

“Don’t
Say
a
Word!”
A Daughter’s Reply

A MEMOIR

by Elizabeth Roper Marcus

PREFACE

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The Tip-Off

“Don’t say a word,” my mother began, looking straight at me. “I know perfectly well this may be dumb.” She was carving the turkey at the time, and the buzzzz of the electric knife underscored her warning—not that my mother ever needed a sharp object to get my attention. It seemed that she and my father were about to buy a used car...in Mexico...sight-unseen, possibly the gold standard for bad ideas for anyone, let alone people in their eighties. Worse still, they were buying the car through the same Guadalajara lawyer they’d recently accused of milking the purchase of their new condo. My parents knew they were asking for trouble; they just didn’t care. And the last thing they wanted was skepticism from me, their only child.

A hard-driving New York, Jewish couple—a Macy’s buyer and a dentist—they’d always been sensible, savvy, and unfailingly consistent. I never visited from Boston without noticing that, while my life was changing, theirs hardly did. Retirement barely slowed them down:

they kept their date book jam-packed and continued to shuttle between Manhattan and Westchester in good health and no worse than usual humor. Even Amy, their housekeeper for over 30 years and originally my beloved nanny, was still in the kitchen struggling to please. My parents, who'd made several shrewd real estate investments that now contributed to their carefree old age, seemed as competent as ever. These two did not make harebrained decisions.

And why the gag order? I never challenged them, at least not directly (and I'm a person who in all other situations needs to get in her two cents). A lifetime of bowing to my parents' impressive self-confidence and extremely impressive tempers had worn a deep groove. I was as likely to confront them as to throw myself under a steamroller, and for the same reason.

Instead, during the brief silence that followed my mother's command, I enjoyed a cheerful thought: "I don't live here any more!" For a few moments, safely seated across from my husband and between the twin shields of my two, preteen children, I was swept with thankfulness—this being Thanksgiving.

And then, my inner fact-checker piped up: "Who are you kidding?" Moving out is not the same as "moving on." I'd been out of this home more years than in it, but my parents still seemed larger than life, personal Macy's Parade balloons, forever looming overhead and

threatening to pull me off my feet. As a child, I gravitated to the safety of the kitchen where I shared the staff's view of them as demanding bosses needing humoring. You'd think they were the Windsors the way the household turned around them, like the planets the sun—and not just a working couple with some hired help. To a nervous, ruminative child, they seemed to move with their own spotlight. Their daily comings and goings, their separate breakfasts and joint cocktail hour, their card parties and theater nights and weekends out of town were the source of all worry and relief. I watched them from the wings, They of the fiery tempers and ironclad wills, glamorous and unassailable, dispensing largesse or dreaded judgment: Edna and Leo Roper, the Zeus and Hera of apartment 2B.

To sit at their table before a plate of accessorized turkey was to relive the horrors of Thanksgivings past. In fact, I couldn't eat jello at this table without heartburn, recalling the dinners of my childhood: the one time each day when my mother and her corrective laser could not be avoided. A mother's job, as she saw it—in the dark days before the discovery of bonding, nurturing, and building self-esteem—was a matter of child improvement. Working longer hours than Leo, Edna couldn't afford to waste even one of our rare moments together. So much to fix, so little time! Choosing clothes was about concealing figure flaws. After-school lessons in art, diction, tennis, skating, golf, ballet, ballroom dancing, piano and music appreciation were to make

me “accomplished.” My letters from camp came back to me with the spelling errors underlined in red. And dinner was a nightly plank walk.

The suspense was ratcheted up when I was ten and Amy took on the cooking—a job move fraught with potential peril. From the beginning, my mother’s taxing job made full-time childcare necessary (that, and her sense that she was not cut out for motherhood). Amazing as it seems now, in the 1950’s two professional salaries could support a pair of live-in servants plus a weekly laundress and heavy cleaner. By chance, just as it became obvious that I was too old for a nursemaid, the cook-of-the-moment quit, and my mother offered Amy the job. Danger or not, it was a miraculous reprieve for the two of us, attached by heartstrings since her arrival when I was fifteen weeks old, after the first three nannies had failed to please.

The problem was Amy had never cooked a meal in her life. Nannying was her calling. As a child in a dirt-poor family of Nova Scotia lobstermen, she was so desperate for dolls she played with live lobsters wrapped in ragged dishtowels. Her new position kept the two of us together but at the price of a daily run through the gauntlet of my mother’s inimitable critiques. Amy was now the deer caught in the sightline of my mother’s stun gun. Later, as an angry post-post-adolescent, I wondered if my mother took special pleasure in humiliating her in front of me. Now, I see she must have hoped

to diminish her rival in my eyes. Was there ever a strategy more doomed to backfire? Still, I got the message. I knew never to defend Amy to my mother and risk creating yet another reason to get the two of us fired.

Any dinner was a high wire act, but the heightened expectations of Thanksgiving raised the wire higher. Though both my parents came from large families that lived nearby, the only guests were my mother's two widowed sisters: our own Greek chorus. The meal began with cocktails in the den. While Amy passed hors-d'oeuvres, in a white uniform instead of a nanny's homey tweeds, I made the martinis, my special parlor trick. Too soon, Amy would hurry back to the kitchen and reappear to announce dinner.

Pushing the swinging door with her back, she carried in the heavy turkey on a silver tray. I thought she was a giantess, with her huge hands and feet, her long stride that kept me running to keep up, but I could read the anxiety in her face: the beads of sweat on her thin upper lip with its faint mustache, the nervous fluttering behind her steamed up glasses. My mother scanned the platter like a drill sergeant, avid for infractions.

I was helpless to protect Amy when she served, but never more so than on Thanksgiving. Normally, we covered for one another, she claiming credit for my fallen coat or I for her missing doily. Though

mortified by my own mistakes, I felt heroic taking the blame for what I hadn't done. (Do all children imagine they live in a scary fairy tale?) But I could only hold my breath as Amy made her way alone through the minefield of all those once-a-year vegetables served on the fancy plates with the good silverware and linen. Worst of all, seated among the enemy, mute, I allowed my family to think I, too, viewed Amy as nothing but a hopeless bungler.

A key moment in the holiday drama was Edna's show of offering me a wing, her favorite part of the bird. "A sacrifice only a mother would make!" she'd laugh, as she carved it onto the plate in Amy's outstretched hands. This was her annual, public declaration of love, as direct as she could get. I accepted the wing to please her and to keep her in good humor. The truth was I thought it was freaky, like the other parts she liked: the fatty tail she called by the Yiddish *pupik*, the neck, the gizzards, bony and gristly things that gave her teeth a workout—witch food.

We dined in character. My father ate with relish, as he did everything, radiating pleasure at the meal's abundance and refinement—a world away from the squalor of his immigrant youth. My two aunts, perennial guests at their younger sister's table, ate politely, deferentially, doing their best to avoid my mother's notice. Amy preferred the leftovers of her childhood: the scrapings of the pot,

the bits around the bone, the cores of apples. I had trouble getting down what was put in front of me. It all seemed potent: the pimply poultry skin, the gaggingly starchy potatoes, the stinky Brussels sprouts whose fumes wafted up, threatening to asphyxiate.

After an eternity, my mother would ring her little silver bell, and Amy would reappear. As she made her rounds with seconds, I cleaned my plate by cutting the remains into small bits that I hid in my napkin and snuck into her apron pocket under cover of the tray.

Amy and I barely made it through those long-ago Thanksgivings, or so it seemed. There was always a spotted glass or floury sauce to prove she wasn't up to the task, that her days with us were numbered. It was little comfort when the guillotine failed to fall; it stood at the ready.

Now, all these years later, nothing had improved except my appetite. My two mothers were still at it, Amy, stooped and wizened, bearing her burden along with a lifetime of hurt, and Edna, two face-lifts later and looking better than ever, ringing her little silver bell and calling her nemesis to task. No one seeing them could ever have guessed that these two women, who'd lived under one roof almost all their adult lives, were the very same age.

Following my mother's used-car bulletin, the dinner rolled along without further distress, until Amy left the warm apple pie

on the table and returned with two flavors of ice cream but only one spoon—a felony! “Have you learned nothing?” Edna bristled. Amy flushed with dismay. Later I could commiserate with her in the kitchen but for the moment just ground my teeth. At 44—with my own family, a career, a life, for God’s sake—I still couldn’t cross my parents’ doorstep without falling in line.

These were my parents, just as I’d known them ever since I’d known anything at all. If there was more to them, it never crossed my mind. I took them at face value—and as permanently fixed as specimens caught in amber. Perhaps we all tend to see our parents as simply being and ourselves as always becoming, to see them as solidly of a piece and ourselves as a mille feuille of conflicting motives and desires. But it didn’t help that Edna and Leo were wedded to the what-you-see-is-what-you-get nature of themselves and to the idea of their own immutability.

Still, at 80 and 84, like it or not, they had entered the stage of life where gears wear out and cables fray. Edna and Leo were coming undone and in ways that no one who knew them could ever have predicted. Now, I recognize the car announcement as the first, real warning. At the time, I didn’t know what to make of it, since I scarcely believed in their aging. I made nothing of their falling behind the times, and by then they could barely operate a TV remote. My sense

of my parents as unyielding and all-knowing felt more real than all evidence to the contrary. As a result, the inevitable was inconceivable. And it remained inconceivable even when, soon enough, Edna and Leo began all but transmuting in front of me.

I blame Mexico for what happened. Up North, anchored by places and people they'd known their whole lives, my parents stuck to patterns long engraved in their autonomic nervous system and passed as themselves. Had they stayed put, they might have had an unremarkable decline and coasted quietly into the sunset. In anticipation of my father's retirement at 80, my parents did try out Palm Beach and Palm Springs, where most of their friends wintered, but they'd been underwhelmed. "They dress for dinner," Edna complained. Leo was more direct. "Too predictable and dull," he said. "You could die there."

What my parents were after was a new frontier. Mexico offered a sense of discovery, a touch of exoticism, the thrill of a bargain. The first two winters in Guadalajara went smashingly. They rented a lovely house in the suburbs, joined a golf club, and savored a life abroad that had all the comforts of home, including a cook. There were difficulties—they got lost with regularity and would enter rotaries, called rosarios, at major intersections and then, disoriented and reduced to screaming at one another, be unable to find their way

out—but they remained undaunted. Were it not for the lack of a good bridge game, they might never have found the nearby town of Ajijic, with its colony of retirees (even a few Jewish ones), its golf and card clubs, its amateur theater and chili-cook-off fundraisers. Explaining to friends up North its correct pronunciation—ah-hee-heek—was a kick. Plus the town didn't have a single rosario.

It was in Ajijic that my parents began to progress from cheerfully undaunted to alarmingly unfazed. When I'd first seen them choosing adventure over the usual late-life path of cautious entrenchment, I'd thought: "Good for them!" But by the time of my mother's used car announcement, coming up on their fifth winter in Mexico, they'd begun to jettison sense. Soon they'd be throwing themselves into cockamamie building projects and courting a cast of oddballs they might previously have crossed the street to avoid. A sudden shock would push my father further, and with even stranger strangers. Before it was over their devil-may-care stance would bring down the kind of disasters commonly found in pulp fiction.

Though Edna and Leo never spent more than three months a year in Ajijic, I've come to think of their final decade as "The Mexico Years." It was there they cut loose. And it was there that my family-of-four made an annual two-week pilgrimage each Christmas to visit them. In Mexico, viewing my parents, year after year, against

the same foreign backdrop and for an extended period, I saw their transformation as in time-lapse photography. Each year I was stunned anew by the latest version of them, an ongoing metamorphosis that eventually called into question everything I'd ever thought about them. Two people, who all their lives had insisted above all else on maintaining control, were increasingly out-of-control. Off they sped, holding fast to life and leaving me to wonder just who they really were.

Uncovering their true identities was a liberation. “Don't say a word!” my mother warned? For a long time I didn't.