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How I Scare Grace Paley

First let me tell you that none of this is deliberate. There are certain of us who just don't know how to deal with kind and loving individuals, with writers who forgive, or with grandmothers. Paley happens to be all of these so far as I know. If she's not a grandmother, she ought to be, and she's certainly everything else on that above list.

It begins with me having trouble with a short story I keep bouncing around to small press magazines and getting rejections about. No one publishes it, but everyone compliments it. I'm thinking it's not quite there yet (there being writer lingo for publishable material), and I want Grace Paley's opinion so long as she's in town and getting paid to read to me and who knows, maybe teach a seminar. You see, nothing surprises me once I hear about it -- because I believe there's a conspiracy which tries to keep me from everything, and therefore all information is absolutely credible, insofar as it counterbalances all those guys who want me ignorant and harmless. So I'll be damned if I ever hear anything in time enough to really enjoy it. I mean really enjoy it, dress for it, slick my hair, have the dentist cap my teeth. Other writers would always be digging up information about this writer here and that writer there: Groupies I guess you'd call them, or Deadheads. I'd just be sitting, waiting for somebody to tell me writer to writer, but instead they'd look me over real smugly because I didn't know, then whisper to each other until I left.

Of course, this reading is something of an exception to my usual not knowing. I must have read about it on a bulletin board or something, and you could tell all the groupies were pretty disappointed in me. I had a nice sweater on and my Nunn Bush loafers. I splashed on some musk oil and thanked the Good Lord for whatever animal had to die so I might smell O.K.. I think I even brushed my hair. It is, after all, an important occasion when Grace Paley comes to town: It's not like a hockey game or church festival.

So Grace Paley reads at this Midwestern University I'm attending. She will read two of her numerous stories, neither of which I'm familiar with but both of which I appreciate. She has an ear, I think, for dialect and dialogue, and a knack for musicality and whimsicality. Her characters are all New Yorkers and somehow Yiddish, although they never do anything much to indicate a religious affiliation. One cannot listen to her without being overwhelmed by her love of mankind. Her stories seem to forgive everyone: Even people she has never met, she almost forgives them in advance of meeting them. Though sometimes, as in "Living" she forgives someone without actually meeting them after having met them previously, subsequently speaking to them over the phone, and finally thinking about them. Forgiveness is a multi-dimensional opportunity for Grace Paley.

I don't think she knows a great deal about Midwesterners. She knows even less about me at this point but she'll find out.

We like to scare each other, us Mid-coasters. I mean the people from the Midwest, to which I certainly belong. Here's a fine example. There's a girl I know who said yesterday, "A couple of years ago, do you know

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what they gave away at Yankee Stadium on opening day? Bats! What were they thinking? Forty-thousand New Yorker's. All with bats!" It was typical Midwestern stuff. Besides liking to scare each other, we also talk about New Yorkers and Californians. I could see Steinbrenner wedged in-between bodyguards, leaving the game via secret exit, jammed into his version of the Popemobile, speeding off to Jersey through the Holland tunnel, finally out to Los Angeles to butt heads with La Sorda. Or the two of them could start at opposite coastlines and meet in St. Louis. But I'm not so sure the Dodgers would hand over bats to their adoring fans the way the Yankees apparently did on opening day.

Well, that's just how people talk to each other in these parts. You sit through six months of wintertime and see what happens to your sense of humor. Around Easter, I bet you'd be frying up ants underneath a magnifying glass just like I used to until it got boring. Now you can see how Grace Paley coming to town had to be a long anticipated event.

Anyway, she's finished with her first story -- Grace Paley, I mean, not my friend, though my friend, I think, could be a pretty good writer if she'd try it once -- and I ask the following honest and clever interrogatory, not at all because I want to provoke or be annoying: "How would you go about writing a story with a lot of characters talking to each other? Because I've seen stories like that from you and would like to write one myself and don't know exactly how."

"Jeez, that's a good idea," says Grace Paley, "I think I'll write one like that. But when did I ever before?"

"How about 'Faith in a Tree?'" I ask.

"Oh yeah. I forgot that one." At this point everybody in the audience laughs except me, because it's funny that a writer as good as Grace Paley should forget about something she wrote a long time ago. I don't laugh because I hardly laugh at anything.

Grace Paley tells me she can't explain how to write such a story, because different people write differently, and I have to figure out how it is I'll write my story, then let other people write theirs. I realize she can't tell what it is I want from her, because she doesn't know me, or else there just might be that secret society of fiction writers I somewhat alluded to before. But either way she doesn't tell me, and I've got these images in my head of movie characters walking around with blindfolds on surrounded by terrorists.

There are a couple more questions, both from older women, one about her political activism (anti-nukes, a cause I think as justified as any), and one about her daughter (I'm not sure. I mix her up so much with her character. I want to say she has two sons, but I think this question was about her daughter). Then she reads the second story and to my amazement it's even better than the first, something I secretly wish wouldn't happen. I wish people wouldn't write so much better than me that they embarrass me.

The reading is over and several women crowd around Grace Paley in a kind of swarm. They all move slowly down a center aisle between two rows of chairs, and crowding together, they begin to look like a National

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Geographic special I've seen about the royal procession of army ants. They stop in front of a portable bar set up to accommodate the reading, and there start drinking. Soliciting autographs, they hold hardcover editions of "Later That Same Day" which at that time I hadn't read, but later I did. It was very good. They wait now all facing her as she smiles. There are just a few men. Mostly there are women, older women. And I'm wondering whether or not that's typical at these readings.

Do the male groupies just act like they know what's going on? Is that the secret to fitting in?

Meanwhile, I'm pretending to look at student art works, because the reading had been held in the art gallery in the student union. I keep peering over to see how long the line is. When it gets down to just a few people, that's when I go to the end of the line and try to think of how I will ask Grace Paley about my story.

In line, I notice for the first time how incredibly short Grace Paley is. It seems to me she can't be five feet tall. Her hair is gray, her face wrinkled, her eyes swimming behind a pair of bifocals. She isn't the woman I'd imagined at all, the sort of Standing Liberty. And finally I'm right in front of her looking down. I'm dazzled, bewildered. It's the Fall of the year, and I begin to think about an Alberta Clipper bringing snow straight from Minnesota.

I stammer about my story, how no one publishes it, but everyone compliments, and how I'm frustrated and angry with the rejections because it seems to me if they really liked it they'd print it.

Grace Paley looks at me and understands. I think she trusts me, believes I am honest, and wants to genuinely help with her advice.

"What is the first line of the story?" she asks in a very grandmotherly way, and I tell her verbatim. Then I explain how it's about acrobats who fall on purpose because it's more profitable than staying in the air, and she says it sounds like a good idea.

"It seems like a pretty good first line too," she says, "I don't know why they're not publishing it. I guess I'd have to see it."

"I don't have it with me. I'm sorry."

"Tell me, how many times has it been rejected?"

"I don't know. I think five? Somewhere in there. Four. Five."

"Oh that's not enough," she says, "you just have to send it out more. Don't worry. Someone will publish it."

"Thanks," I say.

It's at this point I scare her. It wasn't anything deliberate, like I said. It's just for about three months I'd been practicing looking at people directly in the eyes because I thought that was the only way to show them I was a good person and not afraid of them. I wanted Grace Paley to know I appreciated her advice. And it seemed to me there had to be some sort of comradery between writers, even blue- and hazel-eyed writers like Grace Paley and myself respectively, even successful and unsuccessful writers. How else would the groupies know so much and me so little? And I want-

ed to know.

So I stared into her eyes and she stared back and then her mouth came open and she inhaled and made a little yip and I saw a droplet of drool standing on her lower lip. When I say things at such moments I make awful blunders, especially with women. And Grace Paley was probably one of my idols at the time, the others being Ghandi and Terry Bradshaw.

Fortunately someone came up behind her at that moment and asked her whether or not she was going to The Eclipse, which was a bar the groupies go to. Grace Paley turned immediately and started yakking with that someone, nodding, smiling. It looked like she was going: she was totally transformed and happy to be included. And it struck me Grace Paley hadn't lost the slightest fragment of her hearing. She never looked at me again, but I kept staring. I couldn't stop anymore.

The beehive of women formed again and made its way slowly toward the center doors of the student art gallery, drawing away until there was no one but the bartender within fifteen feet of me.

Now I realize that a man probably hadn't looked at Grace Paley that way in thirty years and that might well have been what scared her. Or else it was me. I was twenty-two at the time: thin, dark, tall. I was lots of things. I still have crazy hair that flies in all directions, but back then I had lots of hair, hair so thick you had to spread it apart with your hands in order to see my scalp.

I stood by myself and watched Grace Paley talking to her enclave, smiling, seeming just a little frozen somehow inside as she slowly walked. I saw her diligently working at her typewriter, creating new characters, and one after another forgiving them. I too wanted forgiveness, but I'm certain by now she won't remember me. Periodically I read "A Conversation With My Father" and marvel at her ability to make characters converse and come alive even as one of them dies. I imagine how they love each other, these people she creates, and how I might once have been forgiven. But had I apologized, Grace Paley would have thought me even crazier than she did when I stared inside her mouth and said absolutely nothing. And explaining to her now would be impossible, under the circumstances even frivolous. She's dead now, and I'm not one to go to graves and speak to their contents, especially ones I hardly know.

She was right. My story was eventually published. But now that's years ago, and I'm the only one who remembers it.