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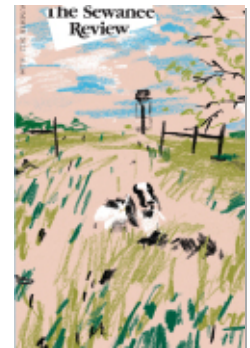
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Judith Claire Mitchell

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WE SIT IN A CIRCLE

JUDITH CLAIRE MITCHELL

In January 1981, when I was twenty-eight and two years divorced and there was no internet or serotonin reuptake inhibitors, I sometimes opened the Providence yellow pages—that voluminous if inert search engine—and scanned the eclectic array of addiction specialists, adoption agencies, junk haulers, and housecleaners who’d paid to have their businesses listed under the inchoate category of HELP. Or I’d read the help wanted ads in the *Providence Journal* and look for my name. In both cases it was as if I hoped for a listing that said, Judy: Call this number and we’ll fix everything.

When I had the energy, I sought less magical but equally non-productive means of rescue. I made appointments with a series of psychologists but connected with none. I went on dates, so many dates, usually spending the night, but almost always grateful to part in the morning. There was also a man I saw somewhat steadily, a bankruptcy lawyer whose girlfriend, a nurse, worked nights and weekends. Just good times, cocktails, and sex, I reminded myself when not only the gin but oxytocin began to flow.

I was weepy, felt empty, had nothing but my office work, which I did from nine to five, and my drinking, which I did when I got home. I'd once had writing, the only thing I'd ever been told I was good at, but I had faltered without deadlines, assignments, community. This season of my life, these doldrums, might have been a good time for an MFA—Brown, a half mile from my apartment, offered one—but that would have required planning and gumption. The only writing I did was in a personal journal, daily multi-page scrawls of frustrations and disappointments and self-recrimination that I didn't think counted. "If you write something that nobody else reads, is that really writing?" a professor in college had asked us, fledgling novelists in a seminar room. Yes, we chirped, but she shook her head sadly and told us the answer was no.

1/6/81 Today's new therapist looks over my forms and asks what I need to cure my depression. I've never been asked that before. I say I don't think of chronic depression as something curable exactly, the way headaches can be cured with aspirin, but if she's asking what might mitigate it some, then maybe a committed relationship with someone I like who likes me. Love is what I mean, but it's also a word I don't like to use in public. It has come to sound babyish to me.

In any case, my answer is not only wrong, it's offensive. She literally rolls her eyes and tells me I should not need a man to be happy. Also, if I really wanted a relationship, I'd have one. Finding a man is not as difficult as I'm making it out to be. Women meet men all the time. Women meet men every day on the bus.

"Well, that must be my problem," I say. "I walk to work."

This therapist, an icicle wearing a blue suit from Talbot's, glares and asks why I've chosen to deliberately deflect her point. I tell her I'm sorry, but I'm a transplanted Jewish New Yorker

and joking in moments like this is something we do. I want so badly to add that relationships are not as easily come by as she thinks, that, in fact, the only thing harder than finding a good man in Providence is finding a good therapist in Providence, that in both cases you know within five minutes it's not going to work, but you still have to sit there for a reasonable amount of time, blithering out your life story, as I'm doing now, forty-six minutes to go.

And so, for my New Year's resolution I forced myself to hunt down a writing class. The one I found was an adult education course called "Keeping a Journal for Creative Writing."

I expected, as did the others who enrolled, a class where we'd comb through our journals and turn the more interesting entries into finished essays or stories or even a book—readable, publishable, real. We imagined we'd grapple with the ethical issues inherent in creative work based on actual people and events, that we'd learn how to fiddle with timelines and fudge facts to shape the ordinary into something dramatic, to impose on our lives a compelling narrative arc.

It was the preposition in the title that had thrown us off. The class should have been called Keeping a Journal *as* Creative Writing. Because contrary to our assumptions, our journal entries weren't going to be the raw material for essays and stories, but the final product. The first and last draft. The point.

Our instructor, Marcia, laid out the rules. We'd all continue to write in our journals at home. In each class session, we'd read our journal entries aloud. That was it. No lessons. No discussion. No feedback. This wasn't a writing workshop. It wasn't group therapy. If someone was overwhelmed by the need to respond to a piece, that person could say to its author, "Thank you for sharing."

Nor could we revise. Any entry we opted to read had to be both true and raw. We couldn't invent or exaggerate or withhold or whitewash. Each clunky sentence was expected to capture our truth at the moment we put it down on the page. Rewriting would impose an understanding or mood from a subsequent moment. Change did not improve our entries, it rendered them false.

Facetiously but seriously, Marcia made us raise our right hands. Facetiously but seriously, we intoned as one: I shall make no changes. I shall not revise.

1/28/81 Today's new therapist is a hollow-cheeked man in a suit and tie with wispy white hair. He has arranged the blinds so the afternoon sun glares in his patients' faces.

He asks about my life. I tell him about my office job and my women friends and the men, all the men. It's the men he homes in on. "So," he says, "you are sitting here proudly telling me you're promiscuous."

I don't like promiscuous. I'd prefer anything over promiscuous. Whore. Slattern. Slut. At least slut sounds like a girl who's having fun. I'd also prefer a therapist who hadn't come of age during the Great Depression. I try to catch him up on what's happened since. The pill, the terms "double standards" and "sexual revolution." I come this close to bringing "generation gap" out of mothballs.

He says, "If you believed any of that you wouldn't be depressed."

Later I meet up with a guy friend at the Rue De Lespoir. We drink martinis while I rail about his species. The sneering therapist. My ex-husband who recently volunteered that my face is better than the face of the woman he's currently seeing, but her body is better than mine. The bankruptcy lawyer who lies to me whenever he's going to be with the nurse.

"We agreed from the start we'd both see other people," I say to my friend, "so why does he lie about it?"

"The real question," my friend says, "is why do you always pick men from the Venn diagram of assholes?"

He takes a pen from his jacket, draws three interlocking circles on a cocktail napkin, points to each one in turn. "You've got your mean pricks here," he says, "and your selfish jerks here and your insensitive douchebags here."

My friend is an awkward man, bulky and balding, obsessed with antiquity and obscure operas. I'm sure women have been choosing awful men over him all his life.

"The therapist you saw today is a prick," my friend says. "The lawyer you're dating is a jerk. Your ex-husband's a douchebag. And you're sitting in the middle thinking the men in the circles are all there is."

I tell him I get what he's saying, but I don't think he understands how the center of Venn diagrams work. "If I'm in the middle where the circles overlap," I say, "it doesn't make me some damsel trapped in a world of assholes. It makes me all three kinds of asshole at once. It makes me mean and selfish and clueless."

But later, when he asks me to go back to his place, this nice guy, this good friend who is not an asshole, who cares about me, and I say I'm sorry, I just don't see you that way—then I think maybe he understands Venn diagrams fine.

.....

We went around the room at the start of our second class, each of us reading one of our entries. The single mother read about exhaustion and food stamps. The older woman read about leaving her family for a woman she recently met and fell for. The self-identified housewife

read about sleeping alongside her second husband while dreaming of her first, a boy who died too young.

The nurse's aide read about changing the dressings on a patient's vulvectomy. "There was no mons pubis. No clitoris. No vagina. No nothing."

The only man in the group read about being the only man in the group.

I read about the Venn diagram of assholes, my farcical piece about my stereotypical life. It got laughs. As I'd painstakingly designed it to.

Because right from the start I'd broken my vow. I'd written the first draft—the one I'd promised not to alter in any way—with care, knowing a group of strangers would be hearing it, judging it and me. But when I finished that first draft and read it over, I knew I could make it clearer, funnier, smarter, more meaningful. With no hesitation—who would know, after all?—I tore the page out of my notebook and started anew.

Though no one had taught me about the off-putting nature of melodramatic interiority, I removed all fulminations and self-pity. Though it would be almost two decades before I could articulate how direct dialogue impacts pacing, I wrote conversations as if a transcriptionist followed me wherever I went. I refined the language, then refined it some more.

I added the explanatory bits. In the first draft I hadn't described my friend's appearance—I knew what he looked like—but had simply referred to him by name. In the second draft I added the description, but omitted his proper name, called him instead by his generic name, "my friend." This way my audience could envision him but not, in tiny Rhode Island, identify him.

There was also this: I'd met my friend at the Rue De L'espoir a full month before I wrote this entry. I know because I wrote about

our get-together in an earlier journal from 1980. And because I still have that earlier journal, that's how I also know, some forty years later, that I combined the two entries, pretended that I'd met my friend on the same day I'd met the therapist. To do that I had to make some significant changes. For instance, I deleted the name of the man my friend originally called a prick and subbed in the mean therapist. I clearly didn't care that I was making things up or turning two true entries into a single entry that would not withstand fact-checking. I introduced an element of fiction, the kind of deeper truth-telling that only an author's inventiveness could bring to the page.

I don't remember committing this perfidy, but I have no doubt as to my reasons. It turned a consumer complaint into a story. It complicated the first-person narrator by contrasting the therapist's view of her immoral behavior with what was truly immoral—not her expression of her sexuality but her doing something that could deeply hurt another woman. No, I was saying without coming right out and saying it, our narrator is not the innocent her friend thinks she is. She is, in fact, the bad person, the asshole the therapist thinks she is. But not for the reason the therapist thinks.

As for the changes to the prose itself, clunky writing had always been a stray lash in my eye, something I couldn't ignore. It didn't matter what I'd sworn to. I could not leave my writing unpolished. When it came to writing, if only my writing, I had standards.

.....

Though the class was not what we'd expected, we adapted. Then we more than adapted, and journal writing became our calling. We'd finish reading our entries aloud and sit in astonished silence at all the human business we'd shared. Marcia said, "More and more I

think this kind of writing is the most important writing I do,” and we wrote that down. Only one person resisted. This was Delores, who, on the first day, told us she was a travel writer, which turned out to mean she wrote letters to friends when she traveled, and who, at the second meeting, before walking out, said, “I don’t see why it has to be so dark. Why can’t we write about recipes and children’s bright sayings and vacations?”

I had no children, feared solo travel, and for dinner, often opened a can from Campbell’s new Soup for One line. My kitchen trash was empty wine bottles and a half dozen Soups for One. “Well, that’s pathetic,” a date said one morning before he tied off the bag and carried it to the curb on his way to his car. It was a little less pathetic when you turned it and him into a journal entry, when the soup and the man both got laughs. My journals were full of this sort of thing, some funny, some not.

Last night I dream I’m holding hands with B, talking earnestly to him about his penchant for lying, but when I look at him, I see my ex-husband’s face. “You’re not B,” I say, “you’re Greg,” and, because my dream mind thinks I’m an idiot, he smiles and says, “Judy, all men are Greg.”

~

Today the architect sends roses to my office. I count them. Eleven. When I get home, he’s outside my door, the twelfth rose in his hand. Such a romantic gesture. God, I hate romantic gestures.

~

Tonight, a friend’s ex shows up uninvited to talk about their breakup. How can he win her back? I tell him he can’t and I’m not on his side and I show him the door, but he won’t leave. He pours himself some of my scotch. He smokes and sucks mentho-

lated mints. Go home, I say, but he won't. It's the mints that should have warned me.

~

Dancing with Danny at the Bowling Green. We go home together. That's when I learn he's all about feet. Nothing but feet. I'm not about feet. I have no interest in feet. Ah, well, he says.

~

Wes calls again. This time I abandon polite. I tell him he's just some person I danced with and slept with and woke up with and am done with, that I don't like his I-saw-it-in-the-movies idea of courtship, that he must stop buying me things, writing me letters, calling me up, skulking around my yard, that he must please oh God please go away. When I finish, there's a beat, a sigh, and then "You're so intriguing," he says.

~

At the bar with no name we drink Rolling Rock and talk about our dates for this coming weekend. Linda says, "This is my last man. If it doesn't work out, I'm switching to women." I say, "Can you just do that? I don't think I can. If there's a continuum, I'm stuck at one end." Jackie says, "You think relationships are easier with women? You think there's more communication and all you do is talk about your feelings?" She says, "If this weekend doesn't work out, it's my last woman, it's my last person, and I'm devoting my life to animal rescue."

.....

Marcia belonged to a journal group called the Rhode Island Women's Journal Collective. It included professors in the new field of women's studies, directors of politically oriented nonprofits, activists, and

poets. They shared their journals with each other, published selected entries in what we'd now call zines, and gave public readings. Their journaling was personal and, in that way, political. Their ethos was nonhierarchical, noncompetitive, and nonjudgmental. They saw the journal as subverting the literary and academic patriarchies through accessible writing about the quotidian and the domestic.

We admired them and, when Marcia's class ended, we asked to join them. When they turned us down, we decided to meet on our own. We understood why they didn't want us. We were very different people. Both groups were mostly but not all white, mostly but not all heterosexual. But our group was mostly younger and poorer. None of us were professors or professionals. Not all of us had even finished high school. We weren't all politically aligned. And one of us was a man.

Also, unlike them, none of us lived in private homes on Providence's tony east side. Except for the housewife, we rented small apartments in the shabby mill towns adjacent to the city—mine the illegal basement sublet of a house in Pawtucket just over the Providence line. To get to my front door, you had to open my landlady's back door, descend an unlit staircase, and snake through an antique shop's worth of old furniture, pyramids of half-used paint cans, stacks of snow tires, and towers of boxes filled with musty clothes and Christmas tree lights. There was more furniture outside my apartment than in it. I owned only the most rudimentary pieces: bed, table, and a couch made of two slabs of foam rubber covered in brown corduroy. If you sat on this couch, unless you were completely still, the top slab gradually inched forward until it dumped you onto the floor.

Still, I did what I could to entertain my guests. I boiled cloves and nutmeg. I polished the wood floors. I tossed the plants I'd

neglected since the last time anyone came over and replaced them with new ones, robust and blooming. Only then did I let people in.

5/18/81 Six of us show up to our first post-class meeting. We sit in a circle on my floor because, as I explain as each person arrives, the couch is great unless you want to use it for the purpose of sitting.

Nobody seems to mind. We're like a Scout troop around a fire ready to share some ghost stories. We're happy to still be together. Unlike the women in Marcia's collective, we didn't come to the group as friends or neighbors or colleagues. We would never have encountered each other anywhere outside of Marcia's class. We met only because we all saw ourselves as writers but didn't know what to do next.

And yet here we are, still not talking about writing. We still don't revise or comment or talk mechanics. We don't read published journals. No Pepys, no Nin, no Jewish girls in attics for us.

Laura tonight, reading: "How do you take a journal writing group and use it to become a better writer? What do I do with my bad writing that's good because it's honest and my good writing that's bad because it's not?"

"Thank you for sharing," we say.

The journal group is great unless you want to use it for the purpose of writing.

That turned out not to be true. If the genre subverted the patriarchy, the group subverted the genre. It triggered the observer theory—a thing observed is changed by the act of observation. Elements of carefully constructed narrative—exposition, backstory, even cliffhangers—began showing up in our entries. We came up with "show, don't tell" all on our own but intuitively knew when to

just go ahead and tell our heads off. We developed distinct voices and styles. Now and then the man in the group, a wiry and angry Vietnam vet, wrote his entries in rhyming couplets.

As for our ethos, it was never nonjudgmental. Never noncompetitive. In that way, too, we could not have been more writerly.

Take the housewife. After the class where everyone first read to each other, she and I walked to the parking lot together. "I thought I'd blow everyone out of the water with my widow story," she said, facetious but serious, "but it's hard to beat a vulvectomy."

She persevered, though. She doubled down on her widowhood, writing weekly about her long-dead husband as if they'd been together that morning. There were entries about celebrating their anniversary, about the way he wore his hair, about his bad taste in clothes. When we met at her house, we thanked her living husband for carrying in the coffee, and later, when he was off watching TV and the housewife had finished reading about her dead husband, we thanked her for sharing.

We all had subjects we returned to. The veteran's inability to move past the war. The older woman's love for her girlfriend. My loveless love life, so hectic no one could keep the names straight, so hectic there was no need to. No one looked wearily at the ceiling when one of us revisited well-worn ground. No one said, For the love of all that's holy, move on.

It was only the housewife, who we now thought of as the widow, that made us want to say that. The root word of journal, like diary, means *day*. Journal entries are supposed to ravage your present life, not the past. We talked about it behind her back. We were cruel. "Another dead husband entry," we'd say.

It seemed to us she dredged him up not to heal or grow or cope, not even as a way of gathering recollections for a memoir or novel—keeping a journal for creative writing—but because she felt

her days weren't interesting. Carpools. PTA meetings. Recipes and children's bright sayings. We sensed that she was motivated not by unresolved grief but by the pressure to entertain an audience.

We should have been more sympathetic. We all struggled with the notion that our lives weren't sufficiently interesting to be recorded, much less read to others. We all worried that the need to keep our journal entries engaging was beginning to affect our life decisions. Was I dating the bankruptcy lawyer because I liked spending time with him or because, without him, my entries would be nothing but what I watched on TV all weekend long?

We talked about it from time to time, not in the group, but in pairs, hanging out. We feared that while the private journal might be a profoundly feminist genre, as Adrienne Rich had asserted, when it went public, it became more Tolstoyan. All happy entries are alike, i.e., pedestrian, dull. It's the entry that throws itself in front of a train that blows the others out of the water.

9/20/81 "Not feeling well," he says when he calls to cancel last minute. He coughs. "Bye," he says. "Love you."

It's the "love you" that keeps me from sleeping. We never say "love you." Now, at dawn, I drive the forty minutes to Newport in the teeming rain. In his driveway I see what I knew I'd see: the nurse's car parked behind his. Not that I've ever seen her car before. But there's his black sports car, all Batmobile-phallic, and there's its feminine counterpart, same make and model but in powder blue. Who else could it belong to? He probably bought it for her. Here, I got you a powder blue penis for the times we can't be together.

What if I knock on the door? What if, when he opens it, bleary and hungover, I say nothing, stride in, nod at the nurse, take

*my things from their hiding place, sweep back out into the rain?
Maybe call, "Bye. Love you," over my shoulder.*

Now, that would be a journal entry! That would win journal group!

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Months passed. A year. There came a time when all of us, except the widow, were writing at length about sex. The lawyer and I had parted, and I was seeing a new man, kind and affectionate and available every night of the week. Along with being tentatively hopeful, I burned for him. My entries went all soft-core porn. Then everyone else's followed suit. Our oldest member resumed rhapsodizing about the color and texture of her girlfriend's vagina. The single mother started having phone sex at work with a sales rep she'd never laid eyes on. Coincidence? Competition? Contagion? Did it matter?

Only the widow had no sex to write about. That is to say, she had married sex to write about: pedestrian, dull. At the same time, even she had come to realize she'd been mining her increasingly distant past for sympathy and entertainment and eros. And yet, giving up the past would once again leave her with nothing to write about other than what she was making for dinner. Unless she did something proactive.

10/6/82 The problem with journal group is that it's a group and a group is comprised of people and people ruin everything.

Or, no, the problem with journal group is that we've become friends and on non-journal group nights we meet up in small subgroups, maybe three of us, maybe just two, and there's all this one-to-one talking off the page.

Or, no, the problem with journal group is that there are two of us who are not just one-to-one talking off the page, they're one-to-one fucking and then one-to-one fighting about the fact that they're fucking and it's not off the page, it's right on the page, or at least on the pages of one of them. That is, one of them is writing about the other, not by name, just by addressing a You, as if that makes it all right, as if we don't all know who You is.

"I know you stood on my front steps last night while my family slept. You left your Marlboro butts there intentionally. You left an empty bottle in the driveway so my husband would find it."

And on my floor, cross-legged, cross-armed, You glowers, Marlboro pack visible in her pocket, whiskey, as always, on her breath. She has only just finished reading an ode to the woman she ostensibly adores. The next day our only man calls me and says, "Did I hear what I think I heard?" and he and I snicker and are we writers or gossips and is there a difference and I have become a corrupt accountant keeping two sets of books.

.....

Marcia's Collective continued for decades, ending only when its founders began to age and die. My journaling group petered out after three years. The war veteran ghosted us. The single mother married and moved. Replacement members didn't work out. But mostly it was that two members could no longer be in the same room.

I was ready anyway. Toward the end of our time together I'd found a good therapist, a man my own age, and his office became a safe place to not only explore but replicate how I was with men, to

work out productively what I'd been writing about endlessly. Wrong men, attached men, abandoning men. Our work together helped me right up until the session he told me he'd be leaving Rhode Island in a couple of weeks. That bit of replication was too much too soon. "My therapist is moving to Syracuse," I wrote in my journal. "It sounds like a line from a Woody Allen movie." Then I sobbed for a week and gave up on therapy.

And when, after our lovely few months together, the man I'd let myself trust revealed himself as duplicitous as any of them, I gave up the love quest too. I made the deliberate decision to focus on work and friendships. I calmed down. I solo traveled. My journal entries became quiet and short. They were, for both writer and listener, less compelling.

A couple of months later, on a cold night while Christmas shopping with friends, I met the person I've now been married to for over thirty years. I'm not saying cause and effect. I'm just saying what happened.

Eventually my husband and I left Providence and moved to the Midwest so I could get an MFA. Like pretty much every other student in the program, I was now on Prozac. There should have been a candy bowl in the student lounge filled to the brim with those teal and white pills. "Why don't any of you drink?" a visiting writer joked at a party. "I've never met so many writers who don't drink."

"We're all medicated," I said. No. Exulted.

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I never kept this kind of journal again, though in grad school I did take a class on journal writing. It was the class I'd expected Marcia's to be. With an eye toward producing a cohesive book, we kept journals that focused on a single, preselected subject. We revised con-

stantly, reshaping our old entries, omitting discursive material, fiddling with timelines, fudging facts. We conflated characters, which is what we called the people in our lives. We received feedback and revised some more.

My subject was my father's terminal illness, an ordeal that kept me flying from Iowa to Florida, where I sat by his hospital bed taking notes.

Dad: Who will you leave your soup to? Should we call someone to remove all these snakes? Who has my beer? If I get on the train, how will we find each other again?

Nurse: For some reason, they all talk about trains. I wonder what they talked about before there were trains?

I never wrote the book. My agent at the time assured me no one wanted to read about ordinary families and their ordinary deaths. And, really, it was just that I'd had to pick a topic for class. It was just a way to get a few more credits toward the degree. I was interested only in fiction back then. Still, I lugged those old journals with me. State to state, house to house. They currently live in a wooden trunk in the back of a closet. They're hard to get to and I read them rarely. I dislike the young woman I was. All that weeping into her pillow. How many times have I warned my writing students against having their characters cry?

On the infrequent occasions I do read the journals, I'm struck by all the things we didn't have that could have helped. Caller ID. Dating apps. The concept of forthright, polyamorous relationships. The term autofiction. The phrase *date rape*. The word *stalker*.

6/27/83 After the reading, we go out as a group to Angelo's. Five women drinking Chianti and laughing and trying not to get red sauce on their summer dresses. A man comes up to our table. He says he just bet his friend we'd let him join us.

"You lose," I say.

Journals are madeleines without the sweetness. You read a passage and you're in a Rhode Island spaghetti house where a housewife in a white sundress effusively praises you for chasing a man away in the same tones that she might use to reinforce her dog's good behavior. You open to another page and you smell the breath, all stale cigarettes and cloying menthol, of a man coming at you. A different page and a different man, a man you haven't thought about in four decades says, "I tried to love you, but I just couldn't get there," and you gasp at the freshness of unexpected pain, and your husband is in the other room watching TV, and the journal in your hand (a small version of the blue three-ring binders you used in high school, now available only on eBay—"Rare! Mid-Century!") is proof that time is elastic or that all time is concurrent or that there's no such thing as time. And while a moment ago your memories were, as scientists have lately asserted, merely memories of memories, just your brain overlaying all your accidental and willful distortions and denials and sheer fabrications on top of the actual event until the truth is hidden, irretrievable—now those memories are there on the page in your careful handwriting, recorded within hours of their happening. Unassailable, undeniable, and, except to the extent you were lying at the time, the absolute truth.

10/16/83 This weekend, nothing to do, no men on my horizon, even my therapist long gone, I go out and next thing you know I've impulse-purchased a couch. No comparison shopping, no

taking a few minutes to mull it over. I just sign on the line under FINAL SALE-NO RETURNS and hand over a check that is, for me, a small fortune.

I've never been in this kind of store before. When you walk in there's a desk where you register so the receptionist can find a salesperson to accompany you from floor to floor, help you pick out swatches, maybe sketch some room designs for you to contemplate. It intimidates me and it should because when I approach the desk the receptionist glances at me, says no one's available, and I should wander along by myself. I can flag someone down if I need help.

I should have dressed up. I should have borrowed a man. There's no one to flag, not on any of the five floors. All the salespeople huddle with couples. It's just as well. I pretend to consider several sofas, but I'm tempted by none. They're too big, tufted and expensive. The prices are near what I'd pay for a car.

Finally, on the fifth floor, I discover a small section reserved for the damaged and returned and discontinued. There's a small camelback sofa marked down several times. I want it, so I sit down to prevent it from wandering off, and I keep an eye out for someone who works here. It's useless. Every salesperson is on a lower floor showing couples Aubusson rugs and lacquered bed-frames and astoundingly awful sculptures of horses and half-naked goddesses.

I continue to sit. As I do, I can't help notice the other unescorted bargain hunters. A mother and daughter, like me, in jeans, look at desks. Two men lie on a mattress. No one helps us. Maybe we can stage a protest. A sit-in. A lie-in. But before the revolution begins, I spot a hapless employee leaving the men's room drying his hands on his pants.

Twelve weeks till delivery. January 1984. What will I be up to then? Probably lying alone on my new couch while writing in my journal about lying alone on my new couch. An ode to a chunk of cotton and batting and springs. Proof of my imperfect but undeniable existence. I buy a couch. Therefore, I am.