
Opening Extract from...

The Women's Room

Written by Marilyn French

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THE WOMEN'S ROOM

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To Isabel, to Janet – sisters, friends

CHAPTER ONE

1

Mira was hiding in the ladies' room. She called it that, even though someone had scratched out the word *ladies'* in the sign on the door, and written *women's* underneath. She called it that out of thirty-eight years of habit, and until she saw the cross-out on the door, had never thought about it. 'Ladies' room' was an euphemism, she supposed, and she disliked euphemisms on principle. However, she also detested what she called vulgarity, and had never in her life, even when handling it, uttered the word *shit*. But here she was at the age of thirty-eight huddled for safety in a toilet booth in the basement of Sever Hall, gazing at, no, studying that word and others of the same genre, scrawled on the gray enameled door and walls.

She was perched, fully clothed, on the edge of the open toilet seat, feeling stupid and helpless, and constantly looking at her watch. It would all have been redeemed, even translated into excitement, had there been some grim-faced Walter Matthau in a trench coat, his hand in a gun-swollen pocket, or some wild-eyed Anthony Perkins in a turtleneck, his itching strangler's hands clenching and unclenching – someone glamorous and terrifying at any rate – waiting for her outside in the hall, if she had been sitting in panic searching for another way out. But of course if that were the case, there would also be a cool and desperate Cary Grant or Burt Lancaster sliding along the walls of another hallway, waiting for Walter to show himself. And that by itself, she thought mournfully, feeling somehow terribly put upon, would have been enough. If she had one of them, anyone at all, waiting for her at home, she would not be hiding in a toilet booth in the basement of Sever Hall. She would have been upstairs in a corridor with the other students, leaning against a wall with her books at her feet, or strolling past the unseeing faces. She could have transcended, knowing she had one of them at home, and could therefore move alone in a crowd. She puzzled over that paradox, but

only briefly. The graffiti were too interesting.

'Down with capitalism and the fucking military-industrial complex. KILL ALL FASCIST PIGS!'

This had been answered. 'You simplify too much. New ways must be found to kill pigs: out of their death new pigs spring as armed men sprouted from the bulls' teeth planted by that mcp Jason. Pigs batten on pig blood. The way is slow and hard. We must cleanse our minds of all the old shit, we must work in silence, exile, and cunning like that mcp Joyce. We must have a revolution of sensibility.'

A third party entered the argument in purple ink:

'Stay in your cocoon. Who needs you? Those who are not with us are against us. Anyone who supports the status quo is part of the problem. THERE IS NO TIME. THE REVOLUTION IS HERE! KILL PIGS!'

Writer No. 2 was apparently fond of this booth and had returned, for the next entry was in her handwriting and in the same pen:

'Those who live by the sword die by the sword.'

Wild printing in the purple felt-tip followed this in great sprawling letters:

'FUCKING CHRISTIAN IDIOT! TAKE YOUR MAXIMS AND STUFF THEM! THERE IS ONLY POWER! POWER TO THE PEOPLE! POWER TO THE POOR! WE ARE DYING BY THE SWORD NOW!'

The last outburst ended that symposium, but there were others like it scrawled on the side walls. Almost all of them were political. There were pasted-on notices of SDS meetings, meetings of Bread and Roses, and Daughters of Bilitris. Mira withdrew her eyes from a crude drawing of female genitalia with 'Cunt is Beautiful' scratched beneath it. She presumed, at least, that it was a drawing of female genitalia, although it looked remarkably like a wide-petaled flower. She wasn't sure because she had never seen her own, that being part of the anatomy that did not present itself directly to the vision.

She looked at her watch again: she could leave now. She stood and from force of habit turned to flush the unused toilet. On the walls behind it someone had printed great jagged letters in what looked like nail polish. The red enamel had dripped and each stroke had a thick pearl at its base. It looked as if it had been written in blood. SOME DEATHS TAKE FOREVER, it read. She drew her breath in sharply and left the booth.

It was 1968.

2

She washed her hands vigorously, also from force of habit, and combed her hair, which was arranged in careful curls. She stood back, examining it in the glaring light of the lavatory. It looked a strange color. Since she had stopped dyeing it last year, it had grown out not just grayer, but with a mousy brown tinge, so she had been tinting it, and this time it had come out perhaps a bit too orange. She moved closer to the mirror and checked her eyebrows and the blue eye shadow she had applied only an hour before. Both were still okay.

She stepped back again and tried to see her whole self. She couldn't do it. Ever since she had changed her style of dress – that is, ever since she had been at Harvard – her self refused to coalesce in the mirror. She could see bits and pieces – hair, eyes, legs – but the pieces wouldn't come together. The hair and eyes went together, but the mouth was wrong; it had changed during the past years. The legs were all right, but didn't go with the bulky shoes and the pleated skirt. They looked too thin under the thicker body – yet she was the same weight now she'd been for the past ten years. She began to feel something rising in her chest, and hastily looked away from the mirror. This was no time to get upset. Then she turned back jerkily, looking at nothing, pulled out her lipstick and applied a line of it to her lower lip, her eyes careful to look at nothing but the mouth. In spite of herself, however, her eyes caught her whole face, and in a moment her head was full of tears. She leaned her hot forehead against the cool tile wall, then remembered that this was a public place full of other people's germs, and straightened up hurriedly and left the room.

She climbed up the three flights of ancient, creaky stairs, reflecting that the ladies' room was in an inconvenient location because it had been added long after the building was erected. The school had been planned for men, and there were places, she had been told, where women were simply not permitted to go. It was odd. Why? she wondered. Women were so unimportant anyway, why would anyone bother to keep them out? She arrived in the corridor a little late. No one was left in the hallway, lingering, loitering outside the classroom doors. The blank eyes, the empty faces, the young bodies that ten minutes earlier had paced its length, were gone. It was these that, passing her

without seeing her, seeing her without looking at her, had driven her into hiding. For they had made her feel invisible. And when all you have is a visible surface, invisibility is death. Some deaths take forever, she found herself repeating as she walked into the classroom.

3

Perhaps you find Mira a little ridiculous. I do myself. But I also have some sympathy for her, more than you, probably. You think she was vain and shallow. I suppose those are words that could have been applied to her, but they are not the first ones that spring to my mind. I think she was ridiculous for hiding in the toilet, but I like her better for that than for the meanness of her mouth, which she herself perceived, and tried to cover up with lipstick. Her meanness was of the tut-tut variety; she slammed genteel doors in her head, closing out charity. But I also feel a little sorry for her, at least I did then. Not anymore.

Because in a way it doesn't matter whether you open doors or close them, you still end up in a box. I have failed to ascertain an objective difference between one way of living and another. The only difference I can see is between varying levels of happiness, and I cringe when I say that. If old Schopenhauer is right, happiness is not a human possibility, since it means the absence of pain, which, as an uncle of mine used to say, only occurs when you're dead or dead drunk. There's Mira with all her closed doors, and here's me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable.

I spend a lot of time alone here, walking along the beach in any weather, and I think over and over about Mira and the others, Val, Isolde, Kyla, Clarissa, Grete, back at Harvard in 1968. That year itself was an open door, but a magical one; once you went through it, you could never return. You stand just beyond it, gazing back at what you have left, and it looks like a country in a fairytale book, all little patches and squares of color, fields and farms and castles with turrets and pennons and crenellated parapets. The houses are all cozy, thatched-roof cottages, slowly burnishing in the afternoon sun, and the people who live in castle or cottage have the same simple outlines and offer themselves for immediate recognition. A good prince or princess or fairy has blond hair and blue eyes, and bad queens and stepmothers have black hair. I think there was one girl who had black hair and was still good, but she's the exception that proves the rule. Good fairies

wear blue gauzy tutus and carry golden wands; bad ones wear black and are humpbacked and have big chins and long noses. There are no bad kings in fairyland, although there are a few giants of unsavory reputation. There are lots of wicked stepmothers and old witches and crones, though. When I was a child, fairyland as it appeared in the books was the place I wanted to live, and I judged my surroundings according to how well they matched it: beauty was fairyland, not truth. I used to try to concentrate hard enough to make fairyland come true in my head. If I had been able to do it, I would gladly have deserted the real world to go there, willingly abandoning my parents. Perhaps you call that incipient schizophrenia, but it seems to me that that's what I did in the end, lived in fairyland where there are only five basic colors, clear lines, and no beer cans cluttering up the grass.

One reason I like the Maine coast so much is that it allows so little room for such fantasies. The wind is hard and cold and raw; my face is a little chapped all winter. The sea pounds in and no matter how many times I see it it excites me the same way the skyline of New York does, no matter how many times I see that. The words are trite – grand, powerful, overwhelming – oh, it doesn't matter what one calls it. The thing is as close as I can come to a notion of God. The sheer naked power of those great waves constantly rolling up with such an ominous rumble, hitting against the rocks and sending up skyfuls of white froth. It is so powerful and so beautiful and so terrifying at the same time that for me it is a symbol of what life is all about. And there's the sand and the rocks and all the life they foster – snails, mussels. I often smile to myself, calling the rocks snail tenements, shellfish ghettos. They are, you know: the snails are more crowded together there than the people in Hong Kong. The sand wasn't designed for easy walking, and the gray Maine sky seems to open out into the void itself. This sky has no notion of – it can never have been in – brilliant lands where olives grow and tomatoes turn blood red and oranges shine among the green leaves of trees in front yards behind white stucco walls dusty under the sun, and the sky is nearly as blue as the sea. Here, everything is gray: sea, sky, rocks. This sky looks only to the north, to icy poles; you can almost see the color fading and fading as the sky arches northward, until there is no color at all. The white world of the Snow Queen.

Well, I said I was going to try to avoid fairy-tale fantasies, but I seem to be incorrigible. So I'm feeling alone and a little superior standing in this doorway looking back at fairy-tale land and almost enjoying my pain. Maybe I should turn around. But I can't, I can't

see ahead yet, only backward. Anyway all of this is ridiculous. Because I was on my way to saying that Mira had lived all her life in fairy-tale land and when she went through the doorway, her head was still full of fairyland images, she had no notion of reality. But obviously she did; fairyland was her reality. So if you want to stand in judgment on her you have to determine whether her reality was the same as other people's, i.e., was she crazy? In her economy, the wicked queen was known by her face and body shape, and the good fairy by hers. The good fairy showed up whenever she was needed, never took a dime for all her wand-waving, and then conveniently disappeared. I leave it to you to decide on Mira's sanity.

4

I no longer try to label things. Here, where everything seems so arid and austere, the place teems with life: in the sea, in the sky, on the rocks. I come here to get away from a greater emptiness. Inland a couple of miles stands the third-rate community college where I teach courses like 'Fairy Tale and Folklore' (can't get away from it!) and 'Grammar 12,' mostly to female students who aim to do well enough here to get into the state college and acquire teacher certification and the joys of the ten-month year. Wait, I think, just wait and see how much joy it holds.

Look at those snail clusters on that rock. There are thousands of snails, and mussels too, among the heaped boulders, clustering together like inhabitants of an ancient city. They are gorgeous, they shimmer with colors they've had for thousands of years: red and gold and blue and white and orange. They all live together. I find that extraordinary. Each one occupies its own tiny space, no one seems to push around for more room. Do you suppose there are snails with too little room who just die? It is clear that their life must be mainly interior. I like to come here and stare at them. I never touch them. But as I look, I keep thinking that they don't have to create their order, they don't have to create their lives, those things are just programmed into them. All they have to do is live. Is that an illusion, do you suppose?

I feel terribly alone. I have enough room, but it's empty. Or maybe I don't, maybe room means more than space. Clarissa once said that isolation was insanity. She never says anything carelessly, her words come out of her mouth like fruit that is perfectly ripened. Unripe

fruit she doesn't deal in: that's why she is silent so often. So I guess isolation is insanity. But what can I do? At the one or two parties a year I'm invited to, I have to listen to academic gossip, snarling retorts (never made in fact) to the president, nasty cracks about the mediocrity of the dean. In a place like Harvard, academic gossip is pretentious and hollow, full of name dropping and craven awe, or else it oozes complacency, the invulnerability of the elect. In a place like this, where everyone feels a loser, the gossip is mean-minded and full of that kind of hate and contempt that is really disgust at one's own failure in life. There aren't many single people here except for a few very young male instructors. There are damned few women, none single, except for one sixty-year-old widow who does needlepoint at faculty meetings. I mean, not everything is in your head, is it? Do I have to accept total responsibility for my fate? I don't think it's my fault that I'm lonely. People say – well, Iso wrote (she would!) – that I should drive down to Boston on weekends and go to the singles bars. You know, she could do it and she'd find someone interesting. But not me. I know it. I'd meet some middle-aged swinger with a deep tan and sideburns (not quite a beard) and a mod suit (pink jacket, maroon pants) and a belly kept in by three hours a week at the gym or the tennis club, and I'd die of his emptiness even more than I'm dying of my own.

So I walk the beach. I've been coming out here all year, since last September, with a kerchief tied around my head, blue jeans splashed with the paint I used to try to make my apartment a bit more livable, an embroidered poncho Kyla brought me from Mexico, and in the winter months, a heavy, lined nylon jacket over that. I know I am already pointed to, whispered about as a madwoman. It is so easy for a woman to seem mad if she once deserts The Image, as Mira did when she ridiculously went out and bought short pleated skirts because she was back in college. But on the other hand, maybe they are right, maybe I am mad. There aren't too many people here – a few surfcasters, some women with children, people like me who just come down to walk. But they all look at me strangely.

So they look at me strangely: I have other problems. Because the school year ended last week and in the flurry of papers and exams I didn't have to think about it, and then suddenly it was there – two and a half whole months with nothing to do. The joys of the ten-month year. To me it looked like the Sahara Desert, stretching on and on under the crazy sun, and empty, empty. Well, I thought, I'll plan my courses for next year; I'll read some more fairy tales (Fairy Tales and

Folklore), try to understand Chomsky better (Grammar 12), try to find a better writing handbook (Composition 1–2).

Oh God.

It comes to me that this is the first time in years, maybe in my life, that I am completely alone with nothing to do. Maybe that is why everything comes crowding in on me now. These things that jar their way into my mind make me think that my loneliness may not be entirely the fault of the place, that somehow or other – although I can't understand it – I have chosen it.

I have bad dreams, dreams full of blood. I am pursued, night after night, and night after night I turn and strike out at my pursuer, I smash, I stab. That sounds like anger. It sounds like hate. But hate is an emotion I have never permitted myself. Where could it come from?

As I walk along the beach, my memory keeps going back to Mira those first weeks in Cambridge, tottering around on her high heels (she always walked shakily in high heels, but she always wore them) in a three-piece wool knit suit, with her hair set and sprayed, looking almost in panic at the faces that passed her, desperate for a sharp glance, an appraising smile that would assure her she existed. When I think of her, my belly twists a little with contempt. But how do I dare to feel that for her, for that woman so much like me, so much like my mother?

Do you? You know her: she's that blonded made-up matron, a little tipsy with her second manhattan, playing bridge at the country club. In the Moslem countries, they make their women wear jubbah and yashmak. This makes them invisible, white wraiths drifting through streets buying a bit of fish or some vegetables, turning into dark narrow alleys and entering doors that slam shut loudly, reverberating among the ancient stones. People don't see them, they are less differentiated than the dogs that run among the fruit carts. Only the forms are different here. You don't really see the woman standing at the glove or stocking counter, poking among cereal boxes, loading six steaks into her shopping cart. You see her clothes, her sprayed helmet of hair, and you stop taking her seriously. Her appearance proclaims her respectability, which is to say she's just like all other women who aren't whores. But maybe she is, you know. Distinction by dress isn't what it used to be. Women are capable of anything. It doesn't really matter. Wife or whore, women are the most scorned class in America. You may hate niggers and PRs and geeks, but you're a little frightened of them. Women don't get even the respect of fear.

What's to fear, after all, in a silly woman always running for her mirror to see who she is? Mira lived by her mirror as much as the Queen in *Snow White.* A lot of us did: we absorbed and believed the things people said about us. I always took the psychological quizzes in the magazines: are you a good wife? a good mother? Are you keeping the romance in your marriage? I believed Philip Wylie when he said mothers were a generation of vipers, and I swore never, never to act that way. I believed Sigmund's 'anatomy is destiny' and tried to develop a sympathetic, responsive nature. I remember Martha saying that she hadn't had a real mother; her mother did nothing in the way women were supposed to – she collected old newspapers and pieces of string and never dusted and took Martha to a cheap cafeteria to eat every night. So when Martha got married and tried to make friends with other couples, she didn't know how. She didn't know you were supposed to serve drinks and food. She just sat there with George, talking to them. People always left early, they never came back, they never invited her. 'So I went out and bought *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping.* I did it for years religiously. I read them like the Bible, trying to find out how to be a woman.'

I hear Martha's voice often as I walk along the beach. And others' too – Lily, Val, Kyla. I sometimes think I've swallowed every woman I ever knew. My head is full of voices. They blend with the wind and the sea as I walk the beach, as if they were disembodied forces of nature, a tornado whirling around me. I feel as if I were a medium and a whole host of departed spirits has descended on me clamoring to be let out.

So this morning (shades of the past!) I decided on a project to fill this vacant stretching summer. I will write it all down, go back as far as I have to, and try to make some sense out of it. But I'm not a writer. I teach grammar (and I hate it) and composition, but as anyone who's ever taken a comp course knows, you don't have to know anything about writing to teach it. In fact, the less you know the better, because then you can go by rules, whereas if you really know how to write, rules about leading sentences and paragraphs and so forth don't exist. Writing is hard for me. The best I can do is put down bits and pieces, fragments of time, fragments of lives.

I am going to try to let the voices out. Maybe they will help me understand how they ended as they did, how I ended here feeling engulfed and isolated at the same time. Somehow it all starts with

Mira. How did she manage to get herself, at the age of thirty-eight, to hide in that toilet?

5

Mira was an independent baby, fond of removing her clothes and taking a stroll on a summer's day to the local candy store. The second time she was returned home by a policeman she had directed. Mrs Ward began to tie her up. She did not mean to be unkind: Mira had been crossing a busy boulevard. She used a long rope, so Mira could still move around, and tied it to the handle of the front door. Mira continued in her disconcerting habit of removing all her clothes, however. Mrs Ward did not believe in corporal punishment and used stern reproach and withdrawal of affection instead. It worked. Mira had trouble removing all her clothes on her wedding night. In time, Mira's fury and tears at being tied up abated, and she learned to operate within a small space, digging into things since she was not permitted to range outward. The leash was then removed, and Mira showed herself to be a docile and even timid child, only somewhat given to sullenness.

She was a bright child: she finished all the textbooks on the first day of school and, bored, spent the rest of the term enlivening her classmates. The solution decided upon was to move her ahead, into a class 'more on her level,' as the teacher put it. She was moved ahead several times, but never found such a class. What she did find was classmates years older, inches taller, pounds heavier, and with a world of sophistication greater than hers. She could not talk to them, and retreated into novels she kept hidden in her desk. She even read walking to and from school.

Mrs Ward, convinced that Mira was headed for great things – which meant a good marriage, to that good woman – scraped together money to send her for lessons. She had two years of elocution, two years of dancing school, two years of piano, and two years of water-color painting. (Mrs Ward had loved the novels of Jane Austen in her youth.) At home, Mrs Ward taught her not to cross her legs at the knee, not to climb trees with boys, not to play tag in the alley, not to speak in a raised voice, not to wear more than three pieces of jewelry at a time, and never to mix gold and silver. When these lessons had been learned, she considered Mira 'finished.'

But Mira had a private life. Being so much younger than her

classmates, she had no friends, but she did not seem to care. She spent all her time reading, drawing, daydreaming. She especially loved fairy tales and myths. Then she was sent for two years of religious instruction, and her concerns changed.

At twelve, her preoccupation was determining the precise relation of God, heaven, hell, and earth. She would lie in bed at night looking out at the moon and clouds. Her bed stood beside a window, and she could lie comfortably on her pillow and gaze up and out. She tried to imagine all the people who had died, standing around up there in the sky. She tried to make them out; surely they must be peering down, longing for a friendly face? But she never caught a glimpse of one, and after reading a little history and considering how many millions of people had in fact inhabited the earth, she began to worry about the population problems of the afterworld. She imagined searching for her grandmother, dead three years now, and wandering forever through mobs of people and never finding her. Then she realized that all those people would be very heavy, that it was impossible that they should all be up there without the heavens falling down. Perhaps then there were only a few up there and all the rest were in hell.

But Mira's social studies texts implied that the poor – whom Mira already knew to be the wicked – were not really wicked at heart but only environmentally deprived. God, Mira felt sure, if He was worth anything at all, would be able to see through such injustices to the good heart, and would not consign to hell all the juvenile delinquents who appeared in the pages of the *New York Daily News* which her father brought back from the city each night. This was a knotty problem, and gave her several weeks of heavy brainwork.

To solve it, she found it necessary to look into herself, not just to feel her feelings, but to examine them. She believed she really wanted to love and be loved, really wanted to be good and have the approval of her parents and her teachers. But somehow she could never do it. She was always making nasty cracks to her mother, resenting her father's fussiness; she resented that they treated her like a child. They lied to her and she knew it. She asked her mother about an ad in magazines, and her mother said she did not know what sanitary napkins were. She asked her mother what *fuck* meant; she had heard it at the schoolyard. Her mother said she did not know, but later Mira heard her whisper to Mrs Marsh, 'How can you tell a child a thing like that?' And there were other things, things she could not put her finger on, that told her her parents' idea of being good and her own were not the same. She

could not have said why, but her parents' idea of what she should do felt like someone strangling her, stifling her.

She remembered one night when she had been very fresh to her mother about something, had been fresh because she was right and her mother refused to admit it. Her mother scolded her severely, and she went into the dark porch of the house and sat on the floor sulking, feeling very wronged. She refused to go in to dinner. Her mother came out to the porch and said, 'Come on, now, Mira, don't be silly.' Her mother had never done a thing like that before. She even reached out her hand to Mira, to pull her up. But Mira sat sulking and wouldn't take the hand. Her mother went back to the dining room. Mira was near to tears. 'Why do I have to be so sullen, so stubborn?' she cried to herself, wishing she had taken the hand, wishing her mother would come back. She didn't. Mira sat on and a phrase came into her head: 'They ask too much. It costs too much.' What the cost was, she was not sure; she labeled it 'myself.' She adored her mother, and she knew that by being sullen and fresh she lost her mother's love; sometimes Mrs Ward would not speak to her for days. But she went on being bad. She was spoiled, selfish, and fresh. Her mother told her all the time.

She was bad, but she didn't want to be bad. Surely God must know that. She would be good if it didn't cost so much. And in her badness, she was not really bad. She only wanted to do what she wanted to do: was that so terrible? Surely God would understand. He did understand because they said He saw the heart. And if He understood her, then He understood everyone. And no one really wanted to be bad, everyone wanted to be loved and approved. So there was no one in hell. But if there was no one there, why have it? There was no hell.

When Mira was fourteen, she had finished all the interesting books they would allow her to take from the library – they did not permit her into the adult section. So she leafed through the unappetizing family bookcase. The family itself had no notion what was in it: their books had collected themselves, being leavings from the attics of dead relatives. Mira found Paine's *Common Sense* and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, as well as Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, a book she read with complete incomprehension.

She became convinced of the nonexistence not only of hell but also of heaven. However, without heaven a new problem arose. For if there were neither hell nor heaven, there was no final reward or punishment, and this world was all there was. But this world – even by fourteen one knows this – is a terrible place. Mira did not need to

read the newspapers, to see pictures of exploding ships and burning cities, to read rumors of places called concentration camps, to realize how terrible it was. She needed only to look around her. There was brutality and cruelty everywhere: in the classroom, in the schoolyard in the block she lived on. One day, as she walked to the grocery store on an errand, she heard a boy screaming, and the thwack of a strap in the end house. Having been brought up with gentleness, Mira was horrified and wondered why a parent would do such a thing to a child. Had her parents done that to her, she would have been worse than she was, she knew that. She would have tried to defy them in any way she could. She would have hated them. But the terribleness of life existed even in her own home. It was a tight, silent place; there was little conversation at the dinner table. There were always tensions between her mother and father that she did not understand, and often tensions between her mother and her, as well. She felt as if she were in the middle of a war in which the weapons were like light beams, darting across the room, wounding everybody, but unable to be grasped. Mira wondered if the insides of everybody were as tumultuous and explosive as hers. She looked at her mother and saw bitter misery and resentment in her face; she saw sadness and disappointment in her father's. She herself felt wild clamorous emotions toward them both – love, hate, resentment, fury, and a crying ache for physical affection – but she never moved, never threw herself at either of them in either love or hate. The rules of the household forbade such behavior. She wondered if anyone at all was happy. She had more reason to be than most: she was treated well, fed well, clothed well, safe. But she was a screaming battlefield. So what were other people? If this were the only world there was, there could not be a God. No benevolent mind could have created this earth. Finally, she disposed of the problem by dispensing with the deity.

Next, she set about planning a world where unjust and cruel things could not happen. It was based on gentleness toward and freedom for children, and moved upward using intelligence as the distinguishing characteristic. The rulers of the world – for she could not conceive of a world without rulers – were its most intelligent and wisest members. Everyone had enough to eat, and no one had too much, like gross Mr Mittlow. Although she was as yet innocent of Plato, she came up with a structure remarkably similar to his. But in a few months, she disposed of that also. It was simply that once she had the whole thing perfectly organized, it bored her. It was the same as when she used

to imagine stories about herself, stories in which she was adopted, and one day a wonderful handsome man, one with a real face, not like Daddy Warbucks', but possessed of equal resources, would drive up to the Wards' front door in his long black car, and claim her. He would take her to wonderful foreign places and would love her forever. Or stories about how there really were fairies, only they didn't appear anymore because people had stopped believing in them, but she still did, so one would come to her and offer her three wishes, and she had to think a long time about those, and kept changing her mind, but finally she decided the best wishes would be that her parents could be happy and healthy and rich and if they were then they would love her and they would all live happily ever after. The trouble was the endings of these stories were always boring, and you could never go beyond the end. She tried to imagine what life would be like once everything was perfect, but she could never do it.

Later, much later, she would remember these years, and realize with astonishment that she had, by fifteen, decided on most of the assumptions she would carry for the rest of her life: that people were essentially not evil, that perfection was death, that life was better than order, and a little chaos good for the soul. Most important, this life was all. Unfortunately, she forgot these things, and had to remember them the hard way.

6

Because at the same time that she was making all these decisions, she was being undermined. The problem was sex. Couldn't you have guessed that? That Garden of Eden story hasn't hung on all these years for nothing. Even though Genesis suggests and Milton insists that it wasn't sex itself that caused the Fall, but was only the first place the reverberations were felt, we go on equating sex with fall because that's the way it happens to us. The main problem with sex, I'm convinced (and now I'm beginning to sound like Val), is that it comes on us when we are already formed. Maybe if we were fondled and petted all our lives, it wouldn't be such a shock, but we aren't, at least I wasn't and Mira wasn't, and so the strong desire for bodily contact comes upon us as a violation.

At the end of her fourteenth year, Mira began to menstruate and was finally let in on the secret of sanitary napkins. Soon afterward,

she began to experience strange fluidities in her body, and her mind, she was convinced, had begun to rot. She could feel the increasing corruption, but couldn't seem to do anything to counter it. The first sign was that when she lay in bed at night, trying to move ahead from her disposal of both God and Perfect Order to something more usable, she could not concentrate. Her mind wandered vaguely. She stared at the moon and thought about songs, not God. She smelled the air of the summer night and a tremendous sensation of pleasure encompassed her whole body. She was restless, could not sleep or think, and would get up and kneel on her bed, lean on the windowsill, peer out at the gently waving branches, and smell the sweet night air. She had sudden overwhelming desires to put her hand under her pajamas and rub the skin of her shoulder, her sides, the insides of her thighs. And when she did that, strange spurts would happen inside her. She would lie back and try to think, but only images rampaged through her head. These images were always, horrifyingly, of the same things. She had a code word for her decaying condition: she called it *boys*.

Now, in the past fifteen years she had lived on earth, Mira had been quite alone, had lived mostly in her head. She had despised the children she saw jumping rope or playing tag in the streets: she found their occupations stupid. She despised the empty boredom of adults' lives, gathered mainly from occasions when the Wards entertained friends, and found their conversation stupid. She respected only two people: her English teacher, Mrs Sherman, and Friedrich Nietzsche. But of all the stupid creatures that lumbered around on earth, the most stupid were boys. They were loud, truculent, sloppy, dirty, silly, boisterous, and dumb at school. Everyone knew that. Whereas she was smart and clean and neat and precise and able and got A's even without studying. All the girls had been smarter than the boys until the last few years when the girls had started to get silly, too. One by one, they had started to lick their lips all the time to make them shiny, only to end up with chappedness around their mouth. They would pinch their cheeks to make them pink. And smoke in the girls' room, even though you got expelled from school for that. Girls who had been smart in sixth grade acted stupid in class in seventh and eighth. They walked in groups and talked in whispers and giggled. She couldn't even

find anyone to walk to school with. But now she discovered that if she didn't want to act like them, she really wanted to know what it was they were whispering and giggling about. That her easy disdain for them should turn into a vulnerable curiosity outraged her.

And the boys! She would eye them furtively, having finished writing out her Latin declensions ten minutes before the rest of the class. She saw skinny necks, wetly plastered hair, pimply faces. They threw spitballs and made paper airplanes and never knew the answer when the teacher called on them. They giggled over nothing. And the girls would watch them, smiling and tittering, as if they were doing something clever. It was inexplicable, but no more so than the fact that if one of them looked right at her, she felt her heart start to pound and her face get red.

But there was another problem, even deeper because she understood it even less than she understood what was happening to her. It had to do with the transformation of boys to men. Because everybody despised boys, everyone looked down on them, the teachers, her mother, even her father. 'Boys!' they would exclaim in disgust. But everyone admired men. When the principal came into the classroom, the teachers (all women) got all fluttery and nervous and smiled a lot. It was like when the priest came into the room when she was taking religious instruction: the nuns bowed all the way down to the floor, as if he were a king, and they made the children stand up and say 'Good afternoon, Father,' as if he were really their father. And when Mr Ward came home from work, even though he was the gentlest man in the world, all Mrs Ward's friends would scurry home, their cups of coffee still half full.

Boys were ridiculous, troublesome, always fighting and showing off and making noise, but men strode purposefully to the center of every stage and took up the whole surface of every scene. Why was that? She began to realize that something was awry in the world. Her mother was dominant at home; in school, the authorities had all been women except for the principal. But it was not so in the outside world. The stories in the newspaper were always about men, except once in a while when a woman got murdered, and there was Eleanor Roosevelt, but everyone made fun of her. Only the page that gave recipes and dress patterns was for women. When she listened to the radio, the programs were

all about men, or else about boys like Jack Armstrong, and she hated all of those and would not eat Wheaties when her mother bought them. Jack, Doc, and Reggie did the exciting things, and the women were always faithful secretaries in love with their bosses, or they were beautiful heiresses needing to be rescued. It was all like Perseus and Andromeda, or Cinderella and the Prince. Of course it was true that there were also in the newspapers pictures of ladies in bathing suits being handed bunches of roses, and down at the Sunoco station there was a full-size cardboard poster of a lady in a bathing suit holding up a thing called a spark plug. The connection between these two puzzled her, and she pondered it long and often. Worst of all, she realized that her childhood notions, when she had read about and adored Bach and Mozart and Beethoven and Shakespeare and Thomas E. Dewey and thought that she would be like them, were somehow inappropriate.

She did not know how to deal with any of this, and her fear and her resentment brought out all her stubborn pride. *She* would never be anybody's secretary, she would have her own adventures. She would never let anybody rescue her. She would never read the recipes and dress patterns, but only the news and the funnies. And no matter what went on in her head about boys, she would never let them know it. She would never lick her lips and pinch her cheeks and giggle and whisper like the other girls. She would never let a boy know she even looked at him. She would not let drop her suspicion that men were only grown-up boys who had learned some manners and were not to be trusted, being also members of the inferior gender. She would never marry, having seen enough in her parents' friends to warn her off that state. And she would never, never look like those women she had seen walking around with their bodies all popping out and deformed. Never.