

GRACE PALEY: First I wrote this poem-- walking up the slate path of the college park under the nearly full moon the brown oak leaves are red as maples,

And I have been looking at the young people. They speak and embrace one another,

Because of them I thought I would descend into remembering love, so I let myself down, hand over hand, until my feet touched the Earth of the gardens of Vesey Street,

I told my husband, I've just written a poem about love. What a good idea, he said.

Then he told me about Sally Johnson on Lake Winnepesaukee who was 12 and 1/2 when he was 14. Then he told me about Rosemarie Johanson on Lake Sunapee. Then he told me about Jane Marston in Concord High.

Then he told me about Mary Smythe of Radcliffe when he was a poet at Harvard. Then he told me about two famous poets, one fair and one dark, both now dead, when he was a secret poet working at an acceptable trade in an office without windows. When at last he came to my time-- that is, the last 15 years or so-- He told me about Dotty Wasserman.

Hold on, I said. What do you mean, Dotty Wasserman? She's a person in a book. I don't believe she even exists.

OK, he said. And why Vesey Street? What's that?

Well, it's nothing special. I used to be in love with a guy who was a shrub buyer. Vesey Street was the downtown street garden center of the city when the city still had wonderful centers of commerce. I used to walk the kids when they were little carriage babies half asleep, maybe take the ferry to Hoboken. Years later, I'd bike down there Sundays, ride round and round. I even saw him about three times.

No kidding, said my husband. How come I don't know the guy?

Ugh, the stupidity of the beloved. It's you, I said. Anyway, what's this baloney about you and Dotty Wasserman?

Nothing much. She was this crazy kid who hung around the bars. But she didn't drink. Really it was for the men, you know. Neither did I drink too much, I mean, he said. I was just hoping to get laid once in a while or maybe meet someone and fall madly in love.

He is that romantic. Sometimes I wonder if loving me in this homey life in middle age with two sets of bedroom slippers, one a skin sandal for summer and the other pair lined with cozy sheepskin-- it must be a disappointing experience for him.

He made a polite bridge over my conjectures. She was also this funny mother in the park, years later, when we were all doing that municipal politics stuff and I was married to Josephine, he said. Dotty and I were both delegates to that famous Kansas City National Meeting of Town Meetings, NMTM. Remember? Some woman.

No, I said, that's not true. She was made up, just plain invented in the late '50s.

Oh, he said, then it was after that. I must have met her afterwards.

He is stubborn, so I dropped the subject and went to get the groceries. Our shrinking family requires more coffee, more eggs, more cheese, less butter, less meat, less orange juice, more grapefruit.

Walking along the street, encountering no neighbor, I just hummed the little up and down tune and continued jostling time with the help of my nice reconnoitring brain. Here I was, experiencing the old Earth of Vesey Street, breathing in and out with more attention to the process than is usual in the late morning-- all because of love, probably. How interesting the way it glides to solid invented figures from true remembered wraiths. By God. I thought. The lover is real. The heart of the lover continues-- it has been propagandized from birth.

I passed our local bookstore, which was doing well, with "The Joy of All Sex" underpinning its prosperity. The owner gave me, a dependable customer of poorly advertised books, an affectionate smile. He was a great success. He didn't know that three years later his rent would be tripled. He would become a sad failure, and the landlord, feeling himself brilliant, an outwitting entrepreneur, he would be the famous success.

From half a block away I could see the kale in the grocer's bin, crumbles of ice shining the dark leaves. In interior counterview I imagined my husband's North country fields, the late autumn frost and the curly green. I began to mumble a new poem.

In the grocer's bin, the green kale shines,

In the North country it stands sweet with frost,

Dark and curly in a garden of tan hay,

And light white snow,

Light white. I said that a couple of questioning times. Suddenly my outside eyes saw a fine-looking woman named Margaret, who hasn't spoken to me in two years. We'd had many years of political agreement before some matters relating to the Soviet Union separated us. In the angry months, during which we were both right in many ways, she took away with her to her political position and daily friendship my own best friend, Louise-- my lifelong park, PTA, and anti-war-movement sister, Louise.

In a hazy litter of love and leafy green vegetables, I saw Margaret's good face, and before I remembered our serious difference, I smiled. At the same moment, she knew me and smiled. So foolish is the true love when responded to that I took her hand as we passed, bent to it, pressed it to my cheek, and touched it with my lips.

I described all this to my husband at suppertime. He was happy to explain everything. The smile was for Margaret, he said, but you know you miss Louise a lot and the kiss was for Louise. We both said, ah. Then we talked over the way the salt treaty looked more like a floor than a ceiling. We read a poem written by one of his daughters, looked at a TV show telling the destruction of the European textile industry, and then made love.

In the morning he said, You're some lover, you know. He said, You really are-- you remind me a lot of Dotty Wasserman.

[LAUGHTER]

SPEAKER 2: Paley's achievements are the envy of many a writer. She has received grants to work from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She's taught at Columbia, New York, and Syracuse universities and Sarah Lawrence College. Her two collections of short stories have each been reprinted.

Paley's manner belies her accomplishments. In-person, she is the consummate leveler, warm, open, funny, the Jewish mother, who would just as soon offer me fruit as reflect on herself. She found it difficult to articulate the ways in which she's changed over the years.

GRACE PALEY: I got older. That's the only change I noticed. I mean, I hardly, and even that a surprise.

SPEAKER 2: What do you mean? With age, what has come?

GRACE PALEY: Well, I bought a rug. I never bought a rug when I was young. I bought a rug the other day, and I was only wishing that my father and mother were alive so they could see how I had really entered the real world.

SPEAKER 2: Do you really mean that?

GRACE PALEY: Yeah.

SPEAKER 2: Do you really feel that there's this need to prove at this point?

GRACE PALEY: No, no, I'm joking.

SPEAKER 2: Not specifically with mother and father.

GRACE PALEY: But I do mean that the acquiring of certain things like a rug or something like that is really-- it makes me feel funny because I've really lived quite differently. But anyway, that's really of no importance. And it was just a joke I squeezed in.

SPEAKER 2: I did catch the joke. I was just fishing around to see if there was a deeper meaning behind it.

GRACE PALEY: Oh, no. The changes I feel in myself are changes of a certain-- maybe it's confidence, but it also is something else. It's that I feel all people as they get older become more themselves, become clearer in some way and become less afraid to be themselves. So I think that I do have less difficulty being myself.

SPEAKER 2: Is that maybe because society writes off old age as precisely that, a time when people probably become themselves but are not expected to be so mainstream?

GRACE PALEY: No, I don't really think so. I think you become easier with yourself. And people who are really nasty get nastier. So, I mean, I don't mean it always in a very good sense.

But I feel more-- you asked for changes. And I just say that as time goes on, I feel more at ease with myself and in the world. But I also feel more desperate about the world and the world's condition.

SPEAKER 2: While more comfortable with who she is, Paley has become less sanguine about the state of the world over the years. Her primary concern, man's capacity for survival, has moved from the day to day concerns of lovers and family to larger questions. And that's evident in her short story, *Living*.

GRACE PALEY: Two weeks before Christmas, Ellen called me and said, Faith, I'm dying. That week I was dying, too. After we talked, I felt worse.

I left the kids alone and ran down to the corner for a quick sip among living creatures. But Julie's and all the other bars were full of men and women gulping a hot whiskey before hustling off to make love. People require strengthening before the acts of life.

I drank a little California Mountain Red at home and thought, why not? Wherever you turn, someone is shouting, give me liberty or I give you death. Perfectly sensible thing owning church-fearing neighbors flop their hands over their ears at the sound of the siren to keep fallout from taking hold of their internal organs. You have to be cockeyed to love and blind in order to look out the window at your own ice cold street.

I really was dying. I was bleeding. The doctor said, you can't bleed forever. Either you run out of blood or you stop. No one bleeds forever. It seemed I was going to bleed forever.

When Ellen called to say she was dying, I said this clear sentence. Please, I'm dying too, Ellen. Then she said, oh, oh, Faithy, I didn't know. She said, Faith, what will we do about the kids? Who'll take care of them? I'm too scared to think.

I was frightened too. But I only wanted the kids to stay out of the bathroom. I didn't worry about them. I worried about me.

They were noisy. They came home from school too early. They made a racket.

I may have another couple of months, Ellen said. The doctor said he never saw anyone with so little will to live. I don't want to live, he thinks. But, Faithy, I do. I do. It's just I'm scared.

I could hardly take my mind off this blood. It's horrid to leave me. It was draining the red out from under my eyelids and the sun burned off my cheeks. It was all rising from my cold toes to find the quickest way out.

Life isn't that great, Ellen, I said. We've had nothing but crummy days and crummy guys and no money and broke all the time and cockroaches and nothing to do on Sunday but take the kids to Central Park and row on that lousy lake. What's so great, Ellen? What's the big loss?

Live a couple more years. See the kids in the whole cruddy thing, every cheese hole in the world go up and heat blast, fire waves. I want to see it all, Ellen said. I felt a great gob making its dizzy exit. Can't talk, I said. I think I'm fainting.

Around the holiday season, I began to dry up. My sister took the kids for a while so I could stay home quietly, making hemoglobin red corpuscles, et cetera, with no interruption. I was in such first-class shape by New Year's, I nearly got knocked up again.

My little boys came home. They were tall and handsome. Three weeks after Christmas, Ellen died. At her funeral at that very neat church on the Bowery, her son took a minute out of crying to tell me, don't worry, Faith. My mother made sure of everything. She took care of me from her job. The man came and said so.

Oh, shall I adopt you anyway? I asked, wondering if he said yes, where the money, the room, another 10 minutes of good nights, where they would all come from.

He was a little older than my kids. He would soon need a good encyclopedia, a chemistry set. Listen, Billy, tell me the truth. Shall I adopt you?

He stopped all his tears. Why, thanks. No, I have an uncle in Springfield. I'm going to him. I'll have it OK. It's in the country. I have cousins there.

Well, I said, relieved, I just love you, Billy. You're the most wonderful boy. Ellen must be so proud of you.

He stepped away and said, she's not anything of anything, Faith. Then he went to Springfield. I don't think I'll see him again. But I often longed to talk to Ellen, with whom, after all, I have done a million things in these scary private years.

We drove the kids up every damn rock in Central Park. On Easter Sunday, we pasted white doves on blue posters and prayed on 8th Street for peace. Then we were tired and screamed at the kids.

The boys were babies. For a joke, we stapled their snowsuits to our skirts and in a rage of slavery. Every Saturday, for weeks, we marched across the bridges that connect Manhattan to the world. We shared apartments, jobs, and stuck up studs. And then two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying.

SPEAKER 2: Although Paley's use of irony suggests detachment, she is far from that. The writer not only instills her beliefs in her art, she acts. The past 15 years have found her an active participant in civil rights, the anti-war movement, and the nuclear power controversy. Earlier this year, Paley was among a group of anti-nuclear demonstrators arrested near the White House.

GRACE PALEY: I mean, I have a heavy pessimism about a world in which United States really has stockpiled about 30,000 hydrogen bombs. That's why my heart is very heavy.

And I think women will be an important force in ending that. I'm sure that that will happen. But I mean, if it doesn't happen, that's it.

And, of course, the Russians have about as much to-- probably less. But they don't have to have-- so let's say they only have 20,000, whatever it is, maybe 15,000, we can already murder each other. We can destroy each other's cities a dozen times over. And there've never been weapons in this world stockpiled, put away, hung on the wall that haven't been used. So I worry about that a lot. And I think people have to move very fast, especially young people.

SPEAKER 2: I was talking with some of the writers who have done fiction tackling the subject of Vietnam in the last couple of years. And they say that the only way to truly portray the insanity that you just talked about is through fiction and forget documentary kinds of writing or kinds of filming or whatever, and do it through fiction. Do you agree?

GRACE PALEY: Well, I think writers will say that. I went to Vietnam in 1969. I was in Hanoi. And when I came back, I did write a report.

But the only way I could really-- I mean, being already stuck in the role in my head as an artist, the only way I could really report was to write a series of poems on it. So in that sense, I see what they're talking about. And we've been talking about this for the last two days, that it's only through invention that you can really get at the truth in a sense.

SPEAKER 2: You've been talking about women and writing in America while you've been here. Have you reached conclusions about women and writing in America?

GRACE PALEY: I'm not a speechmaker in that sense, so I haven't really the papers on the subject at all. But I am a woman writing in America, and I'm a woman among many, and I know many of them. And in some ways it's a good time.

SPEAKER 2: Why?

GRACE PALEY: Because we have the support of a whole movement. We grew up around that movement, and we are supported by it. I mean, I don't think it existed when I first began, but without the women's movement, God knows if I would be read as much as I am. So I feel that support of women all the time, and I'm very grateful for it.

And I give it to my sister writers, and I give it to my sister readers, too. But I think if you want to talk about the situation of women writing, you have to-- there are a couple of things that are happening to the women's movement throughout the country, a moving back that we see that happens in the problems around the RA and stuff like that.

But that and as far as women writing is concerned, for instance, I received a letter a few months ago from Ellen Beiser, who's an editor of *The 13th Moon*, a woman's journal. And she had received honorable mention in CCLM. It's the Council of Little Magazines or whatever.

They give out prizes, and she had gotten an honorable mention. There were 10 prizes all given to male editors. And the only one to her was honorable mention. So she refused it on that basis.

And it made me look at certain things. And I sat down and counted up the Guggenheim's. And the Guggenheim's were-- and don't hold me to this figure because I'm a bad counter, but I'm not off by more than a couple. It's about 255 men to 34 women, 5 women. And as far as writers are concerned, it's 16 men and 2 women.

So we have to look at those figures and say what is the male establishment relaxing into its own self? Is it, as it gets older, becoming more itself?

SPEAKER 2: OK. But is there also the other side of the question that by having such a strong support system within the group of women's writers that perhaps there's a cloister effect occurring, that they're becoming insulated, relying upon themselves and not getting out enough?

GRACE PALEY: No, I don't think so. I think you have writers being published by major publishing houses. And I don't really understand that question. I mean--

SPEAKER 2: I--

GRACE PALEY: --I almost do, but I don't quite.

SPEAKER 2: OK. When you were talking before about the strengths of having this kind of support system, I'm talking about what some people might consider a weakness in that you get to rely upon that support system so much so that you're perceived by the mainstream system as being off in that other system and not.

GRACE PALEY: Oh, I see. But the mainstream system always wants to put you someplace. If you're not a woman, they want to-- you could be a Black. You could be a-- they'll say she's just a Jewish writer or she's just a woman's writer.

And, of course, then you say to them, and this guy's just a man's writer, I suppose. I mean, we can say that about-- but the mainstream is always trying to denigrate and/or they'll say to you, don't-- and also they're always trying to cut you off from your support system so that-- a good friend will say to me, don't say you're a woman's writer. Well, why should I say that?

I mean, it seems to me so crazy not to say what your roots are, where you come from. And, of course, I want men to like my work. I mean, I'm just your average natural writer who wants to be read as much as possible and understood as much as possible. But if someone says to me, are you a Jewish writer? I say, yes, I damn well I am.

If I'm traveling in Europe, someone says to me, are you an American writer? Of course, I am. I mean, whatever I am, I am. And there's no way out of that because that's where my tongue comes from, my language, my life, and therefore, my literature.

This one is called *A Conversation With My Father*, before I knew about him.

My father is 86 years old and in bed. His heart, that bloody motor, is equally old and will not do certain jobs anymore. It still floods his head with brainy light. But it won't let his legs carry the weight of his body around the house.

Despite my metaphors, this muscle failure is not due to his old heart, he says, but to a potassium shortage. Sitting on one pillow, leaning on three, he offers last-minute advice and makes a request.

"I would like you to write a simple story just once more," he said, "the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write. Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next."

I say, "Yes, why not? That's possible." I want to please him, though I don't remember writing that way. I would like to try to tell such a story, if he means the kind that begins-- "There was a woman--" followed by plot, the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life.

Finally I thought of a story that had been happening a couple of years right across the street. I wrote it down and read it aloud. "Pa," I said, "how about this? You mean something like this?"

Once in my time there was a woman and she had a son. They lived nicely, in a small apartment in Manhattan. This boy at about 15 became a junkie, which is not unusual in our neighborhood. In order to maintain her close friendship with him, she became a junkie too. She said it was part of the youth culture, with which she felt very much at home.

After a while, for a number of reasons, the boy gave it all up and left the city and his mother in disgust. Hopeless and alone, she grieved. We all visit her.

"OK, Pa, that's it," I said, "an unadorned and miserable tale."

"But that's not what I mean," my father said. "You misunderstood me on purpose. You know, there's a lot more to it. You know that. You left everything out."

Turgenev wouldn't do that. Chekhov wouldn't do that. There are in fact Russian writers you never heard of. You don't have an inkling of, as good as anyone, who can write a plain ordinary story, who would not leave out what you have left out. I object not to facts but to people sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who knows where."

"Forget that story, Pa, what have I left out now in this one?"

"Her looks, for instance."

"Oh. Quite handsome, I think. Yes."

"Her hair?"

"Dark, with heavy braids, as though she were a girl or a foreigner."

"What were her parents like, her stock? That she became such a person. It's interesting, you know."

"From out of town. Professional people. The first to be divorced in their county. How's that? Enough?" I asked.

"With you, it's all a joke," he said. "What about the boy's father? Why didn't you mention him? Who is he? Or was the boy born out of wedlock?"

"Yes," I said. "He was born out of wedlock."

"For God sake's, doesn't anyone in your stories get married? Doesn't anyone have the time to run down a City Hall before they jump into bed?"

"No," I said. "In real life, yes. But in my stories, no."

"Why do you answer me like that?"

"Oh, Pa, this is a simple story about a smart woman who came to New York City full of interest, love, trust, excitement, very up-to-date, and about her son. What a hard time she had in this world. Married or not, it's of small consequence."

"It is of great consequence," he said.

"OK," I said.

"OK, OK, yourself," he said, "but listen. I believe you that she's good-looking, but I don't think she's so smart."

"That's true," I said. "Actually, that's the trouble with stories. People start out fantastic. You think they're extraordinary, but it turns out as the work goes along, they're just average with a good education. Sometimes the other way around, the person's a kind of dumb innocent, but he outwits you and you can't even think of an ending good enough."

"What do you do then?" he asked. He had been a doctor for a couple of decades and then an artist for a couple of decades, and he's still interested in details, craft, technique.

"Well, you just have to let the story lie around till some agreement can be reached between you and the stubborn hero."

"Aren't you talking silly, now?" he asked. "Start again. It so happens I'm not going out this evening. Tell the story again. See what you can do this time."

"OK," I said. "But it's not a five-minute job." Second attempt.

Once across the street from us, there was a fine, handsome woman, our neighbor. She had a son whom she loved because she'd known him since birth, in helpless chubby infancy, and in the wrestling, hugging age, 7 to 10, as well as earlier and later. This boy, when he fell into the fist of adolescence, became a junkie. He was not a hopeless one. He was in fact hopeful, an ideologue and successful converter. With his busy brilliance, he wrote persuasive articles for his high school newspaper. Seeking a wider audience using important connections, he drummed into lower Manhattan's newsstand distribution, a periodical called Oh! Golden Horse!

In order to keep him from feeling guilty, because guilt is the stony heart of 9/10 of all clinically diagnosed cancers in America today, she said, and because she had always believed in giving bad habits room at home where one could keep an eye on them, she too became a junkie. Her kitchen was famous for a while-- a center for intellectual addicts who knew what they were doing. A few felt artistic like Coleridge and others were scientific and revolutionary like Leary.

Although she was often high herself, certain good mothering reflexes remained, and she saw to it that there was lots of orange juice around and honey and milk and vitamin pills. However, she never cooked anything but chili, and that no more than once a week. She explained, when we talked to her, seriously, with neighborly concern, that it was her part in the youth culture and that she would rather be with the young, it was an honor, than with her own generation.

One week, while nodding through an Antonioni film, this boy was severely jabbed by the elbow of a stern and proselytizing girl, sitting beside him. She offered immediate apricots and nuts for his sugar level, spoke to him sharply, and took him home.

She had heard of him and his work, and she herself published, edited, and wrote a competitive journal called Man Does Live by Bread Alone. In the organic heat of her continuous presence, he could not help but become interested once more in his muscles, his arteries and nerve connections. In fact, he began to love them, treasured them, praised them with funny little songs in Man Does Live--

The fingers of my flesh transcend my transcendental soul. The tightness in my shoulders and my teeth have made me whole.

To the mouth of his head, that glory of will and determination, he brought hard apples, nuts, wheat germ, soybean oil. He said to his old friends, from now on, I guess I'll keep my wits about me. I'm going on the natch. He said he was about to begin a spiritual deep-breathing journey. How about you too, MOM? He asked kindly.

His conversion was so radiant, splendid, that neighborhood kids his age began to say that he had never been a real addict at all, only a journalist along for the smell of the story. The mother tried several times to give up what had become without her son and his friends a lonely habit. This effort only brought it to supportable levels. The boy and his girl took their electronic mimeograph and moved to the bushy edge of another borough. They were very strict. They said they would not see her again until she had been off drugs for 60 days.

At home alone in the evening, weeping, the mother read and reread the seven issues of Oh! Golden Horse! They seemed to her as truthful as ever. We often cross the street to visit and console. But if we mentioned any of our children who are at college or in the hospital or dropouts at home, she would cry out, my baby, my baby, and burst into terrible, face-scarring, time-consuming tears. The end.

First my father was silent, then he said, "Number one, you have a nice sense of humor. Number two, I see you can't tell a plain story. So don't waste time. Then he said sadly, number three, I suppose that means she was alone. She was left like that, his mother. Alone. Probably sick?"

I said, "Yes."

"Poor woman. Poor girl, to be born in a time of fools, to live among fools. The end. The end. You were right to put that down. The end."

I didn't want to argue, but I had to say, "It's not necessarily the end, Pa."

"Yes," he said, "what a tragedy. The end of a person."

"No, Pa," I begged him. "It doesn't have to be. She's only about 40. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on. A teacher or a social worker, an ex-junkie. Sometimes it's better than having a master's in education."

"Jokes," he said. "As a writer, that's your main trouble. You don't want to recognize it. Tragedy. Plain tragedy. Historical tragedy. No hope. The end."

"Oh, Pa," I said. "She could change."

"In your own life, too, you have to look it in the face." He took a couple of nitroglycerin. "Turn to five," he said, pointing to the dial on the oxygen tank. He inserted the tubes into his nostrils and breathed deep. He closed his eyes and said, "No."

I had promised the family to always let him have the last word when arguing, but in this case, I had a different responsibility. That woman lives across the street. She's my knowledge and my invention. I'm sorry for her. I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying. Actually, neither would life, which, unlike me, has no pity.

Therefore, she did change. Of course, her son never came home again. But right now, she's the receptionist in a storefront community clinic in the East Village. Most of the customers are young people, some old friends. The head doctor has said to her, "If we only had three people in this clinic with your experiences--"

"The doctor said that?" My father took the oxygen tubes out of his nostrils and said, "Jokes. Jokes again."

"No, Pa, it could really happen that way. It's a funny world nowadays."

"No," he said. "Truth first. She will slide back. A person must have character. She does not."

"No, Pa," I said. "That's it. She's got a job. Forget it. She's in that storefront working."

"How long will it be?" he asked. "Tragedy. You too. When will you look it in the face?"

[APPLAUSE]