Lover
Harris, Bertha

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Introduction

How Love Happened in the First Place: 1

I grew up in an excessively hick town in the South where there was never anything to do, so when a big-time polio epidemic hit one summer there was suddenly even less to do than nothing. I was kept confined to the house and yard.

This happened before television. My family didn’t own any books. I spent a couple of days outside trying to dig a swimming pool of my own with a teaspoon. Then I went inside and switched on the radio. The radio was encased in green Bakelite, its dial was hot orange with black numbers. It was perched on a cast-iron plant stand beside a red begonia. It had to warm up for a minute or so before it started broadcasting. What I wanted was the baseball game; that’s what I believed I wanted.

It was Saturday. Vic Damone was singing over the radio. I gagged. I was a child aesthete. At nine, I had joined the Girl Scouts because the leader was an antiques dealer; instead of letting me touch her eighteenth-century chairs of “chewed paper” (some know it as papier-mâché), she’d led me and the rest of the troop deep into some piny woods to heat up beef stew over damp sticks: I turned in
my uniform. Within the year, I would fail to construct a chandelier out of the only available materials—three wire coat hangers, a thoroughly smashed milk bottle, glue and thread. The polio epidemic had aborted my plan for the summer, which was to be kidnapped by a family with exquisite taste. I was a lonely, anxious, skinny child; on a daily basis my mother compellingly described to me how worthless I was. I had early on elected to love beauty rather than love or hate my mother.

I spun the radio dial. A man with a honey of a voice came in loud and clear, dispassionately reciting the events of the final scene of Salome by Richard Strauss: Herod, who is enflamed by an unnatural lust for his daughter, Salome, promises her anything she desires if she will only dance for him. Salome, who is enflamed by an unnatural lust for the prophet Jokanaan—who has repulsed her advances—performs the dance of the seven veils, then tells her father that what she wants is the head of the prophet Jokanaan on a platter. Herod is horrified by his daughter’s wish; his unnatural lust for his daughter turns to abhorrence. But he keeps his promise. When the executioner hands the head on a platter to Salome, she sates her unnatural lust for Jokanaan by kissing it passionately on its mouth. Her father orders his soldiers to crush Salome with their shields. They do so.

The honey of a voice belonged to the late, great Milton Cross whose career was spent telling the folks at home what was happening on the stage of New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House during the Saturday afternoon performances.

Unnatural lust couched in sumptuous harmonics was my first experience of art. I lay on the floor next to the plant stand’s bowed legs and let it convert me. I never
missed a single broadcast. The kid across the street sneaked off to the movies one Saturday afternoon and wound up in an iron lung. Not me.

*Lover* should be absorbed as though it were a theatrical performance. Watch it. It is rife with the movie stars and movies of my childhood and adolescence. A perverted, effeminate *Hamlet*, and Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* have supporting roles. There’s tap-dancing and singing, disguise, sleights of hand, mirror illusions, quick-change acts, and drag. In opera, when a soprano performs the role of a young man who is in love with the soprano who is the girl in love with the young man, the soprano who is the young man is singing a “trouser role.”

*Lover* has a vaudeville atmosphere. My father did tap-and soft-shoe dancing in the waning days of vaudeville, and when vaudeville died, he consoled himself by recreating (or, twinning) the good old days with the means he had at hand. I was the means at hand. My father taught me his routines and we performed regularly for the lifers at the state asylum for the insane, and for the residents of the state home for the deaf and the blind: which was better than nothing; it was, in fact, much better than nothing. To tap-dance for people who cannot hear, and do soft shoe for people who cannot see, and to do both for people who are certain that the dancers are not at all who they say they are, but instead are Satan and the Holy Ghost, or a plate of fried chicken, or President Harry S Truman and Princess Margaret Rose—this gave my father a few essential horse laughs out there on the “death trail,” which is what *very* small-time vaudeville was called, and engendered in me a taste for surrealism whose expression would eventually worm its way into *Lover*.

In my father’s day, and before, vaudeville dancing was
done exclusively by men. In Lover, replications are perversions and effeminiztations of originals. Francis Bacon’s example of perversion, in one usage, was governance of men by women. A lapsed definition of effeminate is addiction to women. One of the twins in Lover, Rose-lima, suggests that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer plans to film an extravaganza based on Lover. It will be, says Rose-lima, a pastiche of every Hollywood film ever made before the end of its author’s adolescence, with special appearances by gallons of menstrual blood and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The character of Flynn thinks this: “That a thing, if performed, is its own duplicate.”

Lover Falls in Love with the Women’s Movement: 2

Women’s liberation in New York was, at its onset, about sexual liberation; too many men were not interested in finding out what makes a woman come. Too many women had sedulously anaesthetized libidos. The women’s liberation movement was about the American woman’s American orgasm. It was that simple.

Every other thing that the women’s liberation movement was about during the sixties and seventies in New York followed from that, including the fact that I looked out my window one morning and saw lesbians everywhere. It’s easy to recognize lesbians; they look like you, only better.

The early days of the women’s liberation movement in New York was as intimate as the boudoir scene which opens Der Rosenkavalier. The more intimate the women, the higher their consciousness, the greater their liberated displeasure in men, the greater their pleasure in one another. That’s how liberation initially worked. But pleasure frightened many women; so did the displeasure of men.
Betty Friedan, a social reformer from Peoria and the author of *The Feminine Mystique*—a primitive analysis of sexism which immortalizes Ms. Friedan as the liberated housewife’s liberated housewife—put the fear of pleasure into words; she accused lesbians of trying to subvert the women’s liberation movement with orgasms. A sexual panic broke out.

When the dust cleared, the movement was roughly divided between the sexual subversives and the rest of the women’s movement—women who feared both the displeasure of men and the pleasure they felt with one another.

*Lover* is the pleasure dome—which includes *fêtes champêtres* and excursions to bars, the movies, and Niagara Falls—I imagined for those sexual subversives. The twins, Rose and Rose-lima, tell their sister Flynn that at the end of the movie everyone ascends into Heaven. *Lover* “ends with Justice being done . . . true lovers united.” It’s a Renaissance heaven I had in mind, where there’s sex.

Just as my father had invented an “alternate” existence for vaudeville dancing, with me, so I assumed the women’s movement’s sexual subversives (as if they were, en masse, a duplicate of the Blessed Virgin Mary) into the “heaven” of *Lover*. I wanted them to have a good time, unmolested by women who were afraid of pleasure.

Although *Lover* is presumed to be a “lesbian” novel, and it is, the sexual subversives I put in it are not always, nor necessarily, lesbian. I am no longer as certain as I used to be about the constituents of attraction and desire; the less certain I become, the more interesting, the more like art-making, the practice of love and lust seems to me: it becomes more like something I first grasped as a child.

Shortly after I was born, my mother moved in across the street with a beauty parlor operator. Their ordinary
routines centered on hard work and the double bed they bought on layaway. Their “hobby” (but it was an obsession) was attending beauty pageants. They made notes—hair styles, approximate bust and hip sizes, legs, posture, gait. They thought that the talent category in the pageants was a waste of time, stuck in, they said, to distract people from the real issue at hand, which was the girls’ bodies; to make it seem, they said (when it certainly wasn’t!), that baton twirling or a ham-fisted performance of the first movement of “The Moonlight Sonata” was more important than an eighteen-inch waist. They almost always disagreed with the decision of the judges. My mother told me why she’d moved in with the beauty parlor operator: “Because I worship beauty.”

Rather than love or hate me, my mother elected to become a confirmed aesthete; I became acquainted at Mother’s knee, so to speak, with a way to overwhelm reality that has come to be called the gay sensibility.

Lover’s central characters, my sexually subversive elite—Maryann, Grandview, Honor, Metro, Daisy, Flynn, Mary Theresa, and “the beloved” (who appears under other aliases too) are highly aestheticized, like contestants in a beauty pageant; they are not intended to remind readers of actual flesh and blood. As well, my characters are from time to time distorted or magnified or reduced, like the stars (Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner, Loretta Young) in the Hollywood movies of the forties and fifties. Or they are painstakingly romanticized into melodrama, like the artists (highly temperamental composers, ballet dancers, et al.) in the camp classic of my generation, the British film The Red Shoes.

Or they are very often like those saints of my Roman Catholic girlhood, every one of them a femme fatale like Salome, who single-mindedly pursued any extreme, the
more implausible the better, to escape the destiny of their gender. At St. Patrick’s Academy, holy cards were distributed as rewards for excellence in English grammar and composition, Latin and penmanship, and for keeping a straight spine up your back, especially during the elevation of the Holy Sacrament at Mass: girl-saint holy cards for the girls, boy saints for the boys. The saints I earned appeared to me against a robin’s egg blue background in a state of ecstasy: a rapturous transport often accompanied by physical phenomena (swoons, trances, stigmata, speaking in tongues, agitation of the limbs), in which the soul is liberated from the body so that it may contemplate the nature of the divine more readily. The exempla of some saints preface Lover’s episodes to honor their acumen at ecstasy.

I deliberately mistook holy cards, which were intended as aids in meditation and prayer, as objects of art. Depicted in glowing colors, with blazing eyes and parted lips, the saints were all raving beauties. I mistook, I mean, raving beauties for objects of art: I was young and unworldly. I am no longer young.

Life affects Lover’s characters as if it were, instead, Traviata or Norma—just as it did the queen of art, Maria Callas. In my mid-thirties I threw a yard sale in front of my Greenwich Village building which I advertised as “The Maria Callas Memorial Yard Sale.” Swarms of strangers approached, dropped some small change into my cigar box, and reverently bore away my mismatched kneesocks. No one charged me with falsifying my old clothes; everyone already knew that Maria Callas had never set foot in my socks. Together, the patrons of my “Maria Callas Memorial Yard Sale” and I were collaborating in a sort of workshop production of the gay sensibility, whose prac-
tice hinges, like the arts, very much on decisively choosing as if over is. I recall saying this to one devotee: “She was wearing those argyles the morning of the day she so tragically died in Paris. That’s twenty cents, please.” And he replied, “Too true. I’m going to keep them in a silver box on my coffee table.”

But real flesh and blood does hover at a safe distance behind Lover’s unreal characters. As I wrote, I had in mind some of the most intellectually gifted, visionary, creative, and sexually subversive women of our time. I got to know nearly all of them within the women’s liberation movement, and I was drawn to them in the first place because they were hot. Some appear in Lover as sexual subversives. Others are in place to sabotage how the vulgar think about love, lust, sex, intellectual activity and art. Ask them this: Are you a practicing homosexual? They will answer, I don’t have to practice. I got perfect at that years ago.

The real women join with the fictional characters to commit Lover’s “style.” All of them, like all good performers, are protean in their capacity to exchange one identity for another; they are so intrepid and ingenious they are able, when circumstances call for it, to shape-change to male. Other women I came across in the movement are responsible for the personal anecdotes and jokes in Lover, which are as much a part of its texture as anything I invented myself.

In no particular order, the real life lurking behind Lover was: Jill Johnston, Eve Leoff, Jenny Snider, Esther Newton, Jane O’Wyatt, Phillis Birkby, Carol Calhoun, Joanna Russ, Yvonne Rainer, Valerie Solanas, Smokey Eule, Mary Korechoff, Kate Millett, Louise Fishman, and myself. Books by Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Jane Ellen Harrison,
and Valerie Solanas show up on a bookshelf in Lover as my own objets de virtu.

It does not flatter them to say so, but the work of Jill Johnston, Yvonne Rainer and Louise Fishman made the ultimate difference in how I imagined Lover, and determined, however obliquely, Lover’s expression.

Lover Enjoys Postmodernism: 3

In the 1960s, I saw Yvonne Rainer’s dance, The Mind Is a Muscle. A virtuoso dancer, Yvonne Rainer, like many postmodernist dancers-choreographers of that era, was moving against technique, especially her own technique, to abolish choreographic meaning and narrative. She freed her work from social, political, and cultural associations, and from the familiar arguments of cause and effect. She turned the body’s movement over to the play of randomness, coincidence, and chance. Her mentors were, of course, John Cage and Merce Cunningham whose music and choreography had also gone some distance in liberating me from the ordeals of purposefulness. My mind was a Zen blank as I absorbed The Mind Is a Muscle. After the performance, I thought of the noncontinuous writing of Gertrude Stein and of the ethereally discrete fiction of Ronald Firbank. The Mind Is a Muscle was a world unto itself. I wanted to make one of my own like it.

All allusions to the brain throughout Lover are emblematic of Rainer’s The Mind Is a Muscle, which was my donnée. References to cancer of the brain are memento mori, the imagination as death’s head when contaminated by exegeses. The blank spaces, the silences in Lover, where useful narrative is expected, indicate that Lover is meant to be an aesthetic rather than a useful entity. My subver-
sive elite are recluses from usefulness and meaning: they are *objets d’art*.

When *Lover*’s character Veronica isn’t writing the fiction I’m supplying her with, she’s forging masterpieces and salting archaeological digs with fakes. Forgeries, I’m suggesting, are aesthetically at a further remove from usefulness and meaning than their originals. As mirror-images, duplicates, twins, of the originals, they are better art. Within the secluding perimeters of *Lover*, women are the originals, lesbians are the forgeries.

I would rather my character Flynn to have sprung full-grown from my brain (mine, not Zeus’) than descend from a womb: but I don’t write fantasy. The mothers in *Lover* must make themselves reproductively useful before they may enjoy ecstasy. Motherhood in *Lover* is the real worm in the bowl of wax fruit: which is *Lover*. Every biological reality in *Lover*, but especially motherhood, contaminates the aesthetic surround.

I abstracted the character of Maryann from the brilliant and complex personality of Jill Johnston who, during the sixties, had become my literary hero. Her writing had nerve. Much of *Lover*’s deliberate plotlessness, which I hoped would affect the reader as a delirious spin, spins around Maryann, my idea of the lesbian’s lesbian.

Jill Johnston had already established herself as the most knowledgeable and sensitive critic of New York’s avant-garde when, in the mid-sixties, she began to turn her *Village Voice* dance column—which was always about much more than dance—into a gorgeous performance of radical self-psychoanalysis, introspection, self-revelation. She began to apply the wit, erudition, comic turns, intellectual acuity, and artistic discernment, for which she was already famous, to an in-public exposure of her own life. Jill Johnston became her own subject: the “dance” of her
column became Jill’s illuminating dance through the details of her own life and mind.

Shortly after the Stonewall revolution in 1969, Jill came out in print like gangbusters and became my sex hero. Her Voice columns were collected under the titles Marmalade Me (1970), and Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution (1973).

**Lover’s Stab at Manhating: 4**

I’ve read somewhere lately that what the real-life (the biblical) Salome wanted cut off from the body of John the Baptist (“Jokanaan” in the opera) was not his head.

In the late sixties, the women’s liberation movement felt a rush of manhating. So did I. It was a heady, Dionysian sensation. We went up on the mountain and stomped. Sensation led to daring suggestion, which Valerie Solanas elegantly dealt with in her publication the S.C.U.M Manifesto; the acronym stands for Society for Cutting Up Men. I chose to deal with the daring suggestion with less than daring. In Lover, from time to time, I recount, sometimes word for word, stories women were telling me about what men, sometimes their men, had done to them. Toward the novel’s conclusion, I wheel in the body of a murdered man. Think of the corpse as Lover’s revenge motif. The character of Veronica hides the corpse by hastily turning it into fiction. Lover’s author loves murder mysteries.

**Life Before Lover: 5**

My pre-Lover fiction was still entrenched in the themes of Southern Gothic and Lesbian Gothick; they are not dissimilar, nor are they unlike Italian opera. Both genres tend to be soaked in booze, blood, and tears; both are thick
with madness, violence, suicide, and love’s tragic finales. I was perversely laboring to apply, perfected, my version of a literary technique that had died, already perfected, along with the Bloomsbury group, to booze, blood, tears, madness, violence, suicide, love’s tragic finales.

When I asked Parke Bowman (who would publish Lover) why she was so eager to take my novel on, one of the things she told me was that she wanted her company, Daughters, to represent the work of a female avant-garde and that as far as she was concerned, I was it. She went on to say that she was disinterested in feminist and lesbian content or sensibility. Parke freed me from any sense of responsibility to force a direct figuring of the politics, ideals, or goals of feminism or lesbianism or lesbian-feminism in my writing. Nonetheless, my politics (such as they are) exist side by side with my DNA in Lover.

But I’ve never been much of a political animal, nor even a social one: it’s the rules, the ordained procedures and ideologies. I like to be either alone or having a good time. A good time is an interval of passionate and intimate exchange followed almost immediately by seclusion; a night in a great gay bar followed immediately by seclusion; a big, lavish party musiked by wall-to-wall Motown, washed in gin, and dense with new breakups, new couplings, new networking, new gossip, and good dope—and when it’s over, two days later, a month of seclusion.

At one of those parties, circa 1973, the funniest and smartest and straightest woman in New York, Eve Leoff (Keats scholar and Professor of English at Hunter College), told some bozo that she’d rather sit on my lap than dance with him. The bozo threw a sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic tantrum, after which Eve danced with me. Politics are where you find them.

I became, sort of, to the best of my ability, a political
animal in the early seventies because, most particularly, I didn’t want to disappoint Kate Millett, whose first book, *Sexual Politics*, turned me instantly into a radical feminist. But mostly I became a political animal in order to have a good time. Feminism struck me as a good time, and it was. Back then, it still frightened the horses; it made most men foam at the mouth, and it got the best women horny. As such, feminism forcibly yanked my writing up from under the Bloomsbury tomb where it had been trying to pass as good but dead.

Some of the best times I had being political were with the artists, Jenny Snider and Louise Fishman; with Phyllis Birkby, the Yale-trained renegade architect; with Smokey Eule and Mary Korechoff, master carpenters who also kindly hammered some sense into me; with my highly significant attorney, Carol Calhoun; with the anthropologist Esther Newton, whose first book was *Mother Camp*, a study of heterosexual male transvestism; and with Jane O’Wyatt, mystic and graphics designer. Very often, the most political thing these friends and I did together was to tell one another the truth. Which made us fearless.

*Lover Regards Print: 6*

By the early seventies, the new political consciousness created by feminism and lesbian-feminism, and by the 1969 gay Stonewall revolt, was being met by a corresponding cultural consciousness out of which a new kind of highly politicized writing was born. Mainstream publishers, by and large, found this work either too inexpert, or too strange (and too political and too sexual) to risk it, and they had already—or were in the process of doing so—satisfying any need they saw for “politicized” women’s writing by publishing the work of white feminists dealing
with the politics of heterosexual love and romance (Erica Jong, Marilyn French, et al.) and the work of middle-class (at least) African-American women such as Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker. The politics of the constant book buyer tend to be liberal.

The new gay, feminist, and lesbian-feminist writers, as a consequence—or because they preferred to be independent of a mainstream which they found classist, sexist, heterosexist, homophobic, racist—founded their own presses. Some presses actually had a press; others used Xerox equipment or hand-cranked mimeograph machines. Suddenly, in verse, fiction, and broadsides, the “love that dared not speak its name” became a motor-mouth. Much of what it had to say was memorable.

The presses eked out a hand-to-mouth existence. The costs of the publications often barely covered the production expenses. Nobody got paid; skills, including fundraising, were learned on the job. Decisions were usually made collectively. Hardship was the rule, burnout was the norm; but the staying power was in some cases enormous, and it was almost exclusively fueled by the adamantine convictions which had got the presses going in the first place: that well-wrought words on a page could, by speaking the unspeakable, create and organize radical political activism.

How well wrought the words were was not usually of primary importance; “good” writing was useful writing, the kind that made gays and lesbians feel strong, comfortable in their own skins, angry, tough, and highly motivated to enforce change, perhaps revolutionary change, in the surrounding heterosexual world. That it worked, to some extent, is history.

But there was considerable talent giving good literary

Arno Press was located on Madison Avenue instead of in a damp basement or an illegal loft. Arno belongs in this context, however, because it had the vision to recognize the writing on the wall as early as 1975, when it began the Arno Special Collection, fifty-four reissues of lesbian and gay classics dating from 1811 to 1975. Jonathan Ned Katz was the editor.

...
Parke Bowman wanted nothing to do with the presses. The radical politics, the nonprofit status of most of them, their collective organization—it all smelled strongly of the left wing to Parke. Parke got involved in publishing women writers because she was in love with June Arnold.

Daughters Publishing Company, Inc., was not a press. Both partners, June Davis Arnold and Parke Patricia Bowman, were rather touchy about the distinction. "Publishers of Fiction by Women" (eventually, they would reluctantly include some nonfiction), their writers got contracts, advances, royalties, royalty reports, etc., identical, according to Parke, to those issued to writers by the mainstream houses. Parke and June referred to all mainstream publishers as "Random House."

Parke's stated goal was to run Daughters as if it were Random House and thereby compete with Random House in the marketplace. To Parke, Daughters was strictly a business whose business was profit-making. She wanted to publish novels with both literary merit and commercial appeal, and if the works were perceived as feminist, so much the better. But from the start she made it clear that she would never agree to publish a novel for political content alone.

June idealized the back-breaking labor at the presses, and she was in complete agreement with their political sentiments. June claimed that Daughters' reason for being was to publish the novel-length fiction which the presses could not afford to publish. As soon as Daughters was founded, June began looking for manuscripts in keeping with the spirit of the poems, short stories and nonfiction of the presses: deep-thinking personal revelations about the nature of oppression.
In 1972, June believed wholeheartedly that a full-scale feminist revolution was at hand. With the patriarchy (and mainstream publishing) in ruins, Daughters would replace Random House, and the works published by Daughters would sell like hotcakes in the new world of empowered women.

Parke enjoyed the idea of Daughters’ replacing Random House, but the last thing on earth she wanted was a feminist revolution, or any connection whatsoever with “prerevolutionary” women’s presses, which she more or less privately referred to as “a bunch of damn dumb dykes.” The way to beat Random House was through the tried-and-true methods of cutthroat capitalism.

Throughout the life of Daughters, Parke longed to have a quiet, deeply closeted life with June. What Parke had in mind was something closely resembling a standard upper-class heterosexual monogamous marriage. She would eventually get just that, but not until June’s hopes for a women’s world, and her own personal ambitions, had been severely disappointed.

From the start, therefore, the partners were at odds about the aims of the company. Throughout Daughters’ brief life (less than a decade), June and Parke went through an ongoing struggle to dominate the company and realize their opposing views. Compromises were grudgingly made, or else one or the other of the partners would back down and wait for the next time. It’s a miracle of a sort that the company lasted as long as it did. The miracle, of a sort, was money, lots of it.

At first, I was only another of the Daughters’ novelists. Then I became their “senior” (their only) editor. Officially, my relationship with the company ended there. Unofficially, I was the third side of a triangle that rivaled the old Lesbian Gothicks in terms of booze, blood, tears,
madness, violence, and operatic grand passions—so much so, I often wonder if Daughters wasn’t something I wrote instead of lived.

For a while, I loved Daughters and Daughters loved me. I applied—I misapplied—three tenets of feminist doctrine to the way I loved Daughters: that trust, solidarity, and strength arise from making oneself totally vulnerable to women; that one may trust women totally, but never men; that male oppression is the sole cause of mental and emotional ill-health in women, and feminism the sole cure. It’s difficult for me to confess to something so banal, but here goes: I needed a good mother.

Founded in 1972, Daughters published its first list in 1973. By 1979, Parke and June had dissolved Daughters in the manner of any publishing company going out of business. All titles abruptly went out of print; rights reverted to the authors; leftover copies of the books were distributed among the authors and to remainder houses. Parke sold the townhouse in Greenwich Village that had been company headquarters. June and Parke severed their connections with feminism and their authors (including me), and retired to an insulated haute-bourgeois life in Houston, June’s home town. At the time, June was fifty-three and Parke was forty-five or forty-six. I hoped never to see either of them again.

Late in 1975, I had rented, along with the feminist theoretician Charlotte Bunch, space in the Manhattan loft building June owned and where she and Parke lived on the top floor. After midnight, in late December of 1977, my phone rang. It was June, in one of her classic rages. She shouted into my ear that I had to be off her premises no later than the next day, my lease notwithstanding. The person I was in bed with, she announced, was an FBI
agent who was sleeping with me for the sole purpose of
gaining access to Daughters in order to destroy the com-
pany.

The person I was in bed with had about as much to do
with the Federal Bureau of Investigation as I did with
professional ice hockey. June’s accusation was so very far
off the wall that I wondered for an instant if the time had
come, finally, to phone for the guys with the straitjackets.
I got my breath back; I told June that it was my distinct
impression that whoever went to bed with me—including
that time back in 1910 (or was it 1902?) when it was
J.Edgar Hoover himself, in full frontal nudity, lusting after
me—did so to gain access not to Daughters but to my
body, okay?

June told me to start packing. I was gone the next day,
as ordered.

After June’s death, Parke would confess that it was she,
not June, who’d wanted me out of the building, no holds
barred. That made plenty of sense to me, for two reasons:
The FBI had had a strong grip on Parke’s imagination for
some time before the night I was caught in bed with J.
Edgar Hoover. And Parke had been in love with me since
the day we met. If she couldn’t have me, nobody could.
Rita Mae Brown, with admirable succinctness, once de-
scribed Parke as a femme in butch clothing, and June, vice
versa. She was right. June had to evict me on Parke’s
behalf because Parke didn’t have the necessary machismo.

After the fiasco of my eviction from June’s building, I
never expected to hear from either Parke or June again.
But in 1979, June telephoned from Houston and rather
warmly told me that she and Parke would love to see me,
would I come and visit? I said yes. My nearest and dearest
suggested that I was out of my mind to go near Parke and
June again. I replied that I was certain that Parke and June must want to apologize, heal old wounds, effect a reconciliation: did that sound like I was out of my mind?

I was out of my mind. June met my plane; Parke waited in the car. June drove and pointed out the sights. Parke sat in stony silence. June told me that they lived in Houston’s most fashionable suburb. It seemed like any fashionable suburb to me—spookily silent, absolutely white-skinned, so rife with self-protection the entire neighborhood seemed to be wedged inside an invisible condom. Their house was hidden behind a locked fence. It was long, low, enormous, and replete with many faux Tijuana-hacienda touches which I recognized because I’m chief of the aesthetics police. Outside, surrounded by a rose garden, there was a swimming pool that passed my inspection.

Parke disappeared in the house. June showed me a guest room approximately one city block’s length from their bedroom, then she disappeared. I hung out in the guest room for a few hours. Then Parke showed up and told me to give her five dollars; she was going out for burgers, five bucks should cover my share. I gave her five dollars.

We sat at a table in a dining room suitable for Kiwanis Club banquets and unwrapped dinner in silence. For some reason I wasn’t hungry, so I decided to make conversation. I introduced the subject of combat women in the military, a controversial topic in the news at the time, and asked whether they thought it was a feminist thing for women to turn themselves into cannon fodder—or did they think that turning women into cannon fodder was just another male plot to get rid of uppity women?

That broke the ice. Instantly, Parke and June flipped from restrained hostility into the active kind: unlike me, they weren’t lily-livered pacifists. They believed in their country. They were one hundred percent behind any war
their president cared to wage. Young women as well as young men should be prepared to die for their country, and any other point of view on the matter stank of communism.

Okay, I said. I figured they still thought they were dealing with J. Edgar Hoover’s girlfriend, complete with wires. I considered congratulating them on being, as of that moment, completely in the clear with my superiors at the agency. I kept my mouth shut.

The next day June told me she’d asked me to visit because she needed help on her new novel, Baby Houston, hadn’t I understood that? No, but. June handed me the manuscript. I sat down in the extraordinarily decorated living room, which was about one-third the size of the New York Public Library’s main reading room, and got to work. Parke dropped in at regular intervals to collect for the next meal.

I stayed in Houston with Parke and June long enough to urge June repeatedly to replace the pretty writing in Baby Houston (“Baby” was her mother) with the rage she was so far keeping between the lines (“You’re wrong,” she told me), and to experience a representative slice of how they were living their new lives. June spent her days working on Baby Houston, swimming and gardening; Parke watched movies on TV, swam, gardened, worked the Times crossword, and read English novels. They visited with June’s girlhood chums and played a regular bridge game with some of them in the evenings. They shopped a lot at Houston’s glitziest mall; they were compiling new wardrobes of French designer clothing. From the neck down, June looked sleek and chic, but her face looked haggard—stressed and grim, as if, inside, she was grieving. Her face would have more appropriately accessorized sackcloth and ashes. Parke’s threads were as upscale as June’s, but were
still in Parke’s favorite understated color, *merde*. I was still in my basics—basically my only basics, except for the vintage evening dresses I reserved for dates with J. Edgar—which were, then as now, white shirts and black jeans. One night, when we were about to go out to dinner with one of Parke and June’s new friends, June said, “I’m so glad to be here, where I can dress in nice clothes again. It’s hard for me to even look at that New York movement drag any more.” I quickly changed into my basic variation on my basics, white jeans and black shirt.

Houston had grown some lesbians since June’s early life there (when, she once asserted, there weren’t any), but except for one or two, all of June and Parke’s close women friends were heterosexual; the one or two lesbians they hung out with were wealthy. They no longer felt comfortable among people too different from themselves. Too much difference, I surmised, was too little money. They had never felt comfortable among people different from themselves.

The last time Parke asked me to fork over, I made bold to ask if by any chance they needed a loan to tide them over. Parke fearlessly stepped on the irony. She told me that from now on they were keeping every penny strictly for themselves; they’d had enough of getting ripped off by the women’s movement.

I wasn’t the women’s movement. Far from ripping off Daughters, or Parke or June personally, I had, minute by minute, inch by inch, paid my own way during my friendship with them and my time with the company. Parke had insisted on it, down to the last dime, even when I was traveling with the partners on Daughters’ business exclusively. She justified this un-Random House-like exploitation of an employee by impressing on hand-to-mouth me that she had to save up for her old age.
I gave her money for the next meal. I don’t keep score; I’d rather be ripped off. And I was, as ever, afraid of Parke’s barely suppressed anger. Evidently, Parke had either demoted me into the “damn dumb dykes” category, or was possessed by the idea that I was so deeply in her debt (though for what?) that I had to make some recompense by paying for my own food while I was a guest in her house working on June’s novel.

Parke was as uncommonly stingy with money as I am cavalier. Which may go some distance in explaining how she, with June’s knowledge, could break the most fundamental rule of hospitality: but it doesn’t begin to explain the rage that accompanied her demands for money. I’ve finally remembered how I actually felt each time I was faced with both her anger and her open palm: I had been invited to Houston to experience humiliation.

I did what I could with Baby Houston. June thanked me and drove me to the airport. I chalked the monetary and emotional costs of the trip up to being out of my mind.

Within two years after Parke and June returned to Houston, June was diagnosed as having cancer of the brain, the incurable kind. I thought, when I heard the bad news, of the trope—the human brain; cancer of the brain—I’d used in Lover. I had a nightmare about fiction’s being able to assume an extraliterary life of its own to do things its author never intended.

Not long after June died, I acted like a Manhattanite and went to a psychiatrist. I felt disabled; I felt that I was disappearing, and neither love nor work nor sex was helping me. The psychiatrist was tall, fat, and mid-fortyish with a little-girl hairdo. She was so white she looked like an Easter bunny. Her clothing led me to believe that in her
professional opinion dainty pinks-on-pinks was a good cure for what ailed her patients. She wore a lot of showgirl makeup—glitter on her eyelids, lashings of pancake, and fifties-red lipstick, and she had flat feet. She wanted me to hold rocks which she described as “crystals” while I talked; she encouraged me to attend events at which a woman entered a trance and then, in a voice belonging to an Egyptian from the Old Kingdom dynasty, answered questions from the audience: “Should I buy General Motors?” and Cheops would answer, “Go with the flow.” I spent most of my energy during sessions with her trying not to show how thoroughly her mind and body revolted me. In no time, she had me driving her around New York, feeding her cats, and moving her from one apartment to another. I was paying her top dollar; we did not have a bartering arrangement. After a year of this, she urged me to give the little girl inside of me a great big hug. I suggested that she go fuck herself and, at last, departed.

I might have filed a complaint with the psychiatric police, but I couldn’t imagine what nature of complaint I could file against my mother, or Parke and June. I spent the rest of the eighties virtually a recluse, one who cannot be had because she is not available to give herself. I avoided old, genuine friends; I felt contaminated, therefore unworthy of their friendship. It doesn’t surprise me in the least that I’ve been unable to complete the four novels I’ve written since life with Daughters.

By 1975, the year before Lover was published, Parke had given up even the pretense of being a feminist, but June was still avidly talking lesbian-feminist politics. Neither of them had yet gone mad—or, if they had, I was so enchanted by being in service to Daughters, I ignored the symptoms. When others suggested to me that something
might be seriously wrong with Parke and June, and therefore with the company, I became their apologist and defender. But after a while even I became aware of some serious contradictions between what June was publicly saying—the politics *du jour* (the personal is political, etc.)—and what she was privately doing: to me, in particular.

June and Parke were the first wealthy people I’d ever been close to. I thought it exotic, at the very least, that June swore by politics which, if they were successfully put into practice, would be the ruin of the sources of her money. But I didn’t say so. I didn’t want to spoil the loud party, I didn’t want them to be disappointed in me. My mother got a lot of mileage out of telling me how disappointed in me she was. Nonetheless, I did wonder if June had found a solution to that tiresome riddle, the one about how much easier it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man [sic] to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Our closeness, which would end in my near-imprisonment, started when Parke went after *Lover*, insisting that I sell it to Daughters even though she hadn’t read a word of the manuscript. Parke told me that she had read my first two novels and that she’d been impressed (Parke later brought *Confessions of Cherubino*, my second novel, back into print). This is how Random House operates, she said; they buy sight unseen too if a writer’s earlier work suits them.

The partners took me to dinner. They were charming, amusing, and warm; every few minutes, Parke would say something hilarious. In the middle of this love feast, June explained that publishing with the “male” houses would brand me as “male-identified;” I would be just another one of those feminists, *so-called*, who did exactly that with their books. Parke said that Daughters was *not* a feminist
house, that it had no political definition whatsoever beyond "Publishers of Fiction by Women." June said Daughters was feminist. Then Parke threw her glass at the restaurant wall, and we were asked to leave.

I was delighted. I was finally in the cast of an opera; somebody definitely throws a glass against a wall during La Traviata. In the street, Parke told me to swear that when people asked me why I published with Daughters, I would not tell them it was because Daughters was feminist; I was to say, instead, that I published with Daughters because, like Random House, Daughters gave big advances. I understood her point. Parke was equating feminism with impoverishment; I was ashamed of being poor. I swore to defend big advances to the death.

About ten days later, they took me to dinner again. They explained that what I would get by publishing with Daughters was a guarantee that Lover would never go out of print; none of their titles, they promised, would ever go out of print. No publishing company on earth could offer that guarantee but Daughters.

I more or less fell on my knees and cried, I am thine! Most writers will understand how I felt, though few are as naive as I was. I knew, of course, that Lover wasn't going to be a bestseller, or even come near bestsellerdom: effeminate aesthetes like me don't write bestsellers. But I hoped that given time, plenty of time—maybe twenty or thirty years—a first edition might be bought out. Daughters, according to the partners, guaranteed that time. When the euphoria wore off, questions occurred to me. How could Daughters make that promise? If, just for example, the partners died, then what guaranteed the future of the company promising in-print eternity?

Parke and June laughed my questions off. I was too
unworldly, they told me; I didn’t understand how businesses operated. They were right. I was unworldly, possibly even other-worldly. Far from understanding how businesses worked, I did arithmetic by counting on my fingers. I was ordered to stop worrying. I decided to stop worrying and become a true believer. I felt safe with June and Parke, as if my time for being a beloved child had at last arrived. I was happy to let them have Lover; I feared that neither Lover nor I was good enough for them.

The only regret I had in publishing Lover with Daughters—and I suppressed it, it seemed audacious—was that Lover would not be reviewed by the New York Times, whose policy then, and for some time to come, was not to review original trade paperbacks. But the physical beauty of the Daughters’ editions was well worth the loss of the Times. The elegantly designed covers and the dimensions (eight and a half by five and a half) of Daughters’ paperbacks have now been adopted by nearly every good publisher—Virago, for example—both here and in Europe, but it was Daughters’ designer, Loretta Li, who created the look.

When I finished Lover, Parke and I had dinner again. I handed over the A&P brown paper bag containing the manuscript and Parke gave me a company check for ten thousand dollars, the same advance, Parke assured me, that Random House gave its authors of third novels. Harcourt, Brace’s Hiram Haydn, in 1969, had given me one thousand, six hundred dollars for my first novel Catching Saradove, and two thousand three years later for my second. I was giddy with the thrill of big bucks at last. Parke suggested we do some drinking and dancing over at Bonnie & Clyde’s, a movement bar on West Third Street, to recover and celebrate. After a few hours, we realized that
we didn’t have *Lover*; one of us had left the only complete copy of the manuscript under the restaurant table. We found our waiter reading it. “Hot stuff,” he said.

I thought Daughters was hot stuff. Parke and June thought Daughters was hot stuff, and with good reason. As far as I know, they were the only women around at that time who were putting so much money where feminism’s mouth was.

I’m extravagant in my affections while they last. Compare me, if you will, to Tosca or to the family dog: I’m the very model of the cheap date. Parke and June led me to believe (that is, they lied to me) that they were gambling every cent they had on Daughters. Parke, for instance, had given up her law career to work full-time for the company’s success. I imagined what June had given up; what I imagined her giving up was what I would have spent a fortune on if I’d had one: Europe, with special attention to Italy and France. My eyes glazed over with hero worship. When people started complaining to me that June tried to ram her politics down their throats and slapped them upside the head, in a manner of down-south speaking, when they failed to swallow her very hard line, I would try to explain away their indignation by urging them to *look*, June could be whiling away pleasant hours in Paris right now, or soaking her tootsies in the Bay of Naples, or lounging in a gondola—but *instead* . . . so the least we can do is be tolerant. Nobody swallowed my line either.

After I gave June and Parke *Lover*, I gradually handed over most of my life to them and to Daughters. I justified my self-abandon by maintaining that I was merging my personal with my political in an area (writing and publishing) for which I was most suited. I thought how lucky I was that they wanted me.
Since 1972, I'd had full-time employment at Richmond College of the City University of New York, where I taught in the Women's Studies program. I had other serious, time-consuming responsibilities, both professional and personal, as well. I had been, except emotionally, a self-sustaining adult since I was sixteen. But in 1976, shortly after Lover was published, June asked me to take on all her editorial work so that she could write full-time. Without pausing to consider when, with both a full- and a part-time job—and a life—I would find time to write myself, I accepted. My mother's chief contribution to my upbringing had been to beat my legs and back with a walking cane every time she thought that I was, in her words, "showing off" or giving the appearance of believing that I was "better than other people." By the time I met June and Parke, I had become so adept at self-effacement that I could make myself disappear at will. My mother told me that because of me, she'd been cheated of everything she ever wanted. I am, to this day, very careful never to compete with other women; I will go to any amount of trouble to help a woman get what she says she wants; if I must sacrifice something I want in the process, so much the better. Sometimes this behavior is mistaken for feminism; it is penance.

I understood immediately that it was more important for June to write than for me to write. June, I would eventually realize, also thought that it was more important for her to write, so much more so, in fact, she would have preferred that I stop writing altogether.

After a while, Parke and June began pressuring me to resign from my assistant professorship at Richmond College and work exclusively for Daughters. Neither offered me an ordinary reason to do so, such as a salary equal to what the City University paid me, health insurance, a
pension—nor even an extraordinary reason. I was supposed to do it simply because they wanted me to do it. No mundane consideration prevented me from giving them what they wanted, it was rather a fear of being eaten alive combined with the twitchings of some half-paralyzed adult instinct for survival that kept me full-time at Richmond until 1976. But I wondered why they wanted me around full-time, and for what? Daughters simply didn’t have enough work to justify my full-time employment unless I added most of Parke’s work—bookkeeping, mailings, dealing with the printers, etc.—to my editorial duties, and this was clearly impossible. As we all knew, I was inept with money and the arithmetic that handling money demands; Parke, furthermore, would never have put the secrets of the company’s account books into my hands.

But in 1974, when they were leaning heavily on me to say it out loud—*I am thine!*—I was, in any event, nearly always on duty at Daughters in one way or another when I wasn’t teaching. Parke was running the ordinary day-to-day business of publishing with intelligence and keen competence; distribution, however, was an on-going problem for her, fraught with stress and anxiety. Except for gay and women’s bookshops (and there were then relatively few), other, general-subject book dealers and their customers were still wary of taking a chance on such unfamiliar, sometimes openly lesbian, writing. The grand design for Daughters that June and Parke had conceived—beating Random House at its own game—was being continually frustrated in the marketplace.

Nor were women, movement women, living up to the partners’ expectations as book buyers. I think now that it’s possible that neither Parke nor June, sheltered as they were from the exigencies of ordinary women’s lives, ever fully understood that, for most, buying books was an
unconsidered luxury; although both June and Parke knew the facts of life—that women were (and still are) paid considerably less for work than men, and that most women who were single mothers led—and still do lead—lives devoted to acquiring the bare necessities—neither had directly experienced those disquieting conditions: so they resisted and ignored them. As well, it bewildered, and often downright aggravated them, to see women who had some discretionery money spending it on a night out, in company, instead of on Daughters’ books. They also avoided looking at the bottom line: that most people, men as well as women, would rather do nearly anything than read unless the book is “useful” nonfiction or escapist fiction; and it’s cookbooks and children’s books that are the entirely dependable sellers. The war against Random House was being constantly lost.

Given their temperaments—Parke and June were highly competitive, ambitious, and proud; they were quick to take offense, they often perceived offense where none was intended; and they did not easily tolerate frustration or disappointment—it isn’t surprising that the partners were frequently in a state of emotional turmoil which too often was directed at outsiders in the form of insults and hostile confrontations. Many of those outsiders were people who could have done Daughters and its authors considerable good.

Part-time editorial work, for which I was fairly paid, soon began to include unpaid labor: witnessing the often violent personal fights between June and Parke; monitoring their often combative meetings with writers; trying to con people whom the partners had insulted into believing that they hadn’t really been insulted; and consulting with the partners over their growing enemies list. The “enemies” I knew of were those who had disappointed or
frustrated the partners by not buying June’s lesbian-feminist party line—and then, having been offended by the partners, offended them in return.

By the time the partners dissolved Daughters, the enemies list included all of mainstream and women’s publishing, the entire membership of the women’s movement, and last but not least, the only good Indian, me.

Almost from the beginning of our association, every move I made away from June and Parke, no matter how slight or temporary, met with their displeasure, then with suspicion (consorting with the enemies), and with charges of “disloyalty.” My heros, friends, publishers, and employers were underneath it all a creature known as folie à deux, which consciously, and conscientiously, never stopped trying to turn itself into an à trois. It’s hard to find good help: but Batman, perforce, needs his Robin, the Lone Ranger his Tonto, and even seething paranoids crave someone to lean on.

Soon I was seeing my friends on the sly; after a while, I woke up one morning and realized that I never saw my old friends any longer—and that I didn’t know how to see them without Parke and June finding out. I couldn’t understand why I was afraid of their finding out, nor did I yet understand why it was so crucial to them for me to know only the two of them. They once berated me for inviting the eminent scholar and critic Catharine R. Stimpson over for a drink without first asking for their approval, and for not asking them over as well. I waffled. By “berated,” I mean the sort of loud, infuriated name-calling and sin-listing inquisitorial attack known as verbal abuse. I was afraid that Parke was going to hit me; more often than not, when words failed to score the point she wanted to make, Parke used her fists.
The truth was that I didn’t want them to become acquainted with my friends any more than they wanted me to have any friends other than the two of them. I was afraid that one, or both, would lash out at people I cherished. I had learned my lesson early on when I invited June to meet my dearest friend, the painter Louise Fishman. I don’t recall the preliminaries but in short order after the introductions, June was, unprovoked, raging at Louise, insulting her life, her work, her background, while reserving special (and mysterious) contempt for the fact that Louise had played basketball in high school. Louise’s response was sensible. She put on her coat and quietly went out the door as if she were backing away from a barking, potentially dangerous, dog.

I put the scene out of my mind. Unless I wanted to walk out behind Louise—and to my eternal shame, I did not—I would have to, at all costs, avoid thinking about June’s assault. I put it out of my mind—and kept it in that overcrowded “out there”—until now: that is to say, their tyranny over me, and my cooperation in being tyrannized, survived their deaths. June has been dead, at this writing, for ten years; Parke died in February 1992, less than a year ago.

Beneath the fragile gift-wrap of her professed politics, June Arnold regarded herself, by virtue of her socialite Houston upbringing, as a singular aristocrat; as such, she tended either to patronize or lavish disdain on any woman (or man) without class characteristics she could honor. It was as simple as this: Louise had played basketball; June had grown up riding her family’s horses. Poverty irritated June; she understood that one might be born poor but to go on being poor into adulthood, she felt, demonstrated either an annoying weakness of intellect, or some pre-
embryonic poor judgment in not getting oneself born an heiress, or some perverse refusal to grab hold of the legendary bootstraps and give them a good yank.

It was, however, the “common” woman who was being canonized by radical and lesbian feminism in those days: the more victimized by sexism or by patriarchal institutions, the more, so to speak, sainted. There was an unspoken taboo against personal ambition. “Using” the movement to achieve individual goals was tantamount to committing the mortal sin of “betraying the revolution,” or betraying the women’s movement, or all women. It was also a time in feminism, coincidentally, when mothers, as opposed to fathers, could do no wrong—a response to the Freud-inspired years of blaming mothers for everything.

Daughters, to some extent, practiced the politics June preached, by publishing literature by women overwhelmingly trapped in circumstances beyond their control—Born to Struggle by May Hobbs, for example, and A True Story of a Drunken Mother by Nancy Lee Hall, and I Must Not Rock by Linda Marie.

But in real life, June was dealing with her feminist embarrassment (not guilt: good feminists had nothing to feel guilty about) over hiring a maid and having the money to pay her well, by tying a big pink ribbon around the new mop she’d bought her, as if it were a gift.

Without money, class, or horses, I could only assume that what separated me, in June’s view, from the common feminist herd was my small literary distinction. But it wasn’t enough. June wanted me cut out of the herd absolutely. June decided, and Parke went along with it, that it would be better all around if I came from a more socially acceptable background, one rather more like hers or Parke’s.

June’s politics were by and large for public consump-
tion only. She swore, for example, by one of the most fundamental tenets of the women's movement, the one on which consciousness-raising, the first step towards liberation, was based: that one woman will unquestionably believe what another woman discloses about her life and the nature of her background. Privately, however, June persisted in reverting to type. In one of my most memorable encounters with the partners, I learned that after close and careful consideration, June had decided that I must be lying about the circumstances of my birth and upbringing in order to gain movement credentials. Nobody, said June, could be as bright, as educated, as good a writer, as well spoken and well mannered (and so forth) as I was—yet come from the deprived circumstances and cruel mother I had only very slightly, and very casually, filled her and Parke in on. It's impossible, said June, _we do not believe you._

While I was profoundly moved and impressed by women such as Linda Marie, who could tell the story of her horrific childhood in clean, spare, glowing language (in _I Must Not Rock_, which I had the honor of editing), I was myself so ashamed of being my mother's victim, and of my helplessness in her power, I made every attempt to conceal the facts of my early life even from intimates, even from myself: I had, for example, spent most of the first four years of my life in a crib which was, in effect, a cage; my mother had ordered a sixth side carpentered for it, a hinged "lid" that locked me inside for most of the day and all the nights. One day my father was moved to take me out of the cage and destroy it. Within the hour, he began teaching me his dance routines. I did not think of myself as a victim; I thought of myself as incredibly lucky. I'd escaped, I'd survived; I was therefore undamaged: wasn't
I? If anything, I had embellished my childhood for June and Parke to make it seem reasonably “normal” to them—more eccentric than awful.

I began very gradually re-entering the world three years ago in my own circuitous, aberrant fashion, through extremes of physical exercise. After a while, I remembered that the one thing during my childhood that I’d loved (beside beauty) was dancing with my father. So I added a dance class to the extremes of physical exercise. My teacher is the dancer and choreographer, Beth Easterly. There are more ways than one to exit a cage. In my case, it has taken more than one dancer to unlock the lid and help me out. I’m out; I am, for instance, writing this introduction to Lover and one of my novels-in-progress, You, is nearly complete.

When June declared that they did not believe me she was within her rights, but for the wrong reasons. I did not fight back, although I might have used the opportunity to tell Parke and June the unvarnished truth; but within the topsy-turvy context of June’s disbelief (that the earth’s disinherited cannot acquire manners and education, or be gifted), the truth would have worsened my position because the truth was much worse than the “eccentric” half-truths I’d told her. And when June was convinced that she was right nothing could persuade her that she was wrong. And under certain kinds of attack, if the attacks come from women, I become paralyzed. I was paralyzed. I felt that June, and Parke with her, had unscrewed my head and filled my body with buckets of melancholy. I felt as helpless as a beaten child. I had no words. I don’t recall how I replied to the charges. Apologetically, no doubt.

On the other hand, I couldn’t bring myself to commit a version of suicide on June’s behalf. I clung to the identity I
had disclosed; it wasn’t much, but it was all mine. June
never stopped disbelieving it.

Aside from the stunningly classist (and positively un-
American) attitude built into June’s disbelief, there was
the partners’ ongoing conviction that if they battered long
enough and hard enough at what I had indeed come
from, and still was (despite the renovations I’d done on
myself) they might eventually erase my difference from
them—my origins, my memories, my history, and my
people.

Doing away with my difference, the stuff of my human
individuality and of my art, would also serve another vital
purpose. Separate a writer from her typewriter and she’ll
find a pencil; separate her from her autobiography, through
disbelief, and she will become silent: and June knew it.
The patriarchy had been successfully employing the tech-
nique for a long time.

June and Parke had filled my days and nights with
personal and professional crises; nonetheless, I was still
writing. Furthermore, Lover was receiving the sort of crit-
ical attention June had craved for her second novel, The
Cook and the Carpenter and for her third, Sister Gin.
Worse, I was the second novelist published by Daughters
who, June felt strongly, had gotten more attention than
she deserved.

June and Parke became lovers in the late sixties. The first
half of Daughters’ life was located in Plainfield, Vermont,
where June owned a farm. Later, June and Parke moved
into the top floor of June’s Manhattan loft building, but
kept the farm. Parke bought the townhouse on Charles
Street in Greenwich Village to serve as company head-
quarters; the Charles Street house also gave Parke a place
absolutely hers to escape to when the fights with June, which were usually over June’s involvement with lesbian-feminist politics and presses, began to escalate. Parke called sleeping at Charles Street “running away from home.” June had her own escape hatches. She would retreat to the farm or rent small apartments in the Village, where she wrote and saw movement friends privately. June’s politics had always made Parke nervous: that’s how Parke put it, “They make me nervous.”

Ironically, June’s politics are what brought them together. June was one of a group of women who, in the late sixties, took over a long-abandoned city-owned building on East Third Street and made it, rather comfortably, a shelter for women and a day-care center. When the city ordered them out, they resisted; the cops dragged them out. Parke was one of the lawyers who went downtown to get the women out of jail. Parke told me how June’s firebrand temperament initially thrilled her; how glamorous she seemed. But Parke’s romance with June’s temperament, and the politics which inspired it, was soon replaced by “nervousness,” which in fact was a fear (which would graduate into paranoia) of June’s drawing fire at the two of them from both the society at large and from parts of the movement June was at war with, which eventually included most of the women June had been with in the Third Street action.

June has been written about frequently, sometimes within the context of warm feminist praise for her fiction and her politics. Once in a while, a few details of June’s life are woven in with discussions of June’s books. It always interests me to find that the writers generally assume that June, with sterling altruism, deliberately turned her back on her Houstonian social rank and discontinued any immoderate personal use of her wealth once she became a feminist and
a lesbian-feminist and a publisher of books by women: as if she had pulled herself down by the bootstraps.

In fact, June risked nothing, and lost nothing, when she left Houston for New York and the women’s movement. She had absolute control over her fortune, and very sensibly she never neglected to foster it. She never felt the cost of Daughters, nor did her generous handouts to feminist enterprises ever make a noticeable dent in her wealth. She enjoyed the enviable position of being able to indulge in charity (and buy alliances) without feeling the pinch of self-sacrifice. She once told me that she was always very careful not to give to feminist causes any of the money she meant her children to have. Her mother, she said, would want her grandchildren raised as much as possible as she had been, and well taken care of after her death.

When the partners decided to terminate Daughters, and retreat from New York into Houston, they might have sold the company to other women. That they did not allow Daughters to continue, in new hands, publishing women’s writing which might otherwise never see the light of day, was their revenge, their particular Tet offensive, against women in general and the women’s movement in particular.

As well as money, June brought to a movement determined to create equality not only with men, but among women, a profoundly inbred sense of superiority and a bottomless need to be recognized as an exceptional woman.

Born in South Carolina, October 27, 1926, June was raised in Houston, where she was a debutante; she went to Vassar but after a year transferred to Rice University back home in Houston. According to June, the Vassar girls were “snobs;” they didn’t regard Texans as their social peers. Attending Vassar was June’s first attempt to gain status in the Northeast: where status counted. Leav-
ving Vassar was her first flight back to established, albeit provincial, status. June had all the well-known vanities, and thin-skinned pride, of the Texas millionaires. She often spoke of how “cultured” (despite the fact that they were Texan?) her mother, and her mother’s family, the Wor-thams, were. The family money was made in cotton and insurance. In Texas, cotton and insurance counted as “old” money. The parvenus were into oil.

After college and a tour of Europe, June married and bore five children, one of whom died in early childhood. She eventually divorced Mr. Arnold because, she told me, he was using up so much of her money in business failures. But not long afterward, according to what she told me, she went to New York and married a “Jewish psychiatrist” whose role as her New York husband, she said, was to give her an excuse to live in New York, away from her mother. June took her second husband down to Houston to meet the family. At the big barbecue thrown to fete the newlyweds, June’s new husband fell in love with all things Texan and refused to return to New York. So she divorced him too. Otherwise, June told me, she’d had lots of male lovers before she met Parke: which is the way it was, she explained, for pretty and popular Houston socialites in her day; she would rather have been a lesbian, of course, but she couldn’t find any lesbians to be a lesbian with.

One of the biggest and loudest fights the partners went through in my presence was about sex. It was bad enough, according to Parke, that June had had sex with men but she also suspected that a woman lover was lurking in June’s past. Parke hated the fact that June had had any lovers, male or female, before her. Sometimes Parke could, in a self-satirizing way, joke about her jealousy. I remember some madcap murderous schemes she came up with to punish June’s first husband for ever laying a hand on her.
I often felt that June, after the honeymoon wore off, was not at all happy with Parke sexually. Parke was a romantic and she had a romantic’s need for June to be the romantic’s ideal of womanhood, the chaste-and-malleable-maiden part of the ideal especially.

Ruinously at work in Parke and June’s relationship was Parke’s enormous need for the kind of security which demands an all-encompassing monogamy, historical as well as current. They joined forces to demand of me “monogamy” with them. Long before they caught me in bed with J. Edgar Hoover, they had more than once heavily hinted that I might be better off without lovers. As I write this, I realize that it wasn’t Louise Fishman’s high school basketball playing that made June attack her, it was because I’d had an affair with Louise, and had been in love with her, and continued to love her.

Parke Bowman was intrinsically shy, passive, and fearful of every kind of rejection. She showed every sign of being deeply inhibited sexually; her personality was the opposite of June’s. Both, however, got a kick out being verbally abusive (they called it “honesty;” what I heard was sadism), and Parke also enjoyed becoming physically violent. I find it probable that Parke felt that beating up a woman was somehow more “decent” than having sex with a woman. She smiled while she was doing it; she seemed orgasmically blissed afterward.

In one blistering scene I was privy to, June argued that any woman—Parke, for instance—of her generation who had not gone to bed with men back in the days when there weren’t enough lesbians to go around wasn’t sexual enough to be a real lesbian. There was a lot of more-lesbian-than-thou one-upmanship going on in the movement then: the fewer the men you’d gone to bed with, the more lesbian you were. But June was not so much regretting Parke’s
lack of heterosexual experience as she was marshaling a
defense against possible movement charges that she wasn’t
lesbian enough to understand and write well about lesbian
experience. As far as I know, those charges were never
made against June or her writing. But New York feminism
was electric with charges and countercharges during the
seventies. June couldn’t exactly pretend to be a poor woman,
not with her real estate and her publishing company, but
she wasn’t about to have her extensive heterosexual past,
which included four children, used against her.

With a few well-chosen words (including, “The reason
you screwed guys so much is because you’re a slut”) Parke
responded to June’s charges that she wasn’t lesbian enough
by redefining insanity and sanity: Insanity, Parke said, was
a woman with the morals of a slut who thinks that the
way to become a lesbian is to go to bed with a lot of men;
sanity, however, was a lesbian who controls her animal
urges until she finds “true love”: as she had.

I always had a hankering to get into some serious legal
trouble so that Parke could win my case in court.

Parke had enjoyed consummated “true love” in only
one relationship with a woman before she met June. She
was by nature deeply conservative and conventional; she
voted a straight Democratic ticket mainly because she
hated Richard Nixon’s guts. “True love” meant marriage
for life.

But “animal urges” sometimes overwhelmed Parke’s
high moral tone. On many occasions, Parke decided that I
was her true love. I am reasonably certain that each was
preceded by a quarrel with June. Compared to June, I was
easy to control and manipulate; and Parke was a control
freak of the first water. But I was not so much controllable
during my life with Daughters, Inc., as very agreeable,
evasive, and diplomatic. I was the unreconstructed femi-
nine (or the unreconstructed daughter of my mother); I was vulnerable to bullying, I would do nearly anything to please. One night, I was at home alone writing *Lover*. Parke rang my bell, marched upstairs, smashed a vermouth bottle against my kitchen stove, and got down on her knees and declared that she was in love with me, would I run away with her? I replied, evasively, diplomatically, that sex and running away together would destroy our friendship. This answer seemed to mollify her. Another time (we were closeted in the Vermont farmhouse pantry whose shelves displayed a survivalist’s supply of canned petit pois), she insisted that I promise her that when I turned fifty—not before, not after—I would “marry” her. She was serious. She said that June would probably be dead by the time I was fifty—a miserable prediction that miserably came true. I was in my mid-thirties at the time; June was eleven years older than I was. I don’t recall what I answered; possibly I lied, and said *Why not?* I loved Parke’s charm and humor; it was her body I was rejecting, but I couldn’t bring myself to insult her body. Parke feared rejection, I feared rejecting.

I was not as diplomatic as I thought I was; Parke knew why, in the first instance, I’d said no, and in the second, the reason for my evasiveness. She never forgave me, yet she never stopped, behind June’s back, trying to seduce me. With every rejection, her hostility grew and expressed itself in ways that ranged from the mean (such as refusing to let me get some laundry done in the washer and dryer at company headquarters), to attacks on my friends, then straight on to eviction.

One of Parke’s favorite forms of revenge was turning me, when she could, into the company’s scapegoat. Midway during the company’s lifetime, June commissioned a novel from a woman in San Francisco, and, I suppose, gave
her an advance. When the completed novel arrived, neither partner thought it was any good. I wasn’t allowed to read it. The writer had published some fine short stories, so I suggested that they send the manuscript back and let the writer turn it into a collection of stories or replace the novel with original stories; I reminded June that mastery of short fiction did not necessarily mean ease with novel-length fiction.

But June was embarrassed by the impulse that had made her commission the work; she had committed, in her mind only, a shaming lapse of judgment. She wanted the whole matter to disappear, as if it had never happened. Parke told me that in order to protect June’s reputation, I had to return the manuscript and write a rejection letter to the author which she herself would dictate to me. Parke stood over me, I typed. The letter was scathing and insulting; it was designed to demolish the author’s ego and make her resist any rash inspiration to show it around to her friends and associates. Then Parke told me to sign the letter I’d typed; my name alone would be at the bottom of Daughters’ stationery: whereupon the worm turned and suggested that we write another kind of letter, the sort that points out to a writer that many novels commissioned by many publishers sometimes—very often, in fact—don’t pan out. If we send your letter, said the turned worm, this woman is going to hate us for the rest of her life. Parke replied that I, not “us,” was going to take the rap; I owed it to the company—for example, Lover had not earned back on sales the ten-thousand-dollar advance she’d paid me and probably never would. June added that the writer deserved the letter for pretending, during June’s visit to her home, to be too poor to afford a television set when everybody (and everybody knew it) could afford TV.

The letter Parke had dictated was sent, with my signa-
ture only. Amnesia has mercifully erased all memories of the responses I got for that letter.

Another book June commissioned that Daughters never published was *Not by Degrees*, essays in feminist education collected and edited by Charlotte Bunch. *Not by Degrees* would have appeared on Daughters’ last list. Charlotte did her work, the book was ready; but it transpired that June and Parke had expected each essay to be a diatribe against Sagaris, a feminist educational institute created by Joan Peters and Blanche Boyd, who was one of Daughters’ authors. Sagaris had enjoyed a groundbreaking life span of one summer during the early seventies in Vermont. I taught writing at Sagaris. One of my students, Dorothy Allison, would later publish her award-winning novel *Bastard from Carolina* as a consequence of her own courage and talent. Charlotte Bunch had taught feminist theory at Sagaris. Charlotte refused to negate the Sagaris experience by complying with June and Parke’s wishes. *Not by Degrees* was later published by Crossing Press.

In the early seventies, Susan Sontag was diagnosed as having drastically advanced cancer. The literary community, worldwide, was frightened for her. One of her friends, and mine, spoke of her fears in front of Parke. It was not long after Parke had decided that I would “marry” her once June was dead; Parke suspected (as if I were June) that my friend and I were sleeping together. On the basis of that suspicion, she hated my friend.

When my friend said that she was afraid that Susan Sontag might die, Parke promptly replied that she hoped that Susan Sontag would die. June agreed with Parke.

No matter what I said to June and Parke about this assault on my friend’s feelings, their answer was always the same, endlessly repeated: Susan Sontag wasn’t a feminist, so she didn’t deserve any pity; if Susan Sontag were
the literary genius she thought she was, she would have long ago said a few good words about Daughters; Susan Sontag, being “male-identified,” occupied the place in the literary firmament which rightfully belonged to June and if the women’s movement had done its work, instead of screwing around so much, the male literary establishment would by now have been replaced by Daughters, starring June instead of Susan Sontag.

Parke was secretive and close-mouthed about her personal life, her background, and her political beliefs. She behaved as if a sort of House on Un-American Activities, manned by a sort of Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn, had its ears to her ground waiting to use anything she might reveal about herself against her. It’s possible that her extreme reserve happened in reaction to the political demands radical and lesbian feminists were making at the time: that class, racial, ethnic, and sexual boundaries separating women could be abolished only by a detailed public disclosure along these lines about one’s own life. Knowledge, in effect, would invariably bring about understanding of the “other,” and understanding would accomplish a united front. It was acknowledged that lesbians, especially poor and/or black and/or disabled (and so forth) lesbians, were the most “other.”

But Parke loathed being identified as a lesbian, and she was deeply suspicious of the “most other,” who, she was certain, would be breaking down the doors to garner for themselves her money and her privileges of skin and class if they were given half a chance.

Meanwhile, June was out there competing for movement prestige by proclaiming herself a lesbian and enthusiastically letting it be known that Daughters was offering the great unwashed half a chance. June made it impossible for Parke to stay absolutely nailed in the closet. When
June was addressing women’s groups, or giving readings, Parke kept herself in the deep background: she didn’t want to seem to agree with June’s lesbian-feminist stance but at the same time she wanted to be around to defend June in case the “most other” went for June’s highly privileged throat. No wonder Parke was a nervous wreck.

Parke was born on February 7 in either 1933 or 1934. She told me that she had been raised, for a while, by her parents in New Jersey, where she would eventually go to college and law school. But while she and her brother, she said, were still children, her grandparents decided that they didn’t want Parke and her brother to be raised by “flappers,” so they went to court and got custody of the two children. Parke gave me the impression that her parents were a sort of *jeunesse dorée*, New Jersey style. Parke also once told me that her father was someone very important with the Atomic Energy Commission. Which is how, Parke told me, she’d learned how to keep her mouth shut; loose lips sink ships, the government had warned the nation during World War II.

Parke told me that the grandmother who’d raised her finally lived in reclusive splendor in a big isolated house in upstate New York and ordered all her food (mostly cans of petit pois) from S. S. Pierce. The conclusion of Parke’s life was not unlike her grandmother’s.

According to Parke, she had severed every connection with all members of her family very early on. She never told me why. She was neutral and cautious when she talked about her beginnings; if she had any feelings for her family, she did not betray them to me. Given the more difficult aspects of her personality—intolerant, hostile, judgmental, unforgiving—I imagine that she was raised harshly. When June spoke of her own upbringing, and she did, frequently and nostalgically, it sounded to me as if
she enjoyed endless love and spoiling, especially from her mother.

The first writer Daughters published who got more attention than June felt she deserved was, of course, Rita Mae Brown.

Daughters Publishing Company, Inc., “Publishers of Fiction by Women,” was created in 1972 to disguise, and legitimize, the fact that June was forced to resort to vanity publishing. Her first novel, Applesauce, written while she was still living in Houston, was published in 1966 by McGraw-Hill and was reprinted by Daughters ten years later.

She wrote her second novel, The Cook and the Carpenter, during her first two or three years with Parke in Vermont. Her first version of the work was an explicit tale of lesbian grand passion, a roman à clef of her relationship with the “cook.” That version, had Parke not interfered with it, might have gotten the mainstream publication June wanted for it, although probably not until June had excised the gender-neutral “na” she used and replaced it with the usual pronouns. But Parke, as she would tell me in detail, was appalled to find herself destined to be in print so openly a lesbian. She demanded from June, and got, cuts, rewrites, equivocation, and dense disguises in the novel’s final version. The Cook and the Carpenter was rejected by all the mainstream publishers.

Hence, Daughters, at a time when June still loved the women’s movement, which would, June was certain, recognize her feminist literary masterpiece in return. And so it did—the educated, habitual book-reading part of the women’s movement, in time, did show a proper appreciation for The Cook and the Carpenter—but not fast enough and never, in June’s view, sufficiently. Nor did the “right”
women (the poet Adrienne Rich, for example, and Susan Sontag) ever respond appropriately, or, perhaps, at all. What the movement did respond to, immediately, and with love, was another novel on Daughters’ first list, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown.

Rita Mae Brown’s first novel is as far removed from the woeful tradition of the Lesbian Gothic as it is from *The Cook and the Carpenter*’s stylistic mannerisms and equivocation. *Rubyfruit* is a funny, straightforward tale of the picaresque adventures of Molly Bolt, and Molly Bolt is lesbian *mens sana in corpore sano* entire. In no time, Molly Bolt became a conquering heroine. To a greater or lesser extent, every woman, gay or straight, who read *Rubyfruit* wished she could be more like Molly Bolt.

Parke rejoiced in *Rubyfruit*’s financial success. She had joined in creating Daughters to become a businesswoman. But Rita Mae Brown’s success humiliated June. The popular acclaim June had counted on from the women’s movement had gone to someone else; nor was there any praise forthcoming from New York’s literary community. June’s covert purpose in founding Daughters was annulled in little more than a year. Nearly as demeaning, the same mainstream houses that had rejected *The Cook and the Carpenter* soon began trying to buy the rights to *Rubyfruit Jungle* from Daughters. Parke wisely held on to the rights until she got what she considered top dollar in the deal.

Even worse, Rita Mae had unwittingly scored another sort of triumph over June. Like Molly Bolt, Rita Mae Brown was still in her twenties; she was attractive, sexually desirable, and sexually active. Rita Mae’s outrageous *mots*, and singular fearlessness, coupled as they were with warmth and charm, endeared her to most women. June was old enough to be Rita Mae’s mother. June had, in middle age, the body of a teenage athlete (but so did Rita
Mae) but only Parke got to see it. At last a lesbian, June was confined (it was as bad as being a wife) in a relationship with a woman who wasn’t all that crazy about sex but was certainly crazy when it came to sexual jealousy. When June tried to be charming, like Rita Mae, she often came off like a deep-fried version of Scarlett. When she tried to be outrageous, she sounded either pompous or scary. June had a scanty sense of humor; Rita Mae was able to make people laugh. Up from poverty, Rita Mae was a self-made woman. If anything, June’s wealth mitigated against her in the women’s movement, which tended, in that era, to equate poverty with political virtue.

Officially, the women’s movement didn’t have stars, but it was composed of human beings so of course it did; and Rita Mae, who had great native charisma as well as political wit, was one of the movement’s first stars. Rita Mae had, in fact, along with Charlotte Bunch, and other members of what was to become the Furies collective in Washington, D.C., been among the first (during the sixties) to posit, and see into print, the politics of lesbian-feminism which June espoused. June had hoped, since the time of the Third Street Building takeover, to be that too: a movement star.

Daughters’ degeneration began with its first list, a year after its founding in 1973, with—as June saw it—the unjust victory of an inferior woman over a superior one. The rest of that first list was, to June, simply high-quality filler.

Parke was proud of Rita Mae’s success. But a united front was crucial to both of the partners. Parke finally, reluctantly, agreed with June that it wasn’t fair.

June and Parke had approved of all my manuscript choices until I presented them with M. F. Beal’s Angel Dance. It was late in the life of Daughters, which was, by
1977, becoming more of a armed camp than a publishing company. The screws were tightening on Parke’s para-noia, which she had lately begun to express as a fear that “something might happen” to June if June didn’t withdraw from public view.

By then, however, June was up to little more than talking old-fashioned lesbian-feminist cant at nothing more dangerous to her health than Modern Language Association Conventions. I once listened to June say at an MLA seminar—which was perhaps entitled Whither Clit Lit?—“We’ve [Daughters and the feminist presses] gotten rid of harsh expressions like screw and spread your legs . . . and reclaimed fat and wrinkled as adjectives of beauty.” Parke was fat, June was wrinkled, and leg-spreading in their bed was on the wane. Parke sat beside me during June’s presentation checking out the audience, some of whom, she’d warned me, would be FBI agents masquerading as academics and writers. Anyone who couldn’t look her in the eye was an FBI agent.

I hadn’t taken Parke’s fixation on FBI infiltration seriously because more often than not she made a joke or a game out of it. I was therefore surprised when the partners initially resisted my desire to publish M. F. Beal’s Angel Dance: in which a strong-minded feminist revolutionary, who’s survived the male left of the sixties, fights her way through sinister attacks from both the left and the right, and ultimately enjoys sex with a women’s movement star in a snowbound cabin. There was nothing wrong with the politics of Angel Dance that I could see, and it was also a heady novel of suspense written with confidence, ease, and sophistication.

When I (wrongly) persuaded Parke and June that Angel Dance was going to be a bestseller just because I loved it, they let me go ahead and write M. F. Beal a letter of
acceptance. Working with M. F. Beal was an interesting change from the usual. As soon as M. F. Beal returned her signed contract, Parke told me that she’d had word from Beal that while I was working with her on the book, I must under no circumstances send anything in writing to her through the mails; all editorial work had to go on over the phone, but it had to be over a public pay phone, never a private one.

What?

Parke hinted darkly that the plot of Angel Dance might be based on the author’s real-life experiences, which (Parke suspected) were replete with dangerous emissaries from the right, and desperadoes from the left, and roughnecks from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

True to form, I did as I was told by the boss. Parke liked me to call her the boss. I enjoyed getting out of the office, even when the local street nuts tried to horn in on my pay-phone conferences, but nothing in my conversations with M. F. Beal gave me reason to believe that she was anything but a good novelist who wanted the best for her book.

It took me a while, but eventually I understood why Parke was buying surveillance equipment, adding locks to the company doors, and regularly inspecting its telephones for taps: government taps. I got it; Parke wasn’t playing cloak-and-dagger games, she was dead serious.

With considerable braggadocio and swagger, Parke had gone up against “Random House” when she’d entered into the Daughters’ partnership. She had, for years, precisely followed the rules of capitalism to achieve success for Daughters, and had openly showed her contempt for the feminist presses for not being intelligent enough (or rich enough) to do the same. But, in her view, she had failed; “Random House” had won. Daughters, Parke felt,
had earned little more than a small *succès d’estime*—and that, only when she was talking to the right people: who were never the “right” people, who were the New York literary establishment.

Inspired by *Angel Dance*, Parke looked in another direction for grandeur of another kind. If the FBI was seeking to find incriminating evidence against Daughters, or to plant some, then Daughters was important. Therefore the FBI was after Daughters because Daughters had to be important. It was true, of course, that the FBI had routinely monitored feminist meetings and individuals since the sixties; and certain of the sisterhood who entered the women’s movement after working for left-wing causes were loathe to give up their dangerous-character identities.

But we were, as I pointed out to Parke, entering the late seventies; I suggested to Parke that it must be common knowledge, even to the feds, that feminism as a fomenting revolutionary force was now a back number if it had ever been a number at all. Guilt by association, Parke answered, now that we’re publishing *Angel Dance*. They’re going to try to nail us.

*Angel Dance* was published in 1977. That same year, the Women in Print Conference that June had organized among women’s presses, large and small, nationwide, took place during a heat wave and a plague of grasshoppers in a deeply rustic Girl Scout camp surrounded by cornfields outside of Omaha, Nebraska. June was responsible for that choice of location. It was central to all the presses; fairness was the issue, not comfort. Neither Parke nor I wanted to summer in a hot cornfield; I had wasted three days of my extreme youth with the Girl Scouts trying to get a close look at some eighteenth-century “chewed paper” chairs, so I hated the thought of a Girl Scout camp.
But the Women in Print Conference was June’s most ambitious stab at achieving movement esteem. A Nebraska cornfield, a Girl Scout camp—Nebraska itself—would serve to demonstrate that she could be a common woman with the best of them.

I told June that speaking as a common woman, I myself preferred hotel rooms in San Francisco or New Orleans to cornfields in Nebraska. Parke told me to shut up, we’d get a kick out of slumming—besides, if we didn’t go along with June “something might happen to her” out there in the alien corn all by herself.

At least a hundred women in print showed up. We all had to take turns going into Omaha to shop for food, then cook it in the unrelieved heat. Some of the hundreds were vegetarians; some, macrobiotic; some spat out anything with sugar in it. The politics of food was under constant discussion. I don’t cook. I was finally coerced into representing three-personed Daughters at the stove, so one night I fried fish and wrote on the chalkboard menu that it was fried grasshoppers—free food, therefore the most feminist food.

There was a major cornfield abutting the cabin where Parke, June, and I slept. The first night of the conference, while June was out working the camp, Parke had a look at the cornfield, then tiptoed over to me and whispered this: The cornfield is full of FBI agents. I laughed. Then I looked at her. She was trembling with fear, tears were in her eyes. It got worse: The FBI, she was certain, had been monitoring feminist presses, and the single feminist publisher, for a long time. Now that everybody was corralled in one place, they’d have an easy bust; any minute, the feds would be slapping the handcuffs on every “pinko” woman in the Girl Scout camp, but they’d take June and her first because they were the most important—and be-
cause June was a well-known “ringleader.” She and June were going to the slammer, they’d be locked in separate cells, she was never going to see June again. Parke began weeping.

I was afraid of all that high-as-an-elephant’s-eye corn myself, but then I’d always been an indoor type. I made light of the corny agents; I tried to reel Parke back in by reminding her that what Daughters did—all Daughters did—was publish fiction by women: therefore nobody, but especially the FBI, took us seriously. Fiction wasn’t taken seriously, I said, women were taken less than seriously; fiction by women? Just a big joke.

Wrong. Women were dangerous, lesbians were even more dangerous, books about dangerous women . . . and so forth.

If June, and Daughters, could get famous no other way they were going to get it as Most Wanted. Parke refused to sleep or eat. She crouched under a window and aimed her binoculars at the corn. I went to find June. I told her that Parke thought that the FBI was hiding in the cornfields and that I thought Parke was having a nervous breakdown. June seemed indifferent; her expression was blank. She said that if I thought Parke was having a nervous breakdown, then I must feel free to take her back to New York; then she returned to the business of Women in Print. I returned to Parke. On my way, it struck me that June’s response to my announcement was eerily calm; my news, I saw, was old news to her. By the time I regained Parke, I was convinced that June had traveled to Nebraska hoping for agents in the cornfield. More than one woman whose ideals and personal ambition had been disappointed by the women’s movement half-hoped to achieve immortality in those days by becoming a martyr to the cause—and June wasn’t the first.
I went and scored some speed (I didn’t inhale) from a San Francisco sister, then told Parke that if she would lie down and grab some sleep, I’d keep watch. I kept watch until it was time to go home.

Once we were back in New York, June asked me never to bring up the matter of the FBI in the cornfield again.

Not all of the FBI hysteria bounced off Angel Dance or snaked its way out of the partners’ delusions of grandeur. Shortly, in the fall of 1977, one of June’s favorite “sister” presses, Diana, in Baltimore, would suffer a devastating break-in and subsequently get the fervent attention of every woman in the feminist press movement. The grapevine was hot with rumors: did Casey Czarnik and Coletta Reid, the founders of Diana, do it to themselves? Was it men? A rival press? The FBI?

Parke and June certainly favored the FBI as the villains. Along with Angel Dance it made for an airtight conspiracy theory. June’s frustration and anger grew more intense. She envied the attention Diana Press was getting. Eventually, Parke would arrange for Daughters to be threatened by my lover, J. Edgar Hoover. Throwing me out of the building was also a good way to get even with me for sleeping with somebody besides her.

With Women in Print under control, June, who thought of herself, and Texas, as southern, announced that it was time to take the South. She had by then published her third novel, Sister Gin, whose story was designed to persuade younger women that in spite of the author’s privileged upbringing and wealth, she was not only as politically correct as they were, she was more so: now she was menopausal, she was old. The older the woman (according to Sister Gin), the less the older woman had to lose; therefore the older the woman, the more the older woman
was inclined to embrace lesbianism, which is what the older woman had wanted to do all along but when she was young, men had stopped her.

The novel is set in the South. June arranged readings in Atlanta and in North Carolina for her and me. As usual, when on company business, I paid all my own expenses. There was an unacknowledged understanding between me and the partners that because of June’s very generous handouts to feminist presses and other enterprises, I was responsible for picking up the slack. It was only right: they had paid me ten grand for Lover and Lover wasn’t earning back the advance.

The southern sisterhood (the few of them who showed up for the readings) fell hard for June. One extremely attractive sister fell hard for me and the fall was mutual. Parke efficiently blocked every move we made to get an hour in bed together.

In Atlanta, while she was reading to an audience of twelve in somebody’s front parlor, June (rather like Luciano Pavarotti) became suddenly overwhelmed by the sound of her own words in her own voice and began crying. Pavarotti weeps, but goes on singing. June wasn’t so professional. By then, I too craved success for June; my motives were base: anything to shut her up. Without a break in the reading, I put one arm around her shoulder, swept up Sister Gin, and replaced her voice with my own.

Our small audience was deeply moved by what they saw. What they thought they saw was sisterhood in action, a feminist bonding and twinning, one woman taking up where another woman must leave off, an emotional correlative of the political. What they saw in fact—on my part—was a purely theatrical gesture, a professional
move deeply instilled in me by my interesting childhood.

One Christmas at the state asylum for the insane, my father and I were only two beats away from entering the stage tapping his flamboyant grapevine step for a captive audience of two hundred or so medicated schizophrenics: but suddenly my father folded. His knees were trembling, his skin was dead white, and damp; he had to sit down. His bad cold was in fact pneumonia. But: *Go!* he croaked, and I did, instantly, holding the right hand of an invisible ten-year-old girl and tapping as my father would have. So I tap-danced for June that night in Atlanta just as I’d been tap-dancing for June, Parke, and Daughters all along—and most of the time, in spite of everything, I enjoyed it. The emotional tone was familiar, as in of or relating to a family, mine in particular. And I loved tap-dancing for the sheer hell of it.

June told our little audience later that she’d started crying during the reading because she was so moved to be back “home” in the South again, where women truly understood her. But I knew that her tears came instead from the depths of her disappointment in these same women. They loved her, and they showed it; but once again there were too few of them to love her the way she needed to be loved.

The southern tour was in any case designed to disguise a personal agenda of June’s, just as Daughters had disguised June’s vanity publishing. June’s son, although intelligent, sweet-tempered, and athletic, was not academically inclined. June, however, wanted him to have a degree from a distinguished university; the family honor was at stake. The readings, and Daughters’ promotion tour, went first to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, so that June could remind the university that one of her ancestors had been the state’s attorney general, and then to Atlanta,
where, June told me, she was going to offer Emory University some sort of deal. After Atlanta, we came back home.

June's trouble with *Rubyfruit Jungle* returned in another form when *Lover* was published. When Diane Johnson wrote a friendly review of *Lover* for the *New York Review of Books*, where no Daughters' book had been mentioned before, June's response was that she'd known all along that *Lover* was "reactionary establishment" writing.

When some feminist *salonistes* phoned the company to ask for my number so that they could invite me to give a reading from *Lover*, June replied that I did not give readings unless she too was invited to give a reading. A month later she told me about the invitation, adding only that she hadn't bothered to tell me about it till then because she'd known that I would agree with her.

Sometimes I believe in a spooky kind of destiny. I happened to be in Houston, for once minding only my own business, when June was diagnosed as having incurable brain cancer. Furthermore, I'd randomly landed in a small hotel less than a block away from where Parke and June lived. They had traded up out of the suburb into Houston's museum district.

Predictably, I dropped everything and ran. Predictably, what June wanted me for was to help her hurry up and complete *Baby Houston*. Parke and June, this time, were under the gun. They put up a show of geniality and graciousness. None of us referred to the past or to the discourse in *Lover* on brain cancer. I set to work. *Baby Houston* was long, wildly disorganized, and packed with extraneous material. June was evidently trying to get every novel into it that she half-suspected she might not live to write; *Baby Houston* had to be her unqualified master-
piece. I did my best; June argued against every change and cut I urged.

After June’s death, *Baby Houston* went through serious editing in other hands than mine and was severely cut. The Texas Monthly Press published it in 1987, five years after June died.

June did not believe that her cancer was incurable. She went through two or three fruitless operations and endured lengthy radiation treatments. Parke spent her days and nights tending to her, often with the help of local friends and June’s daughters. It took June a long time to die. Neither she nor Parke had medical insurance. June had once told me that insurance was a scam, good for nothing except making insurance companies rich: she knew because much of her family money had come from insurance. The wise, she’d explained, make good investments, then cash in when an emergency arises. June’s system worked. The expenses for her care and entirely futile operations and radiation treatments ran into the hundreds of thousands.

When June was dead, Parke sold their house and bought a summer cottage to live in year-round on a straight Fire Island beach. Her neighbor was her oldest friend, Loretta Li, and at least once Parke traveled with her to Hawaii, Loretta’s birthplace. Parke spent most of her last years, however, as a virtual recluse: although there was one bright period when she fell wildly in love (albeit only electronically) with Diana Ross, and then later with an amusing and attractive young woman with whom she wintered for a while in Key West. I advised her, regarding this young woman, to try, to go for the elan vital for a change. Parke couldn’t; she told me that she was too afraid that her friend might say no, and then despise her for being a lesbian. About a year before Parke died, she
returned to Key West alone, and I visited her there. She seemed lifeless and physically frail. She spent most of the time that I was with her silently watching reruns of *Operation Desert Storm* in her darkened living room, but one day decided that we should invite a mutual friend to dinner. At the grocery store, she told me I had to pay for the food. I paid for the food.

A few months before Parke died, riddled with untreated cancer, she bought her own place in Key West. She died in her new home, cared for by Loretta Li. June’s heirs were her children; Parke’s were Loretta Li and Loretta’s son.

Parke told me that about a year before June died, she finally accepted what she had been told all along by her physicians, that her case was hopeless—and so took charge of the matter of her death. She told Parke to go get the gun, kill her, and then kill herself. Parke told me that she got the gun and tried to pull the trigger, but couldn’t: which infuriated June. I asked: Was it like this? If June couldn’t live, neither could you? Parke answered, Yes, of course. And if you, Bertha, had stuck with us the way you should have, she would’ve tried to get me to shoot you first.

It no longer matters who they were; it’s what they did, in spite of it, that continues to matter. They published twenty-two good books by eighteen women, many of whom would not have been published had it not been for June and Parke.

What matters, in no particular order, is: *Kittatinny: A Tale of Magic*, a children’s story by Joanna Russ; *Shedding* by Verena Stefan; *Nerves* by Blanche Boyd; *X: A Fabulous Child’s Story* by Lois Gould; *Applesauce, Sister Gin*, and *The Cook and the Carpenter* by June Arnold; *Angel Dance* by M. F. Beal; *Rubyfruit Jungle* and *In Her Day* by Rita Mae Brown; *Early Losses* by Pat Burch; *A
True Story of a Drunken Mother by Nancy Lee Hall; Born to Struggle by May Hobbs; The Treasure by Selma Lagerlöf; You Can Have It When I’m Through with It by Betty Webb Mace; I Must Not Rock by Linda Marie; The Pumpkin Eater by Penelope Mortimer; Riverfinger Women by Elana Nachman; Daughters in High School, Frieda Singer, ed.; The Opoponax by Monique Wittig; and my two, Confessions of Cherubino and Lover.

Parke and June, as far as I’m concerned, have therefore been assumed, along with Lover’s sexual subversives, into the “heaven” of Lover, where I want them to have a good time, at last.

Lover’s Beloved: 8

I wrote Lover for Louise Fishman. The bowerbird (family Paradisaeidae) falls in love. Immediately, he sets about building a bower of love, a chamber or a passage made of choice twigs and grasses so elegantly made it appears architected. The bowerbird adorns the bower with objets trouvés, bright and shiny bits of paper and glass. When his bower is completed, the bowerbird dances in front of it. I am told that his dance is complicated, that it’s so sophisticated it seems consciously choreographed. It works.

I became a bowerbird. I wrote Lover to seduce Louise Fishman. It worked.