convincing ourselves it was worthwhile to drive the two days each way to New Mexico because there was a darkroom there that she could use to print photographs for a project we had. In those days we were exploring who we wished to become, what the world might give us, and what we might give it, and so, though we did not know it, wandering was our real work anyway.

I had discovered the desert west a few years before with the force of one falling in love and had learned something of how to enter it and move through it. I threw myself into the vastness whenever I could, and I began to have another life among the people of the desert who befriended me, and the places, and the illimitable sky that seemed like an invitation to open up and grow larger.

In those days I was finding my voice and my vocation and they were flourishing, but I was not yet hectic or pressured, and I found countless excuses to wander in that empty quarter of the continent, camping, visiting, working with Native American activists, discovering a world that demanded new senses and delivered wild gifts. We must have taken the most scenic route, because Marble Canyon was not on any imaginable direct route. It's the first canyon below Glen Canyon Dam, at the head of the Grand Canyon. We had driven through the flatlands and mountains of the Mojave, through the highs and lows of the Arizona desert, then

awakes alone in a palace. There an unknown, unseen lover visits her only at

past mesas and escarpments of red sandstone and spread out a tarp and slept on sand near the murmuring river that night and ate breakfast in the morning at the shady diner of the lodge up the road on that north side of the river.

At the long table next to us was a big exuberant group of people in their prime, talking and eating piles of food. I realized at some point they were a river-rafting party, and I must have spoken more loudly than I'd intended when I said that I'd give my eye-teeth to go down the Grand Canyon. One of the guides came over to our table and told us that a few people had dropped out, they had extra places and supplies, and would we like to go? What do you do when a wish is suddenly granted?

I asked when they were leaving, and he said, In about an hour, and I asked how long we had to decide, and he said, About half an hour. There were logistical questions: did we have all the gear we needed, could we leave the car, did we have a way to get back to it, would anyone miss us, could we hike out at Phantom Ranch halfway down, did we trust these people? We already knew we wanted to get into that river that had sung us asleep that night, to be carried away on the current into the deep folds of the earth, back through time to the creation. And so we went back to the river guide and shocked him by saying yes, we would go, for a week or two, on twenty minutes' notice. It was his turn to retreat and mull things over, and he returned to us a little while later saying that the rangers had said we were not on the insurance list and so they could not take us. We thanked him and went onward on dry land.

That yes was a huge landmark in my life, a dividing point. I'd wrestled against the inner voice of my mother, the voice of

night. In paintings Cupid, the unknown lover, is often portrayed with the wings

caution, of duty, of fear of the unknown, the voice that said the world was dangerous and safety was always the first measure and that often confused pleasure with danger, the mother who had, when I'd moved to the city, sent me clippings about young women who were raped and murdered there, who elaborated on obscure perils and injuries that had never happened to her all her life, and who feared mistakes even when the consequences were minor.

Why go to Paradise when the dishes aren't done? What if the dirty dishes clamor more loudly than Paradise?

She had an adventurous streak herself and had talked her younger sister into touring the country by bus when they were young, had moved to Florida alone rather than staying home with her mother as an unmarried girl of her day generally did, had married a Jew who immediately took her away to live in Germany during his military service and then took her to live in the far west and South America. She had turned down adventures too, and she had chosen many things for many years for safety and thrift, sacrificed the present for security in the imagined future again and again, and was wistful for many what-might-have-beens. She had said no too many times, out of fear, out of duty, and in all this I had been tutored.

When you say "mother" or "father" you describe three different phenomena. There is the giant who made you and loomed over your early years; there is whatever more human-scale version might have been possible to perceive later and maybe even befriend; and there is the internalized version of the parent with whom you struggle—to appease, to escape, to be yourself, to understand and be understood by—and they make up a chaotic and contradictory trinity. In saying yes to the river, I had overcome

of a bird, Psyche with those of a butterfly. Nevertheless it is he that is the moth,

some internalized version of my mother that had become almost a reflex of cautious duty.

I came out of that minor adventure with a motto that stood me in good stead ever after—"Never turn down an adventure without a really good reason"—that I used to assay any invitation or possibility I was about to reflexively dismiss. A dozen years or more after we had said yes, Sophie fell in love with a man on the other side of the country, decided early in the romance to quit her miserable job to go be with him, and was told by her parents in a letter that she was making a big mistake in this leap into the unknown, this abandonment of a reliable step on a secure career.

I drove her to the airport for the flight that would take her back to her love. On the drive we talked about the time we'd chosen the unknown. If we had said no, we would have always wondered what would have happened, we would have forever felt that we'd turned down a treasure that could have been ours, had turned down a chance to live—and what mattered is that we had said yes to adventure, to the unknown, to possibility. If she didn't go, I told Sophie, she'd always wonder about the man, and if she went and it did not work out, she would have tried and she would know, and if it did work out—

I told a version of the river story at their wedding. They have two children now, the whirlwind is serene and has found her direction and her place, and of course her parents long ago forgot they had tried to stamp out her impulsive leap. I said yes to other adventures, and in that year of the apricots I was invited as abruptly and even more unexpectedly to Iceland, and I said yes instantly.

coming at night, feeding on her, ravishing her in the dark, lying low by day. The

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