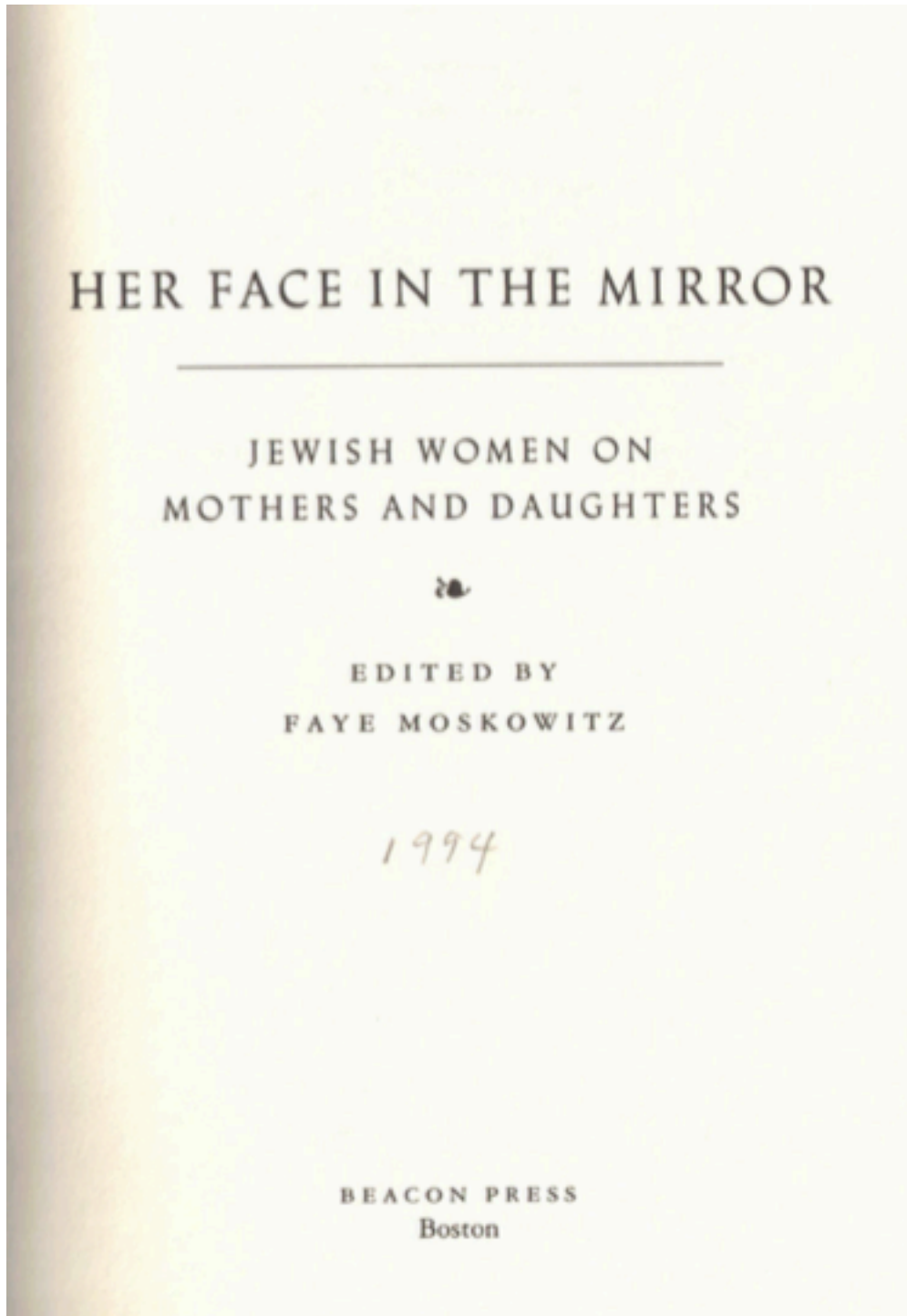


7. About Mothers and Daughters. Vivien Gornick, Irena Klepfisz.  
Introduction to the classic novel by Vivien Gornick Fierce Attachments 1987

Short story by Irena Klepfisz's Gift



## GIFTS

IRENA KLEPFISZ

TALKING BACK

**M**y mother is about to wrap a present—two white cotton handkerchiefs or a green glass vase. I'm very young—ten, maybe twelve.

"Ma, take off the price," I beg. "You're not supposed to show how much you spent." Where did I learn this?

"It doesn't matter. There's no reason to take it off." The price sticks, the tag dangles.

"Ma, *proszę cię!*" I plead, reverting to my primal Polish. "Please!"

"What's the big secret? Let them see! Why shouldn't they see?"

Indeed, why shouldn't they? Why should they think it was nothing? What rules of etiquette require my mother to give silently without anyone having a clue as to her feelings, which, I suspect now, must have been a knot of pride and rage each vying to dominate her public persona:

—See how much I'm willing to spend!

—See how much you're costing me!

—See how generous I am!

—See how much you're making me sacrifice!

A gift from my mother, I would eventually realize, was as much a complex statement about herself and about her place in the world as the note she attached to it. During my childhood I didn't always understand it. But I did grasp this: the gift's price had meaning.

Of course, the nature of the price varied. During our first years in the States, I unconsciously deciphered and tried to obey my mother's coded lessons, which taught that a generous gesture possible only at one's own expense and trouble was the most prized. So as a teenager it seemed natural to secretly embroider a pillowcase with two blue swans floating amid yellow and brown reeds, present it to my mother on her birthday, and then proudly relate how for weeks I had backstitched late at night, using my rearing flashlight under the covers. My mother appreciated struggle and hardship,

the discipline required to make room in an overburdened life for someone else's need. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the value of the gift, the greater the love of the giver. For years, my Jewish immigrant mother tried to let me and others know that her gifts were the gifts of the Magi. Only rarely did she feel she received such gifts in return. But when she did, she boasted. "See, *Irka* sewed this *herself!*" I never knew! In the dark. With a flashlight. *After* I'd gone to bed—late at night. She must have lost a lot of sleep."

My mother expected presents from me twice a year: on Mother's Day and on her birthday. This was not easy. When we came to the States I was eight and had no adult to remind me of dates, to consult with on gifts, or to provide me with money to pay for them. I am an only child. My father had been killed during the war. In those early years, if I wanted to do something without my mother's help or knowledge, I was on my own. Looking back, I don't remember how I managed to get money, nor (except for the pillowcase) the presents I gave her. Perhaps they were drawings from school or repackaged gifts I'd received. But they must have been a success, for, as someone once pointed out, our memory is selective: what we remember most clearly is the pain.

It was the early fifties. I was deeply unhappy. It wasn't that complicated. My immigrant status was no longer exotic or protective ("We have a new girl in class. She came to America on a big boat. She crossed the ocean.") but a source of shame ("Look at those stupid braids! What's she got on her legs? Ugly stockings her big-eyed mother made!"). American children bewildered me. Their unpredictable shifting loyalties—I was Dawn's best friend one day, her archenemy the next—were totally incomprehensible. I had no one to hold onto except my mother and I held on tight, fierce in trying to draw her away from her world of sewing and dress fittings into my world of sidewalk poetry and bicycle rides around the reservoir. She, of course, was trying to earn a living, and most of the time her world won. Most of the time I was lonely.

Summer brought solace. The heat and light gave me strength, made me believe that I could survive—even alone. While my mother sewed, I'd roller-skate at top speed along the colored slate paths of the courtyard and around the blocks of our building, the skate key heavy and solid against my heart. If the layers of scabs on my knees made skating too painful, I'd lie

and dream in the Grove—a grassy, ragged field between our building and Moshulu Parkway. Other times I'd climb the boulder on Sedgwick Avenue and gaze at Van Cortlandt Park and the street below like an explorer annexing a new continent. I'd fantasize power and space and place myself at the center.

But the true gift of the summer was John, the Good Humor man, whom I adored. Making contact with him was as important to me as eating the ice cream he sold. John was constant: always ready to talk, always fully supplied. His truck, with bells sounding as natural as the birds of Van Cortlandt, would wind its way through our neighborhood, making predestinated stops at park benches and on street corners. If I missed him at one, I'd run or skate to the next. On the few occasions when my mother forgot to replenish my funds, John provided credit. I was good for it. My mother had instilled in me an honesty which would never have allowed me to cheat him—or anyone else for that matter.

In those days, ice cream was uncomplicated: orange-and-white cream-cicles for seven cents, vanilla sundae cups or chocolate pops for ten. My mother always gave me dimes (ice in creamcicles was a waste of money) and I, in turn, gave them to John. He'd open a small door at the back of the truck, immediately releasing jittery clouds of white smoke from the "hot" ice which kept the ice cream solid. ("How can something be so cold that it can burn you?" I asked my mother over and over.) Though I yearned for the forbidden creamcicles, I was quite content with the thick sweetness of the sundaes. I'd lick the gooey chocolate syrup off the cover of the Dixie cup, then carefully peel off the wax paper protecting a blue photograph of Susan Hayward or Victor Mature. American custom required me to collect these. Dutifully I stacked them in my desk drawer, though I never really understood why.

At some point I realized I had a choice and I stopped spending the dimes and began saving them. I derived enormous pleasure from my secret thrift. First, saving demanded long-term Discipline and Diligence and Order, all three of which my mother had fully mastered, but which I, already at ten, was finding elusive. Second, and more important, it demanded I give up John and the sundaes, in other words, make a sacrifice, the sole element in gift-giving which guaranteed total success. Since my mother's birthday is at the end of July, I had plenty of time to

exercise self-denial. But let's face it—my sacrifice was probably not as enormous as I chose to believe. (Is this true? Or is this my mother's voice: "So you didn't have ice cream so often? So what?" Have I finally come to accept the fact that *her* sacrifice of leaving my father and the ghetto in order to pass on the Aryan side—"After all *someone* had to be responsible for you, at least one of us had to try to stay alive"—*her* sacrifice of surviving into poverty and lonely widowhood will never be matched by anything I do? She'd given up eternal oblivion for lifelong memory and regret to guarantee me natural mothering. How can I judge today any of my sacrifices, especially ones so trivial as ice cream Dixie cups on hot Bronx afternoons?)

That summer I'd been saving for my mother's birthday for a long time. The final sum: twelve dollars. (Eight dollars? Five? Any of these were enormous amounts for those days.) I wanted to buy something "big," something different. It had to be very expensive. Its price had to reflect how much I loved her, how much I was willing to spend on her rather than on myself, how much I was willing to give up to make her happy. I thought about it incessantly as I walked up and down Jerome Avenue, our main shopping strip. I looked in clothing stores, the five and dime. I was stumped. What could I buy her that would wow her, bow her over? I searched for weeks. Finally, I spotted it in a hardware store window: a lazy Susan.

My mother needed this, as we say in Yiddish, *si a lobb in koy*, like a hole in the head. She was an overworked seamstress, ill with a goiter condition, a woman alone. She barely had time to cook. She certainly never "entertained," nor did her friends. Entertaining was for Americans, for the rich. We were neither. Instead, on Saturday and Sunday evenings my mother and her friends would gather around each others' kitchen tables to sip tea from tall glasses and eat slices of golden pound cake. There was genuine pleasure in this coming together, but inevitably the true purpose would emerge: to confirm once again the existence of the glasses, the food, the table; to review yet again the accounts.

"Shimon Vaysberg? *Er lebt?* He's alive? In Paris?"

"I heard he'd disappeared in Lodz."

"He's married? Bronka? His brother's wife?"

"What happened to his sister? Patti? *Zi lebt?* She's alive?"

"Also in Paris?"

"Didn't she marry very young? *Far der milkhoms?* Before the war?"

"Yankl. A gangster and a pimp. The mother was beside herself."

"Joined the Jewish police."

"*Zlobt bot im derbarger*. The ZOB\* had him shot."

As the evening progressed I'd watch the glasses being refilled, the tea bags redipped, and another loaf of pound cake sliced and distributed. ("*Nem nobis a shikel! Nem! Nem!* Take another piece! Take it! Take it!" they'd urge each other breathlessly.) Even on the few occasions when we'd share a meal, it was always simple, direct. No hors d'oeuvres (except for the oil-drenched *schmaltz* herring), no fancy desserts. To us food was never mystical. It was a pressing need. We did not savor, we ate. Our one-pot dinners of Polish *krynjnik*—a thick, nearly solid stew of boiled chicken, beans, barley, and potatoes, served in large bowls—were intended to fill us up, not to satisfy our senses. If by chance they provided more than nutrition, that was an extra.

So the moment I saw the lazy Susan, I was in love. I remember the blond wood, the delicately carved trays which rotated at different levels around the central golden bar. It may even have been collapsible—the trays folding inward. Among other characteristics, I have inherited my mother's passion for *knickknacks*, knickknacks and gadgets. At the age of ten the genre was already manifest.

I went into the store, had the salesman bring it out. I touched the polished trays, pushed them with one finger—round and round.

"Yes." I told the salesman quietly and watched as he lowered it into a box and wrapped it with festive red paper. I gave him the money, picked up the box and carried it home. I even managed to hide it.

Then it was time. I gave it to her.

At first she seemed just puzzled. "*Nu co moge to arzy?*" What's it for?" she asked.

I shrugged. "*Moze ma ciowc*." I suggested fruit.

The suspect she accepted it with some forced enthusiasm. I don't remember the thanks, only the disaster.

Did she insist on knowing how much it cost because she always had to know *everything*? Did I broach the subject because I was proud of how expensive it was and wanted to tell her how much I thought she was worth or

\*ZOB—Polish acronym for Jewish Fighters Organization

how grown up I was to have so much money to spend? I have no idea. I only know that by then the price was important—to both of us. The point is, I told her.

"*Tuete dollars?* [Five? Eight?]," she whispered. "*Tuete dollars?*" she repeated more loudly. "What's the matter with you? *Bist meshige?* Are you crazy?"

Now she was furious. "You can't waste money like that! This is not what money is for." She was putting it back in the box. "I work and work—and you go out and spend it on *this*? What do I need a thing like this for?"

She closed the box. The lazy Susan was gone.

"I don't want it. *I don't want it!*" She was folding the red paper in half, then again in half. "Give it back! Give it right back. Buy me something I can use. An apron. I need an apron. Buy me an apron," she ordered. She put the red paper in the bottom desk drawer.

I froze. My throat locked, then opened. I began to cry—shock, disappointment, but above all, fear. I'd never returned anything before. The prospect of having to face the salesman and to ask for my money was mortifying. It seemed ugly, demeaning—maybe even immoral, like stealing. After all, there was nothing wrong with the lazy Susan. My mother simply didn't want it, didn't think it was worth the price. How could I ever tell the salesman that?

But I obeyed her. Did I have a choice?

It was getting dark. My mother, usually overly protective, did not seem to notice. I left and, crying the whole way, took the fifteen-minute walk to Jerome Avenue. At the store the salesman was kind. Perhaps it was my obvious misery. Perhaps he figured out the script. In any case, he was merciful and returned the money instantly. No questions asked.

The lingerie shop next door was still open. It was dimly lit, a deep, narrow cave lined with grey cardboard boxes. Behind the counter stood a tiny, stooped Jewish woman waiting to close up and go home. She seemed part substance, part shadow as she stared at the white nylon slips and cotton nightgowns hanging in the window. I told her what I needed. Barely moving, the old woman brought out three aprons from under the counter and spread them out in front of me. I pointed to a green one with white trimming. It had a little pocket on the right side. It cost—who knows? The right amount. The woman folded it and put it in a brown paper bag.

#### HER FACE IN THE MIRROR

I walked home in the dark. As I entered our courtyard I could see the light in the room we shared—where we both slept, where I did my homework and she fitted her customers. Unlike other nights when I'd come home late, she was not at the window watching for me.

I walked up the two flights, unlocked the door. She was sitting at her sewing machine, but stitching a hem by hand. She looked up at me. I handed her the bag and she pulled out the apron.

"Now *this* is nice," she said, getting up. She slipped it over her head and tied it in the back. She put her hand in the pocket to feel out its size. She smiled as she looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror which hung on the back of the door to our room. "I like this. I like this *very much*. What a wonderful color! What a wonderful gift! Oh, thank you, Irka! Thank you!"

Then she kissed me.



From Irena Klepfisz, found among things of Irena's mother

# THE WIDOW AND DAUGHTER

## The Widow and Daughter

"The widow Rose and small daughter Irena survived and now reside in New York." Translated from the Yiddish in *Days of Bundism* (Generations of Bundists).

The widow  
a shadow of the wife Rose  
(he was over six feet  
and called her *Mala*,  
little one)  
at one time expected  
to live  
not survive.

In those days  
she was romantic  
(they met one winter  
when he chased  
and overtook her on a ski slope.)  
She read many novels,  
knew all the love songs  
(one in particular  
was her favorite—  
*ja nie jestern wintna*,  
it's not my fault)  
knew the first part  
of *Pan Tadeusz* by heart,  
helped her husband  
with his work  
(he was an engineer  
and she drew circles for him  
with a protractor)  
and never believed  
that he might die



(he was a champion jumper  
and discus thrower)  
but would be young always  
in their apartment in Warsaw  
(it was sometimes called  
she told me proudly  
the little Paris of Eastern Europe)  
where she would receive her sisters,  
nieces, nephews (one of the twins died)  
and dreamed into a mist even grandchildren  
of unborn sons and daughters  
and looked forward to intellectual discussions  
about the progress of the workers' movement,  
the latest romance in a novel or the family.

Instead she survived  
motherhood  
(she was in labor for three days,  
then he said: something has to be done)  
the Aryan side  
(she became a maid  
and was polishing silver for *them*  
while the ghetto burned)  
widowhood  
(as a child I asked  
if she cried a lot  
when they told her  
and she said  
yes)  
and finally New York  
(she became a dressmaker  
and did alterations)  
with the little daughter  
product of three days of labor  
a moving monument

whose melted existence  
formed an eternal flame  
(at memorial meetings  
she lit candles  
for all the children  
who had perished).

These two:  
widow and half-orphan  
survived and now resided  
in a three-room apartment  
with an ivy-covered fire escape  
which at night  
clutched like a skeleton  
at the child's bedroom wall.

To this apartment  
which chained them  
welded them  
in a fatal embrace  
the missing one  
returned at night.

The missing one  
was surely  
the most  
                  important  
link.

He held out on the fire escape  
refusing to give up  
his strategic position.  
He was there  
on the wall  
with his whole family

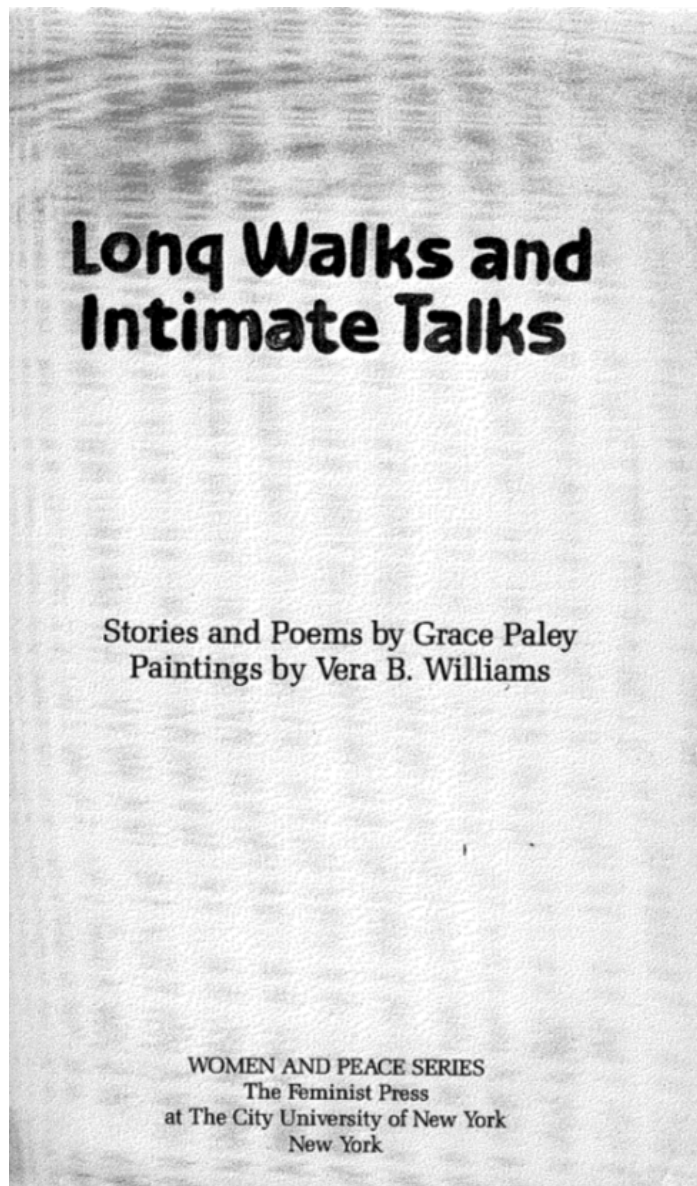


staring out of the picture,  
on the piano  
staring out of the picture,  
in the living room  
(vying with her mother for attention)  
staring out of the picture,  
till the apartment  
seemed to burst with his eyes  
which penetrated every corner  
seizing every movement of their mouths  
and made them conscious  
that he understood  
every word they spoke.

And when the two crowded  
into the kitchen at night  
he would press himself between them  
pushing, thrusting, forcing them to remember,  
even though he had made his decision,  
had chosen his own way  
rather than listening to the pleas of her silence  
    (she once said: I never complained about his activities  
    and Michał said he was glad I was not like other wives  
    who wanted to draw their husbands back into safety)  
he would press himself between them—  
hero and betrayer  
legend and deserter—  
so when they sat down to eat  
they could taste his ashes.

## 8. Midrash About Happiness. Grace Pale.

Grace Pale: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/08/the-art-and-activism-of-grace-paley>



## Midrash on Happiness

What she meant by happiness, she said, was the following: she meant having (or having had) (or continuing to have) everything. By everything, she meant, first, the children, then a dear person to live with, preferably a man, but not necessarily, (by live with, she meant for a long time but not necessarily). Along with and not in preferential order, she required three or four best women friends to whom she could tell every personal fact and then discuss on the widest deepest and most hopeless level, the economy, the constant, unbeatable, cruel war economy, the slavery of the American worker to the idea of that economy, the complicity of male people in the whole structure, the dumbness of men (including her preferred man) on this subject. By dumbness, she meant everything dumbness has always meant: silence and stupidity. By silence she meant refusal to speak: by stupidity she meant refusal to hear. For happiness she required women to walk with. To walk in the city arm in arm with a woman friend (as her mother had with aunts and cousins so many years ago) was just plain essential. Oh! those long walks and intimate talks, better than standing alone on the most admirable mountain or in the handsomest forest or hay-blown field (all of which were certainly splendid occupations for the wind-starved soul). More important even (though maybe less sweet because of age) than the old walks with boys she'd walked with as a girl, that nice bunch of worried left-wing boys who flew (always slightly handicapped by that idealistic wing) into a dream of paid-up mortgages with a small room for opinion and solitude in the corner of home. Oh do you remember those fellows, Ruthy?

Remember? Well, I'm married to one.

But she had, Faith continued, democratically tried walking in the beloved city with a man, but the effort had failed since from about that age—twenty-seven or eight—he had felt an obligation, if a young woman passed, to turn abstractedly away, in the middle of the most personal conversation or even to say confidentially, wasn't she something?—or clasping his plaid shirt, at the heart's level, oh my god! The purpose of this: perhaps to work a nice quiet appreciation into thunderous heartbeats as he had been taught on pain of sexual death. For happiness, she also required work to do in this world and bread on the table. By work to do she included the important work of



raising children righteously up. By righteously she meant that along with being useful and speaking truth to the community, they must do no harm. By harm she meant not only personal injury to the friend the lover the coworker the parent (the city the nation) but also the stranger: she meant particularly the stranger in all her or his difference, who, because we were strangers in Egypt, deserves special goodness for life or at least until the end of strangeness. By bread on the table, she meant no metaphor but truly bread as her father had ended every single meal with a hunk of bread. By hunk, she was describing one of the attributes of good bread.

Suddenly she felt she had left out a couple of things: Love. Oh yes, she said, for she was talking, talking all this time, to patient Ruth and they were walking for some reason in a neighborhood where she didn't know the children, the pizza places or the vegetable markets. It was early evening and she could see lovers walking along Riverside Park with their arms around one another, turning away from the sun which now sets among the new apartment houses of New Jersey, to kiss. Oh I forgot, she said, now that I notice, Ruthy I think I would die without love. By love she probably meant she would die without being in love. By in love she meant the acuteness of the heart at the sudden sight of a particular person or the way over a couple of years of interested friendship one is suddenly stunned by the lungs' longing for more and more breath in the presence of that friend, or nearly drowned to the knees by the salty spring that seems to beat for years on our vaginal shores. Not to omit all sorts of imaginings which assure great spiritual energy for months and when luck follows truth, years.

Oh sure, love. I think so too, sometimes, said Ruth, willing to hear Faith out since she had been watching the kisses too, but I'm really not so sure. Nowadays it seems like pride, I mean overweening pride, when you look at the children and think we don't have time to do much (by time Ruth meant both her personal time and the planet's time). When I read the papers and hear all this boom boom bellicosity, the guys out-darling each other, I see we have to change it all—the world—without killing it absolutely—without killing it, that'll be the trick the kids'll have to figure out. Until that begins, I don't understand happiness—what you mean by it.

Then Faith was ashamed to have wanted so much and so little all at the same time—to be so easily and personally satisfied in this terrible place, when everywhere vast public suffering rose in reeling waves from the round earth's nation-states—hung in the satellite-watched air and settled in no time at all into TV sets and newrooms. It was all there. Look up and the news of halfway round the planet is falling on us all. So for all these conscientious and technical reasons, Faith was ashamed. It was clear that happiness could not be worthwhile, with so much conversation and so little revolutionary change. Of course, Faith said, I know all that. I do, but sometimes walking with a friend I forget the world.





“Grace was just an extraordinary human being and a great, great writer--some compared her to Chekov--though she wasn't very prolific. She was an ardent activist--and participated in all the major movements--feminist, peace, gay, anti-war, etc, etc--I admired her because she was so down to earth and so, so super smart and because she did both her art and activism... I'm attaching a short story of hers that I used to teach... Photo is of me and Grace at an international women's conference in Jerusalem in 1987 when I first got to know her ...we were part of the American delegation...just a few months before the 1st Intifada, when everything changed..”  
(3 May, 2020, email from Irena Klepfisz)