

Barbara Benjamin
Fiction (with a glimmer of truth)
3700 words
Award winner

Memoirs a la Proust

"The Story Book"

Most infants grow gradually into an awareness of life and of themselves as separate beings apart from mother, father, and others around them; though of me, it was often commented that I was born into an awareness of death. Before a recognition of the faintest shadings of life settled upon my optic nerves, slowly raising the curtain of perception on the miniature dramas in my busy orbs—for the eyes, I think, are the first instruments of awareness that the brain awakens; and then smells, sounds and touch infuse life into what sight spreads out before us—before that first awaking awareness discovering the small world encircling my senses, and before my thoughts registered familiar, everyday images of life, the shadow of death laid its hand upon all my senses.

From my earliest recollections, the passage of time echoed from every object or person in my world. When I was very young, my aunt gave me a picture book, the first I ever had. With magical pictures of a small girl imitating animals, *A bird can fly. So can I!* this little book was the source of my delight. A picture is everything—the way the characters are drawn, the distorted proportions of the eyes to the head, the head to the body, the expressions on the faces, and colors; like political cartoons, which the cynical or satirical impact is set up, not so much by what the cartoon says, but by the precise way the picture is drawn relative to the cartoon's message.

On each page the little girl's dress, hair, and pose changed according to the animal she imitated. Her face and pose carried an air of self-containment, a sense of freedom to be what she was—imaginative and carefree. Moreover, shown by all the different, colorful dresses she wore, and by the clever ways her hair was done up, her mother, I thought, possessed an inventive and indulgent nature—neither character trait, to my great disappointment, were inherent in my own mother. My ardent identification with this adventurous and creative picture-book child owed its flowering to my immense passion for clothes, hair ribbons, and vibrant colors—dresses with lots of ruffles and lace, full skirts that one could twirl about in, puffy sleeves, and soft, yet brilliant colors. And, it wasn't enough that I wore a pretty dress, but it had to contain character, one that could be named, such as the dress of numerous buttons and small bows that I appropriately called my "buttons and bows" dress; or the one with a print of spinning tops—naturally enough, I called my "topsy" dress. By naming my dresses, my mother knew specifically the dress I wished to wear that day; but Mother drew the line at wearing one lavender sock and one blue one. My little girl of the picture book represented my desire for the new and unusual; something pretty, a sense of freedom and creativity; and, I suppose, all of these combined stirred my internal yearning for the expression of life I imagined she was permitted; and for how she must have felt. Transferring my identity to hers, I was transported to some place beyond my world. Although I had a peculiar and extraordinary sense of death and decay, my nature wasn't morose or gloomy; rather, my sense of beauty seemed to parallel that of my sense of death.

Each morning I awoke to the thrill of remembering my book, of knowing that at a certain time each day my mother would sit me down, then give me a glass of milk and the book. The routine was quite ordinary and unadorned, but the anticipation it stirred in me marked an indelible space in my memory, which, when thinking on it now, draws a gasp of breath and a brief quickening in my chest; and for a moment something foreign, except to that memory, courses through my body, like a feeling one gets from a certain aroma after a long forgotten pleasurable event associated with that aroma, born from the intensity of a long-ago emotion from an erotic experience, and left behind to live as a haunting ghost in a special chamber of our emotions; though the actual memory recedes into forgotten coves, that exquisite experience and all its associated emotions are condensed, let's say, into the smell of a particular perfume, so that, if unexpectedly, the smell of that same perfume crosses the olfactory senses again,

before any conscious recall of that forgotten memory is triggered, a rush of sensation, a titillating passion and ardent desire grips the emotions unaware—almost paralyzing—dulling the consciousness of the present moment, overwhelmed by the ancient, once living moment brought to life again simply by a brief whiff of the memorable scent. Then, the memory associated with this aroma is uncompressed, welling up to live again. Sometimes the memory is never unlocked, but the emotions, nonetheless, live independently of the memory, hidden until a chance sensory stimulation releases it. So is my state now should I see anything resembling those pictures inside my special book; an astonishing exhilaration sweeps over me, catching me off guard.

Each day, after my nap, Mother would place a large, wine-colored brocade cushion on the floor by the coffee table. I would sit down on the cushion and wait for her to bring the milk and the book. Returning with the milk, she'd place the glass on the table and hand me the book. When my tiny arms and hands reached up for it, a nearly indiscernible tremor would shiver from my jaw down to my belly. Straining for composure, my lips formed an uncontrollable smile exposing my tiny clinched teeth, my jaw set tight against a squeal of delight and every muscle in my face giving away the pure excitement I pained to conceal.

This precise moment held within it a meaning no other could, in quite so arrant a way. I suppose if there is to be a frighteningly negative thought, it will impose itself in the strongest way upon something equally positive. For, cherishing anything opens the vulnerability of its loss. No desire greater existed for me at that time in my young life, than the moment of once again mentally climbing inside this picture book. It was the center of my world and every event and myself were satellites moving around it. As the source of my most profound joy, it also became my greatest punishment. The slightest event could affect this solitary, longed-for occasion, forcing the possibilities of all manner of disasters to surface into my awareness.

Across the alley from our house lived a middle-aged woman whose apparent sole interest in life was everybody else's. By her good luck, her house had the advantage of sitting on a slight rise of ground, high enough so that from her bedroom window on the second floor, she could survey an area that included about eight houses in circumference to hers. Regularly feigning the activity of knitting or crocheting, she would sit for hours by her upstairs bedroom window, assuring herself that nothing happened without her notice. Her husband had died young, leaving her childless and with a small inheritance. She apparently never desired to marry again for she never sought the company of men. Instead, she made the rounds from one women's social group to another; so, she was able to learn all there was to know about what was happening within each family, since the talk between women is relatively open, divulging nearly everything down to, but not including, the activities occurring beneath the matrimonial sheets. This subject was tacitly taboo, although there were those willing to flirt with talking all around it, pretending that what they were referring to was not what the others thought, although they knew everyone did. Talk about sexual escapades finds greater acceptance among men, since their image of manhood, in part, grows from a certain supposed sexual prowess. But a woman's intimate life must remain a mystery, based, I suppose, on the Christian ideal of virginity that has been promulgated for nearly 2000 years. Although the social mores of our era have strayed from the intensely strict laws of the previous generations, and for the most part ignored, nonetheless, a certain reticence still lingers. Though a woman, no doubt, has no less interest in the subject, divulging her personal experience of intimacy would strip away her mysterious quality as a sexual being, cheapening her image as low-grade or base. Mrs. Baker, apparently, needed to stay in touch with intimacy, but without having to touch it. She was a kind of voyeur to life in general, because her sole apparent occupation was to stay informed about all the lives within the households that came within her purview. So, on a somewhat regular basis she visited each house, usually at midday before the husband came home, to avoid any encounter with him. Since her visits were somewhat irregular, if I began to perceive she hadn't come around for a while, anxiety began to escalate within me. The times she chose to visit were usually while I was upstairs during naptime. I rarely ever slept during this period; rather, passed the time in a state of boredom, anger, or fidgety uneasiness during the intervals just preceding Mrs. Baker's visits, in anticipation of the odious day of her visit. Mother's sense of time could be easily distracted, causing her to lose complete awareness of it, and Mrs. Baker's visits excessively dulled Mother's already fragile mindfulness of passing time.

For the women of the neighborhood, these visits were an "honorable" way to stay abreast of the juicy intrigues brewing inside the cooking pots of one's neighbors. The gossip received their tacit approval, although publicly they would righteously condemn it. Like all the other women on Mrs. Baker's route, my mother valued the spicy and titillating dramas Mrs. Baker replayed separately to each neighbor, who was both audience and critic. To minimize the insult should you be the last to hear the latest story, Mrs. Baker had a way of making you believe you were the only one privileged to hear whatever juicy tidbit of news you salivated for, which, of course, she assured you that she was about to divulge the information to your ears alone. Before releasing her treasures, she would extract a pledge that "on your honor" you would never repeat what she was about to tell you. This was the price of admission to each family theater. Since eventually nearly all of Mrs. Baker's tales wound their way through the doors and living rooms of each neighbor, any resulting open gossip held her blameless, and all the gossips implicated themselves. None dared to reveal directly her source (even though everyone knew who it was) for fear she would be dropped from the entertainer's list.

Sitting on my bed in my room, during Mrs. Baker's visits, it seemed as if the walls began stretching outwards the way the body of a balloon stretches out when someone begins to blow air into it; so, too, my room and everything in it grew beyond all proportion to me and seemed to be the universe itself. With anger and self-pity, my esteem, no doubt, suffering with the fear that Mother, in her absorption with Mrs. Baker's stories, would forget the time altogether and leave me in the abyss. At these times, I became like a mere speck of dirt fallen into the carpet. So, like an ant, I would creep slowly across the surface of my chenille bed cover, running my small finger over its patterns, keeping my eyes closed testing if I could tell when my finger ran over the top of a bump or into a valley between them. My chest of drawers was but a towering, smooth brown wall; no longer were there any doors or windows, closets or beds. Over the edge of the bed I'd slide, dropping softly to the floor and crawl around, keeping my face close to the floor, peering closely into and between the carpet strands to blur out everything else around me, the tip of my nose just barely brushing against the carpet fibers. I imagined the fibers as an endless chain of mountains that must be scaled if I wanted to cross the room; and, to find food would take days of walking. I'd roll over on my back and look up at the sparkly popcorn ceiling through squinted eyes. With my eyes squinched tight, I looked through the merest slits, then the ceiling didn't look like a ceiling anymore, just a kind of white nothing.

I'd lie there squinting, thinking about my book; in my mind, going over the picture of the girl on the cover to see how much about her I could remember. I'd picture her in motion, as she appeared on the cover, with her black hair standing straight out behind her to give the illusion of wind blowing, and her bangs blown back off her forehead, covering the blue ribbon in her hair, the ends of which fluttered in the breeze the same direction as the hair. She had her arms up, with her hands bent downward in a flying gesture, and her legs appeared to float beneath her, proving that she indeed was flying. Her face was large and round on a tiny neck, like a balloon floating above her body. On the face were two black half-crescent moons representing closed eyes, and just a hint of a small red mouth in the shape of a 'V,'—clearly a self-possessed smile. She flew behind a bird, his wings, feather tips, and spindly bird legs and feet all in a similar attitude as the girl's. They circled over the land below them, which was filled with romping, playful cartoon animals.

A shiny gold strip of paper covered the spine of the book, a trademark for a series of children's books, so that when several books are lined up on the bookshelf, the glistening image appears as a golden mirage amidst the spiritless black, blue, or red monotony of the competing books' bindings. Reflecting on my book as I lay squirreled away in my room, it occurred to me that, of course, I'd be too small to ever see it, that its overwhelming size relative to me would obscure my recognition, that if even right beside me, its shape would be unfamiliar. Although, the slightly irregular stack of its pages between the covers, I thought, would be magnified and resemble steps, giving way to a curiosity to climb them. But, once on the top, instead of pictures, I'd see great splotches of random colors, like standing in the ocean up to your eyes, looking in every direction but seeing only the blue-green of the water until coming into a section with a distinctly different color, perhaps from the seaweed—for a gradual change of color you'd probably barely notice—then everywhere you look is just that color. Though precocious, indeed, I was given to such fantastical imaginings of exaggerated realities to deflect the consuming anxieties of my isolated

world. Thus, as I receded into my miniature world, I imagined that the colors would bath me, completely close in around me. In my normal size, I can see the myriad of colors around me concurrently; they appear in groups, recognizable as some object or person. The picture of the ocean on my bedroom wall had endless shades of blues, greens, grays, and white, which my eye could choose to see separately or blended together in a way that I knew, without contemplation, which blues were the sky and which blues were the water; or which greens were plants and which greens were the sea. Colors are not mere areas of colors, like the blobs of paint an artist applies to a canvass before the point they become a thing; but the colors I see mean something: the sea, the waves, or the beach.

In my blown-up world, distended like a telescope's view, I was left behind in an abyss of space. In this state, I imaged that my sense of touch gained no comfort from my blankets or pillows; instead of folds, creases, and textures, surfaces would become obstacles or seem flat. In this world, I imagined how I could never wrap about me a blanket, nuzzling my face into the soft, downy material; my size prevented me from sinking softly into anything, rather, of walking always on top of everything, as if there was nothing that existed beyond what I stood on at that very moment, a forever kind of flatland.

The thought of punishment restrained my growing impulse to cry out for Mother, although the desire consumed me, for I feared I'd be lost forever imprisoned in my room-universe. My life was being devoured. When imprisoned, you at once wish time to quicken its pace so you can leave your prison, but you also wish for time to almost stop, realizing that every second passing is stolen from you, robbed from the time you could have been living outside the prison, again in your own world. Prison is not your world, but an imposed world. This seemingly endless prison imposed on me by Mrs. Baker's visits transformed my world into a chasm of both a timeless and time-consuming void. Like my room, Mother's time became distorted, speeded up without her cognizance. She was not lost, but she was lost from me. Her world, for that time, was riveted on the imagined worlds of others and the real-life fairy tales spun out by Mrs. Baker, the storyteller. It was her time to lay her life beside other's, to crawl inside all the little risqué and sordid details of lives normally not on display—the moments about people's lives they wish to keep secret, but often unwittingly leak out. So, such were the worries that plagued my endurance of Mrs. Baker's visits.

The appointed time of day Mother gave me the book was after my nap. Since my restless nature rebelled at naps and bedtime, mother saw the book as an inducement; hence, giving me the book after the nap rather than before. Endurance, then, became a new feature of my life. Before the book, I tolerated naptimes with boredom or tantrums, resentful of her insistence that I take a rest each day when I knew perfectly well I didn't need one. Probably to my mother's dismay, I functioned in only one of two states: actively awake or dead asleep, and it was usually the former, for I needed very little sleep. Most children, indeed, most people, have varying degrees of alertness, fatigue, and sleeplessness. I rarely know a state of tiredness. At the point my activity at last runs down, almost instantly, a tsunami of sleep washes over me. I feel a drifting away, led by a Pied Piper's hypnotic song leading me into the recesses of my subconscious, succumbing to a sensual heaviness pulling me toward a blue-black vagueness; a mental dimness of cascading notes engulfing my senses from some distant haunting music, casting a blanket of soothing sounds about me, melting all resistance. At that moment, I desire complete surrender to this velvet darkness enveloping my consciousness. So thoroughly does my body and mind surrender to the hypnotic trance of sleep, that I often awaken in the morning in the same position I fell into sleep, having no recollection of the intervening time. Mystically, I'm drawn into a life of sleep; wholly surrendering my mind to this life so remarkably dissimilar to waking hours, without the brightness of sunlight and everything muted, and speech often incomprehensible, which is, nonetheless, understandable, but only there—not here. I've never understood those people who concern themselves to "understand" their dreams. The author of your dreams, your subconscious, attempts to communicate to you. We tend to separate conscious and subconscious as if they're two foreign bodies; but the conscious mind needs the subconscious winds to circulate through it. Sleep awakens the subconscious—or, we awaken to it—releasing its coded messages in the shapes of objects or people, of fragments of places or events; all guarded parts of ourselves, forcing themselves into some kind of integration. In sleep, I live in an immersed part of myself, the "night school" of the self, learning a language that belongs to me alone. Perhaps the lessons pass into a darkness upon awakening, but I sense the presence in a wordless whisper, reminding me who I am, unveiling mysteries, like the curious allure of my picture book.

When at last the book was in my hands, I would set my gaze on the cover for a moment and a trepidation passed across my thoughts, like the shadow a cloud casts on the ground as it moves, for this moment prescribes a point on a downward spiral; another petal unwound, breaking free from the bud; another complete revolution of a tire, leaving minute traces behind of itself as it rolls. Gazing at the cover, I scrutinized it for signs of progressed age. One day I'd see that the upper right corner acquired a dent in it; another day I'd see a new scratch, like the first scratch or dent in the shiny paint of a new car—the first sign that it's a used car. Everything shows something that distinguishes it from the time you saw it last, its proof of passing through time; a point or line between the past from the present, or the present from the future. Nothing accentuates that mark more distinctly than routine or custom, like a birthday or a holiday. For me, seeing this book each day at the same time, experiencing that irrepressible inner thrill, ran headlong into my comfortless apprehension of passing time. It was my fate to fixate on the slow decay and eventual demise of things, perceiving scarcely discernible changes in the objects and the people around me; which, as a child, denied me the security of the assumed immortality of parents and grandparents, of which most children never question the authenticity.