

The Other Woman

Also by Toby Olson

FICTION

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Seaview
The Woman Who Escaped from Shame
Utah
Dorit in Lesbos
The Pool
At Sea
Write Letter to Billy
The Blond Box
The Bitter Half
Tampico

POETRY

We Are the Fire
Unfinished Building
Human Nature
Darklight

*and twenty or so chapbooks
and limited editions.*

Toby Olson

The Other Woman

—a brief memoir

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*In memory of my dear wife Miriam,
lover and friend*

this week

This week, for most of it at least, I am her father. Though things can change. I can be her brother, husband or uncle, even – and this touches me deeply – “My Good Friend.” But for now it’s “My Father,” and that spoken in an oddly formal way. “Be careful, My Father,” as I descend the stairs, or “Thank you, My Father,” as I take hold of her hands and pull her slowly to her feet. Maybe it’s just “My Father,” an announcement spoken through a wistful smile as I walk backward, guiding her toward the bathroom.

What can it mean, this transaction between us that her words initiate? I am nothing like her father, though both of us are approaching his age now, the age at which he died. In the Alzheimer’s Care Givers Group, most probably because of my overwrought enthusiasm, it’s suggested that it may be a religious matter, this My Father, referring to the one in heaven or his representative. After all I do tend to dress all in black these days, though I wear no priest’s collar. This response is funny and very kind in its engagement with what may well be my foolishness.

Her father was an immigrant from somewhere in Russia. He came here with nothing but a few relatives and managed to work his way into the ownership of a modest paint store on Third Avenue in Manhattan. He was a simple man, his few foibles suffered kindly by his young wife and four daughters. There are three daughters now, and two of them call on occasion, but no longer visit. They used to speak with Miriam, but

now when I hold the phone to her ear she says nothing at all to them, though she seems to listen with some intensity. I don't know if there is a reason.

A few years ago, when my niece Sara was visiting here in Truro, she noticed that Miriam, though already quite inarticulate by then, would read out the road signs – yield, school zone, slow – deaf child – as we approached them. It took me a while to remember that when she was just a little girl she would ride in her father's truck from the Bronx to his paint store in Manhattan in the early morning. Maybe she was six years old? And she'd read the signs – Bruckner Boulevard, Triborough Bridge, East End Avenue – much to her father's delight. He'd urge her on.

In Miriam's family, there seemed little room for conversation or anger. Four young girls after all, a father who worked from dawn to dusk six days a week, and a mother who busied herself with housekeeping and cooking. Of the four girls, Miriam was the only one who learned to cook at her mother's elbow. And she learned well. There are manila folders full of scraps of paper on which recipes are written. They contain phrases like "cover or a little more than cover," "heat until all is ready," "chop fish to the proper consistency," and these words in their comedy made for a powerful connection between mother and daughter.

At times I overburden Miriam with my anxiety and shenanigans, and she gets angry. But her anger seems half-hearted, her look that of a stern librarian, but without clear object. She's looking at me, sort of, her eyes vacant as if there is nothing understood behind or in front of them. "I'm sorry," she says, out of nowhere,

and I might reply, "Sorry for what?" but I don't do so, knowing she will have no answer. We are both, after all, sorry: sorry that life has taken this turn, sorry for ourselves, even sorry for each other from time to time. Well, I am. I can't really be sure about her.

"Who am I?" I ask this frequently as I enter a room and note her puzzled expression or approach the bed and pull back the covers. And her answer can be, often has been, "Which one are you?"

"There's more than one of us?" I ask.

"Well, yes," she might say, almost articulate. "There's you, Toby, and the other guy."

"I'm the middle one," I say. "That Toby."

A brief smile then and we fall into sleep beside each other, never touching, though I awaken with her hand on my back, her knee pressed against my thigh, tentative, in the way of virginal lovers examining. In our earlier years, we slept close together, always entangled.

In the Care Givers Group, Lee's wife of so many years has passed away, or died, or been released from her suffering, releasing Lee as well. It all depends on who you are and how you look at things. Lee continues to come to our meetings, though his reason for being there is now absent. For the sake of a kind of continuity. He speaks up on occasion, but now his talk is of loss and history. He is mostly silent. A woman in the group speaks of the problems she's having with her husband and his driving. He won't give up his license or the keys. "Why don't you just take them?" one of the men asks, but she can't do that. He won't let her. The women here seem to have much more difficulty with their demented spouses than do the men. Something about gender that

is more complex than I can understand.

Here in Truro there are no stores open in the winter, so I drive to Provincetown to buy a condolence card. And for the first time in my life, instead of one I buy two. One for Lee and one for the next.

“My Father,” Miriam says, her eyes bright and somewhat vacant, and I want to hear the questions following: “My father, are you lonely?” My father, can I help you?” “Bless you, My Father.”

She’s in the house, beautiful brown eyes staring at nothing, and I’m here in my study, writing this, my story.

It feels like cheating.

saints

Some think of me as a saint. There are those who have said as much. All of them have been women. And I have demurred, very much as a saint might, eyes lowered in humility.

What would it be like to be married to a saint, at least to sleep with one? I can see it in their eyes and know the advantages that I have. *And after the loving and the tenderness and the sacred touch, to be cared for as he cares for her: the washing, the massages, his lips upon my wasted body.* There are no massages. Her body is too tender for that, though from time to time I do rub her feet. And the washing is done by the home health care aid, the cheerful and beautiful Pat, another who has granted me that saintly designation. I had become awkward in the bathing, at times enraged in ways saints might find shameful. In ways *she* found shameful, beautiful brown eyes focused in mine. I was seared and looked away.

When Mother Teresa arrived in heaven she was not yet a saint, but this was heaven, where the future is known as well as all details of the past, and Peter placed a small saint's halo above the good mother's head. Then she was allowed entrance into paradise.

One day, while walking around in the clouds, the soon to be a Saint Teresa spied a gathering of women a short distance away, and at the center of the group, attended by the others, stood Princess Diana, and floating above her head was a halo at least four times the size of the one Teresa sported. In consequence, she approached and then spoke.

“Look here, young lady, I’m Mother Teresa. I have tended extensively to the poor and diseased in the black holes of Calcutta. I have been awarded the Nobel Prize. I will soon be a saint. How is it then that you, nothing more than a bit of royalty, should be topped by a halo four times the size of mine? Please explain yourself.”

The young lady looked down at the aged mother, smiled, then spoke.

“This is no halo, my dear, this is a steering wheel!”

All the attendant ladies laughed then, raucously. Mother Teresa learned a lesson in humility.

And we might learn a lesson too, about saints and saintliness. The good mother, after all, objected to both birth control and abortion, and this while tended to those victimized by, according to her saintly rules, the absence of both.

I am not a saint, though I confess to some satisfaction in being thought of as such. And in the lives of the saints, there is much pain delivered – arrows, whips, fire – for purification or cleansing. And I have feelings about that, romance of my frustration, depression, night terrors. I weep at the oddest times, staring at a flower on a greeting card, the strains of sentimental music. There are feelings in here, somewhere, that I can’t quite locate. I am like the Norwegian farmer who loved his wife so much he almost told her. I may have little to be ashamed of, but I am profoundly ashamed. I have not mentioned Miriam’s name one time in this rumination.

A woman is telling a story, about her mother and breathing. Her mother, now institutionalized, can’t find a place for her body. She gulps air, then stops, then shifts painfully into another position, and for a while

she can breath easily. Then the gulping starts again, and the nurse has to turn her. The woman can't help with this turning. She feels guilty. The end is near. Silence creeps into the room. Someone is quietly weeping.

Another woman in the Alzheimer's Care Givers Group was visited by an angel. She had felt "at loose ends," quoted here since in her mouth the words seemed quite literal: ends at the perimeter within which one might feel control; they had come loose, and now the guarding perimeter itself was falling away. It was nothing specific, she said, nothing to do, at least visually, but care for her husband and keep a good house, details she could only handle in a perfunctory fashion.

"Is there nothing I can do?" the Visiting Angel asked her.

"Well," she said, there's the refrigerator. "I know it's in disorder, though it's out of sight, and that bothers me, that out of control feeling?"

So the Angel spent her time in washing and ordering and throwing things away, and when she was finished the refrigerator was clean and gleaming.

"There," she said.

And the woman reported that the cleaning was a very powerful thing indeed. It was as if her insides had been reordered, and though they, like the bowels of the refrigerator, were out of sight, they made it possible to arrange such order on the outside as well. "Or at least I could feel okay when disorder took over, however briefly. I could tend to my husband without care. I was able to focus my attention exclusively upon him."

Visiting Angels and Saints. A world beyond the ordinary. Everyone one in the group lives there, each in

his or her way. We are close to the outposts of human existence, those places where people fall apart, however slowly, before going to whatever existence we, in our various beliefs, might send them. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, heaven or some other great beyond, a mingling with the chemicals of existence. Who can say? We each say.

And in the meantime we hold to fragments, to the smile or even the frown that seemed to be personal, exclusively for us. There is nothing else to do, lest we put them away and forget them, which for us is impossible.