

Fierce  
Attachments

VIVIAN GORNICK

DAUNT BOOKS

I'M EIGHT YEARS OLD. MY MOTHER AND I COME out of our apartment onto the second-floor landing. Mrs Drucker is standing in the open doorway of the apartment next door, smoking a cigarette. My mother locks the door and says to her, 'What are you doing here?' Mrs Drucker jerks her head backward toward her own apartment. 'He wants to lay me. I told him he's gotta take a shower before he can touch me.' I know that 'he' is her husband. 'He' is always the husband. 'Why? He's so dirty?' my mother says. 'He feels dirty to *me*,' Mrs Drucker says. 'Drucker, you're a whore,' my mother says. Mrs Drucker shrugs her shoulder. 'I can't ride the subway,' she says. In the Bronx 'ride the subway' was a euphemism for going to work.

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I lived in that tenement between the ages of six and twenty-one. There were twenty apartments, four to a floor, and all I remember is a building full of women. I hardly remember the men at all. They were everywhere, of course – husbands, fathers, brothers – but I remember only the women. And I remember them all crude like Mrs Drucker or fierce like my

mother. They never spoke as though they knew who they were, understood the bargain they had struck with life, but they often acted as though they knew. Shrewd, volatile, unlettered, they performed on a Dreiserian scale. There would be years of apparent calm, then suddenly an outbreak of panic and wildness: two or three lives scarred (perhaps ruined), and the turmoil would subside. Once again: sullen quiet, erotic torpor, the ordinariness of daily denial. And I – the girl growing in their midst, being made in their image – I absorbed them as I would chloroform on a cloth laid against my face. It has taken me thirty years to understand how much of them I understood.

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My mother and I are out walking. I ask if she remembers the women in that building in the Bronx. ‘Of course,’ she replies. I tell her I’ve always thought sexual rage was what made them so crazy. ‘Absolutely,’ she says without breaking her stride. ‘Remember Drucker? She used to say if she didn’t smoke a cigarette while she was having intercourse with her husband she’d throw herself out the window. And Zimmerman, on the other side of us? They married her off to him when she was sixteen, she hated his guts, she used to say if he’d get killed on the job (he was a construction worker) it would be a *mitzvah*.’ My mother stops walking. Her voice drops in awe of her own memory. ‘He actually used to take her by physical force,’ she says. ‘Would pick her up in the middle of the living-room floor and carry her off to the bed.’ She stares into the middle distance for a moment. Then she

says to me, 'The European men. They were animals. Just plain animals.' She starts walking again. 'Once, Zimmerman locked him out of the house. He rang our bell. He could hardly look at me. He asked if he could use our fire-escape window. I didn't speak one word to him. He walked through the house and climbed out the window.' My mother laughs. 'That fire-escape window, it did some business! Remember Cessa upstairs? Oh no, you couldn't remember her, she only lived there one year after we moved into the house, then the Russians were in that apartment. Cessa and I were very friendly. It's so strange, when I come to think of it. We hardly knew each other, any of us, sometimes we didn't talk to each other at all. But we lived on top of one another, we were in and out of each other's house. Everybody knew everything in no time at all. A few months in the building and the women were, well, *intimate*.

"This Cessa. She was a beautiful young woman, married only a few years. She didn't love her husband. She didn't hate him, either. He was a nice man, actually. What can I tell you, she didn't love him, she used to go out every day, I think she had a lover somewhere. Anyway, she had long black hair down to her ass. One day she cut it off. She wanted to be modern. Her husband didn't say anything to her, but her father came into the house, took one look at her cut hair, and gave her a slap across the face she saw her grandmother from the next world. Then he instructed her husband to lock her in the house for a month. She used to come down the fire escape into my window and out my door. Every afternoon for a month. One day she comes back and we're having coffee in the kitchen. I say to her, "Cessa,

tell your father this is America, Cessa, America. You're a free woman." She looks at me and she says to me, "What do you mean, tell my father this is America? He was born in Brooklyn."

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My relationship with my mother is not good, and as our lives accumulate it often seems to worsen. We are locked into a narrow channel of acquaintance, intense and binding. For years at a time there is an exhaustion, a kind of softening, between us. Then the rage comes up again, hot and clear, erotic in its power to compel attention. These days it is bad between us. My mother's way of 'dealing' with the bad times is to accuse me loudly and publicly of the truth. Whenever she sees me she says, 'You hate me. I know you hate me.' I'll be visiting her and she'll say to anyone who happens to be in the room – a neighbour, a friend, my brother, one of my nieces – 'She hates me. What she has against me I don't know, but she hates me.' She is equally capable of stopping a stranger on the street when we're out walking and saying, 'This is my daughter. She hates me.' Then she'll turn to me and plead, 'What did I do to you, you should hate me so?' I never answer. I know she's burning and I'm glad to let her burn. Why not? I'm burning, too.

But we walk the streets of New York together endlessly. We both live in lower Manhattan now, our apartments a mile apart, and we visit best by walking. My mother is an urban peasant and I am my mother's daughter. The city is our natural element. We each have daily adventures with

bus drivers, bag ladies, ticket takers, and street crazies. Walking brings out the best in us. I am forty-five now and my mother is seventy-seven. Her body is strong and healthy. She traverses the island easily with me. We don't love each other on these walks, often we are raging at each other, but we walk anyway.

Our best times together are when we speak of the past. I'll say to her, 'Ma, remember Mrs Kornfeld? Tell me that story again,' and she'll delight in telling me the story again. (It is only the present she hates; as soon as the present becomes the past, she immediately begins loving it.) Each time she tells the story it is both the same and different because each time I'm older, and it occurs to me to ask a question I didn't ask the last time around.

The first time my mother told me that her uncle Sol had tried to sleep with her I was twenty-two and I listened silently: rapt and terrified. The background I knew by heart. She was the youngest of eighteen children, eight of whom survived into adult life. (Imagine. My grandmother was pregnant for twenty years.) When the family came to New York from Russia, Sol, my grandmother's youngest brother and the same age as her own oldest child (her mother had *also* been pregnant for twenty years), came along with them. My mother's two oldest brothers had preceded the family by some years, had gone to work in the rag trade, and had rented a cold-water flat on the Lower East Side for all eleven of them: bathroom in the hall, coal stove in the kitchen, a train of dark cubbyhole inner rooms. My mother, then a ten-year-old child, slept on two chairs in the kitchen, because my grandmother took in a boarder.

Sol had been drafted into the army during the First World War and sent to Europe. When he returned to New York my mother was sixteen years old and the only child left at home. So here he comes, a glamorous stranger, the baby niece he left behind now womanly and dark-eyed, with glossy brown hair cut in a stylish bob and a transforming smile, all of which she pretends she doesn't know how to use (that was always my mother's style: outrageous coquettishness unhampered by the slightest degree of self-consciousness), and he begins sleeping in one of those cubbyholes two walls away from her, with the parents snoring loudly at the farthest end of the apartment.

'One night,' my mother said, 'I jumped up from sleep, I don't know why, and I see Sol is standing over me. I started to say, "What is it?" I thought something was wrong with my parents, but then he looked so funny I thought maybe he was sleepwalking. He didn't say a word to me. He picked me up in his arms and he carried me to his bed. He laid us both down on the bed, and he held me in his arms, and he began to stroke my body. Then he lifted my nightgown and he began to stroke my thigh. Suddenly he pushed me away from him and said, "Go back to your bed." I got up and went back to my bed. He never spoke one word about what happened that night, and I didn't either.'

The second time I heard the story I was thirty. She repeated it nearly word for word as we were walking up Lexington Avenue somewhere in the Sixties. When she came to the end I said to her, 'And you didn't say anything to him, throughout the whole time?' She shook her head no. 'How come, Ma?' I asked. Her eyes widened, her mouth

pursed. 'I don't know,' she puzzled. 'I only know I was very scared.' I looked at her, as she would say, *funny*. 'Whatsa-matter?' she said. 'You don't like my answer?' 'No,' I protested, 'it's not that. It just seems odd not to have uttered a sound, not to have indicated your fears at all.'

The third time she told the story I was nearly forty. We were walking up Eighth Avenue, and as we neared Forty-second Street I said to her, 'Ma, did it ever occur to you to ask yourself *why* you remained silent when Sol made his move?' She looked quickly at me. But this time she was wise to me. 'What are you getting at?' she asked angrily. 'Are you trying to say I *liked* it? Is that what you're getting at?' I laughed nervously, gleefully. 'No, Ma, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying it's *odd* that you didn't make a sound.' Again, she repeated that she had been very frightened. 'Come off it,' I said sharply. 'You are disgusting!' she raged at me in the middle of the street. 'My brilliant daughter. I should send you to college for another two degrees you're so brilliant. I *wanted* my uncle to rape me, is that it? A new thought!' We didn't speak for a month after that walk.

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The Bronx was a patchwork of invaded ethnic territories: four or five square blocks dominated by Irish or Italians or Jews, but each section with its quota of Irish living in a Jewish block or Jews in an Italian block. Much has been made of this change rung on the New York neighbourhood register, but those who grew up running the Irish or Italian gauntlet, or being frozen out by Jewish neighbours, are not

nearly so marked by their extra portion of outsideness as they are levelled by the shared street life. Our family had lived for a year in an Italian neighbourhood. My brother and I had been the only Jewish children in the school, and we had indeed been miserable. That's all: miserable. When we moved back into a Jewish neighbourhood, my brother was relieved at no longer having to worry that he'd be beaten up every afternoon by kids who called him the Jewish genius, but the outline and substance of his life were not fundamentally altered. The larger truth is that the 'otherness' of the Italians or the Irish or the Jews among us lent spice and interest, a sense of definition, an exciting edge to things that was openly feared but secretly welcomed.

Our building was all Jewish except for one Irish family on the first floor, one Russian family on the third floor, and a Polish superintendent. The Russians were tall and silent: they came and went in the building in a manner that seemed mysterious. The Irish were all thin and blond: blue eyes, narrow lips, closed faces. They, too, were a shadowy presence among us. The super and his wife were also quiet. They never spoke first to anyone. That's the main thing, I guess, about being a few among the many: it silences you.

My mother might have been silenced, too, had she remained living among the Italians, might have snatched her children up in wordless anxiety when a neighbour befriended one of us, just as Mrs Cassidy did whenever a woman in our building smoothed the hair of one of the 'Irish blondies'. But my mother was not one among the many. Here, in this all-Jewish building, she was in her element, had enough room between the skin of social presence and the flesh of an

unknowing centre in which to move around, express herself freely, be warm and sarcastic, hysterical and generous, ironic and judgemental, and, occasionally, what she thought of as affectionate: that rough, bullying style she assumed when overcome with the tenderness she most feared.

My mother was distinguished in the building by her unaccented English and the certainty of her manner. Although our apartment door was always closed (a distinction was made between those educated enough to value the privacy of a closed door and those so peasant-like the door was always half open), the neighbours felt free to knock at any time: borrow small kitchen necessities, share a piece of building gossip, even ask my mother to act as arbiter in an occasional quarrel. Her manner at such times was that of a superior person embarrassed by the childlike behaviour of her inferiors. ‘*Oy, Zimmerman.*’ She would smile patronisingly when Mrs Zimmerman, beside herself over some slight, real or imagined, came to tell her of the perfidy of one or another of our neighbours. ‘Such foolishness.’ Or, ‘That’s ridiculous,’ she would rap out sharply when a tale she considered base or ignorant was repeated to her. She seemed never to be troubled by the notion that there might be two sides to a story, or more than one interpretation of an event. She knew that, compared with the women around her, she was ‘developed’ – a person of higher thought and feeling – so what was there to think about? ‘Developed’ was one of her favourite words. If Mrs Zimmerman spoke loudly in the hall on a Saturday morning, we, sitting in the kitchen just behind our apartment door, would stare at each other and, inevitably, my mother would shake her head and pronounce,

‘An undeveloped woman.’ If someone made a crack about the *schwartzes*, my mother would carefully explain to me that such sentiments were ‘undeveloped’. If there was a dispute in the grocery store over price or weight, again I would hear the word ‘undeveloped’. My father smiled at her when she said ‘undeveloped’, whether out of indulgence or pride I never did know. My brother, on his guard from the age of ten, stared without expression. But I, I absorbed the feel of her words, soaked up every accompanying gesture and expression, every complicated bit of impulse and intent. Mama thinking everyone around was undeveloped, and most of what they said was ridiculous, became imprinted on me like dye on the most receptive of materials.