



MARGARET ATWOOD
JOAN BARFOOT
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dropped threads

WHAT WE AREN'T TOLD

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RENAME SCHULZ
MARGARET SHAW-MACKINNON
MIRIAM TOEWS
ELEANOR WACHTEL
ROSALIE WEAVER
BETTY JANE WYLIE

EDITED BY

Carol Shields

AND

Marjorie Anderson

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AND



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for our daughters,
Anne, Catherine, Cheryl, Dena
Heidi, Meg, Renata and Sara

and for
Andrea MacLennan Hauen
1966–1999
whose life was a gift of joy

FOREWORD

The focus for this anthology floated out one day amid soup and salad at one of those gatherings where Carol and I take the emotional pulse of our worlds — or The World, it seems to us.

“The woman’s network let me down. Nothing I’ve ever heard or read prepared me for this!” This particular yelp resulted from the plummet of energy and purpose I experienced with menopause and quickly led us to wider, more lively musings on what else had caught us unprepared, where else we had experienced gaps between female experience and expression. We were surprised by the number of topics and by the ease with which they came to mind. The image of dropped threads from the fabric of women’s talk occurred to us and the familiar, satisfying assumption that women could talk about *anything* unravelled as we spoke.

We included other women in our speculations: friends, colleagues and family members took up the conversation with enthusiasm and immediate revelations as though, for some, the

topic was one they had wanted to discuss for years. They identified gaps in their communal talk and named life-altering surprises in their individual lives. Most spoke of serious issues, of surprise bruising or blessings, private moments of intense connection or bewilderment. Other women reported insights that bordered on the hilarious: one friend mentioned that her greatest surprise was “sagging earlobes” and another claimed it was “a husband who flosses his teeth in front of you and then expects passion in bed.”

The idea for an anthology of writings on the topic blossomed naturally. We had obviously tapped into a rich vein of stories that touched on defining moments in women's lives. We invited a number of acquaintances and friends to write these stories, the ones they wanted and needed to tell, recognizing, of course, there would be private spaces that everyone needs to keep beyond the claim of words. We thought women writers would have interesting observations: what subjects hadn't they written about that needed communal airing? We also asked women of other backgrounds, academics, ranchers, politicians, homemakers, journalists, lawyers, to identify the areas of surprise and silence in their lives.

The responses were immediate and the topics wide-ranging: everything from the joys of belly dancing to the shock of gender inequities in politics. There seemed to be a general embracing of the license implicit in our invitation, but also some reticence: more than one respondent commented on the courage it would take to write on personal issues that had long been beyond the limits of acceptable expression. A few women identified experiences which they *could not* write on because the pain was too new or the fear of judgment still too strong. What was particularly satisfying to us was that we were contacted by women who had heard of our venture and wanted their stories included. One of these surprise offerings is among the most powerful of the anthology.

The collection of thirty-four reflective pieces is the end

result of those conversations and connections started back in the spring of 1999. Many of the voices will be familiar to readers: others will be new. Some are forthright and take the reader to the heart of intense experience. Others approach distinctly personal moments with caution and then veer away, as though the walls around the silences they've been keeping are impenetrable. What unites all these writings is the uncommon honesty, courage and acuity of emotion these women bring to their topics — and to us.

They tell us that once life slows down enough for reflection, women uncover truths several beats away from the expected and the promised: female friendships are often more central in our lives than those we have with men and children; what we are told can be as limited as what is never spoken; and vanity, dominance and blasts of lust that break through marriage and age barriers can be good things. From those who document the private contours of grief and shame, we learn about survival instincts and minute-by-minute coping strategies that rise up and guide people to new spaces of accommodation. Other women point to the individual colourings of common human happenings: spiritual stirrings, aging and the discovery of fundamental gender inequities continue to catch women unprepared because these experiences can never be the same for any two people.

What the stories and the essays indicate about the variety and uniqueness in women's lives is visually reinforced by the Vinaterta Lady sketch on the cover. This stylized woman speaks to the rich rhythms and shadings of our moods and approaches to life. As well, there is a mystery about this sketch that reminds us of the impossibility of capturing in any medium of expression all of what we are and what we experience. There are still blank spaces before us, and women are still asking, as one of our young contributors does, "What shall I tell my daughter?" When we scan through the topics that even this collection has skipped over — mother-daughter relationships, lesbian experiences, life without partners or children, to men-

Foreword

tion some, we realize that women's conversational weaving will forever be a work in progress.

In the meantime we're reminded not to forget the joys and potential growth from the uncharted. In the afterword Carol Shields writes a characteristically wise, gentle unfolding of the central theme as it relates to her personally. She tells of meeting the "surprises of self-discovery" with "gratitude" and then nudges the reader into embracing the unexpected: "Who isn't renewed by startling scenery or refreshed by undreamed-of freedoms? Surprise keeps us alive, liberates our senses."

Our wish is that this anthology will be liberating for readers. It offers a community of voices that are relevant to everyone, not just women, because the experiences recounted are ultimately those that give us our jagged human dimensions of joy and sorrow. We hope readers of all ages and backgrounds will be inspired by how the contributors answered the initial question we posed and will be drawn to examine their own crevices of surprise and silence.

Marjorie Anderson
July 2000

Starch, Salt,
Chocolate, Wine

Joan Barfoot

The first man I ever slept with was a cop named Clancy. He had a blue uniform with white and gold trim, a wonderfully soft, bulky, embraceable body and a hard, unyielding head. When I was lonely or scared, he was my comfort. Night after night, falling asleep, he was unfailingly in my arms.

We were brought together by my Aunt Geneva, a large woman who lived in Detroit and seemed to me to combine a certain bright, foreign glamour with an excellent, down-home alertness to youthful desires. I hadn't known I needed a Clancy, but my aunt evidently recognized him for what he could be.

Clancy and I were inseparable for three, maybe four years. But life moves on, changes, and finally our interests diverged, my attention lapsed, we drifted apart. For years we lived in different cities, and I didn't give him a thought. Still, we must have retained a kind of connection. If nothing else, a person doesn't quite forget she once had such a purely dependable, safe, solid presence to hold on to.

A decade or so ago, many years after our initial attachment, we reunited. Clancy's uniform is a bit grimy these days and his head — well, his hard unyielding head hasn't worn well; but then again, I'm not what I once was myself.

One difference is that I now realize I was mistaken to assume the universality of his virtues: I appear to have reckoned that other men, too, would tend to have hard, dependable heads and warm, soft, embraceable bodies and hearts.

Whoops.

Before this gets too desperately whimsical, let me just point out, at the risk of explaining the obvious, that Clancy is a doll, albeit an extraordinary one who entirely ruined any affections I might otherwise have developed for Barbies or bride dolls; and that our deepest attachment occurred before I was five.

These facts don't, however, diminish Clancy's effect on my first impressions about the essential comforts of men and, by silent implication and inference about, the essential irrelevance of women. Whoops again.

It wasn't all Clancy, of course. It was the whole 1950s world I could see. It looked, then, as if men were free, at least in the sense that they got out of the house, and women were not. Men got to explore, have adventures, tell stories and misbehave in interesting ways. Women got to vacuum, cook and make what sounded like small talk. There were, in both sexes, exceptions. I saw no pleasing alternative to becoming an exception. I also wanted to have as little as possible to do with the unexceptional. By which I meant, in general, women.

I can't imagine too many things more embarrassing to admit. On the other hand, I don't believe I'm uncommonly dim or unusual. I think I just inhaled a lot of information from the world that I didn't know how to reconcile properly with experience. Which may only (only!) demonstrate the power of impression over reality.

Because of course the truth is, my closest and most-knowing friends have always been female; it just took me ages to

notice that the girls and women whose company I enjoyed and relied on were not free, clever exceptions at all. They were the rule. Boys and men could be lovely and interesting in a number of ways, but as friends — a dab of graffiti here — women rule.



The social information girls absorbed in my youth, and for all I know still absorb, was sometimes subtle, sometimes blunt — but always pervasive. Mainly it distilled to the notion that women's prime interest should be in obtaining the support and protection, preferably along with the love, of men. Because other females were our competitors in this, we would be wise to be wary and sly with each other. In this version of life's guerrilla warfare, other girls and women were our untrustworthy, smiling, camouflaged enemies.

We learned, too, that keeping watch in this way would have to be a permanent condition, even once we'd snared one of those wily, elusive creatures, a man. Because men, like crows or squirrels, we were told, were apt to wander off if they spotted more tempting objects lying about glittering in the grass, and then where would we be?

Alone in the world, that's where. Helpless, solitary, in despair, humiliated by the failure to gain and sustain our chief purpose in life.

Redbook magazine, to which my mother subscribed, was a monthly, most reliable, cover-to-cover source of advice on getting a man and then keeping him from the clutches of other, predatory women. After a time, the thought had to occur: didn't the alternative, being predatory, sound seductive?

Only a tickle, a hint of subversion — but seduction surely sounded more entertaining and various than the *Redbook*-recommended round of preparing sturdy-yet-flaky meals; creating an unobtrusive, calming domestic atmosphere for the head of the household, who might be weary and potentially cranky at the end of the day; and submerging in recommended and,

finally, chillingly automatic ways personal interests and passions in favour of the well-being and comfort of home.

There was almost no mention in *Redbook* of friends. If there were like-minded women to talk to, they were mainly discussing their troubles with husbands, and one was advised not to do likewise.

Not to treasonously let guards down, not to treacherously confide. Psychic walls far sturdier than the aluminum siding of bulk-built, postwar houses.

And yet.



And yet, beyond and outside those powerful, discouraging messages were girls giggling, competing, feuding, running, playing, holding hands, making up dramas together, acting them out. Whispering secrets, betraying them, keeping them. Shifting alliances, as sinuous as amoebas, taking on new shapes together, trying on new sizes.

Where were the boys in all this?

Elsewhere on the playground. Doing whatever boys did.

Boys become men, who do not stay in their part of the playground; nor, for the most part, do we want them to. Between women and men there are generally chemistries, appeals, and, for most grown-ups of whatever age, also occasionally love. Sometimes respect. Even, if so rarely it could make a person weep, the sort of friendship that manages to enter something close to communion.

The sort of friendship, in fact, that as it turns out is not especially rare among women. The sort that endures, periodically dented and scratched but sturdy as an old kitchen table, through upheavals and changes, differences of opinion and distances, through circumstances that merge and diverge, with shared sorrows and laughter and thousands and millions of words.

It's unwise, of course, to romanticize. Real friendship is

as tough as real love. It requires flexibility, determination, care, attention and empathy. Food, water and fuel. It has its vicissitudes and can, just like love, slip away. Or slam away.

And it can, nearly inexplicably, almost chemically, endure.



Gail was my best friend in high school. This was so even though we had strangely separate lives, with distinctly different sets of other friends, different interests, different gifts and desires.

I always thought (still think) of Gail as a pink sort of person: slight, wispy-voiced, gentle-gestured, mysteriously able to lure large boys into doing whatever she wanted. Except it all went awry in the last year of high school, when she got pregnant and her family, her mother, began furiously, literally furiously, planning a wedding.

I wept my way through the ceremony. (One benefit of writing is finding a purpose for moments like that. Years later I took that memory and translated it for a wedding-weep scene in a novel about, mainly, enduring friendship.)

What that marriage meant to me was not a beginning for Gail but, at the age of eighteen, an ending. It seemed it meant much the same thing to her. We were in and out of touch. She had two excellent children and lived in apartments; I went to university, began a career, lived in houses with people she didn't know. Eventually she, too, started university. Her marriage ended. She raised her kids. I began writing novels. She began a dissertation.

In the same week the novel *Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch* was published, the one that included the tiny allusion to Gail's first wedding years before, she asked me to stand up with her at her second wedding. For this occasion, she was in charge and in love. There were tears again, but this time they were for pleasure at her happiness, and also for pride — well, love — for our long, in-and-out-of-touch, middle-aged, well-aged friendship.



Romantic love, sexual love, partnership love — whatever we call it — takes many forms, but for most of us it involves one other person at a time, and sometimes just one person, period.

Which gives it a grave and particular focus, a unique quality of attention, its own set of measures and weights. If we're fortunate, a partnership includes friendship, but it is not solely friendship. Our expectations, desires and responsibilities are not necessarily higher, but they are decidedly different.

"Why," an aggrieved man once asked (asked uncomprehendingly several times, actually), "do your friends get more leeway with you than I do?"

"Well, because," I replied, just as uncomprehending as he, and amazed such a question needed asking. How odd, I thought, not to know.

If partnership love is singular, friendship is expansive. It embraces, if not multitudes, at least a big canvas, muu-muu-sized, tent-sized, of humans. It's a marketplace of interests, temperaments, experiences; a potluck dinner in which we all bring something different, our choice, to the table. (Speaking of potluck — does the role of food even need mentioning? We eat and drink together a lot; the major female friendship food groups, we like to think, are starch, salt, chocolate and wine.)

Little girls and adolescents tend to have best friends — bosom friends, kindred spirits, as Anne of Green Gables phrased it — although the chosen person may not be the same one from one day to the next. Youthful friendships are volatile, explosive. They involve girls trying on new roles, different moods, rapidly altering demands, perceptions and plots — like playing with dolls.

By the time we're adults, friendships have begun to accumulate and there's often no particular need to label them, "best" or otherwise.

My sister is my dear friend. So is my niece. So is a union leader with a rigorous passion for justice. So are some

ex-colleagues from various newspaper jobs over the years, with whom far more profound bonds were formed than are accounted for by mere work or worldly events. So are a few writers who know things about this sort of existence, and about life, that are otherwise hard to explain. So, still, for that matter, is Gail.

I am perfectly capable of understanding that I may be the person a friend thinks of first for solace or laughter in one aspect of her life, but not necessarily in another. That not all information is shared, and when it is, it can take different forms with different people. That two friends together may speak of certain matters with one another, but not be happy discussing them in a group.

That some friends are embraceable and others are not. That some like each other, some should not be put in each other's company and some, from different settings and circumstances and times, have never met.



Our similarities and differences should make old age, should we achieve it with any rough simultaneity, pretty interesting. One truth women gradually become aware of is that, quite apart from divorce and life's various other gender wreckages, the odds are they'll outlive any male partners they have. This is one reason middle-aged and old women are free to travel in packs, as funny and formidable as the umbrella-wielding, sidewalk-hogging granny gangs of the Monty Python skit.

And it's one reason that the subject of what some of us call "the feminary" crops up now and then. This place would be, in our envisionings, an enormous old house with individual bedrooms and offices, many bathrooms, and common living room, dining room, kitchen, library, media room and garden.

In this feminary, we old women friends would entertain and amuse each other, confide in, console and look after each other. The halt would be leading the blind, or vice versa. We would hire whatever medical and housekeeping care would come in most handy, and beautiful men to weed the gardens, mow the