

A young woman, divorced with children, struggles to find a place in the repressive culture of the 1950s. She lands in the middle of Berkeley, California's war protest and environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s and adds her own budding feminism to the simmering pot of social change.

Memoir of an Unintentional Feminist

by Mary Pacios

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Mary Pacios

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Names of some individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

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and coffee and cold from the nearby sink. A cloth napkin was then placed straddling the small bowl of warm water. On the rare occasion when I had reached the end of my patience and needed to vent my frustration, I would simply neglect to add cold water to the bowl.

The customer's reaction was always the same: A lightning fast recoil of the fingers — they never were in the water long enough to cause a burn — and a barrage of curse words from someone who until that moment had appeared very proper and disdainfully in control.

I would be so apologetic! "Oh, I am *sooo* sorry! Was it hot? Oh, dear, I'll fix it right away!"

Often there would be someone else at the table who had been annoyed by the individual's boorish behavior and who would find delight in the "incident". A couple of times I was slipped an extra tip.

My waitress career went up a couple of notches when I found a job at Storyville, a jazz club in Boston owned by George Wein, producer of the Newport Jazz Festival. My previous job had ended suddenly — a lucrative position as a cocktail waitress in the lounge of a Boston hotel. One round of drinks there would produce a larger tip than serving a full-course dinner, and as a bonus, flattering cocktail dresses supplanted the drab uniforms I had worn as a food waitress.

I had been working at the hotel for a few months, happy as a clam, until the hotel was sold. There were rumors about a new sideline being operated out of the hotel. "Notice the changes?" one of the waitresses from the dining room asked, "The new girls hanging out in the lounge?"

I hadn't noticed anything different except a new hostess, said to be the owner's girlfriend. She seemed okay, but within

a couple of weeks when I came to work, she blocked my entrance to the lounge and said, "You're through." The reason given: drinking on the job.

I was a teetotaler. I hated liquor! People even joked about me being a "cheap date" because I only drank Cokes! I could not afford to lose this job; I had three children to feed! I became angry. We'll see about that, I thought. I was a dues-paying member of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union and had been for over three years!

My anger propelled me sixteen blocks and up a flight of stairs to the union's office. From behind a counter, a union official peered over his glasses. "Hmm," he said, "The hostess fired you for drinkin' on the job. Well, if the hostess says you were drinkin', must be somethin' to it."

"But I don't drink!" I screamed at the man. "I have a bartender and a regular customer who were there that night and who'll testify they've never ever seen me take a drink!"

"Well, nothin' I can do, if the hostess fired you for drinkin'."

"But, I ... do ... NOT ... drink! She fired me to give a friend the job! Whose side are you on?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

Damn union, I thought, and stormed out.

My boyfriend Dutch tried to cheer me up. "Maybe it's for the best," he said.

Yeah, I thought, how can losing my job be for the best?

Dutch offered a suggestion. "Why not see if you can get on at Storyville? You'll make good money there."

I scoffed. I didn't know a thing about jazz, which, as turned out, was a big plus. During my interview, when the manager Crawford said Woody Herman and his big band was

booked into Storyville, I replied, “Woody who?” Crawford hired me on the spot, saying he wanted to keep jazz groupies away, didn’t want to catch anyone standing around listening to the music. Our job was hustling drinks and emptying ashtrays. He warned me against fraternizing with the musicians and said it could cause me to lose my job.

My new hours were great; I didn’t have to be at work until seven in the evening. There were two sets each night and a matinee on Sunday — week-long engagements with the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Della Reese, Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan — quite an introduction for a jazz novice. Maynard Ferguson’s big band with singer Irene Kral performed at Storyville, as well as the Four Freshmen and Johnny Mathis (early in his career). On top of those headliners, I also had the privilege of listening to the folk music of Josh White and the comedy of Mort Sahl. Mort was a satirist whose fodder came from the daily news. He wore a signature red sweater and in one hand, carried his standard prop — a folded newspaper.

The renowned pianist Erroll Garner became my introduction to jazz. Arriving a half hour early my first night of work, I was greeted by a line of Garner fans that stretched clear around the block. Garner, composer of the jazz standard “Misty,” endeared himself to Storyville employees by giving everyone a five-dollar tip when his gig was over (equal to about \$45 in 2018 dollars).

Dizzy Gillespie appeared a few times with his big band at Storyville, and once or twice with his quintet, featuring the Cuban Candido Camero on conga drums. I was so enthralled with one of Gillespie’s numbers that I went all over Boston

looking for the record to no avail. I just couldn't imagine why there was no recording.

In the jam-packed club, the sax section would stand up and chant: "I'll-never-go-back-to-Georgia / I'll-never-go-back-to-Georgia," and then, *wham*, the full orchestra would break into an Afro-Cuban beat. The crowd would go wild. But when I tried to find a recording of the song, I received the same response from every record store. "I'll never Go Back to Georgia?" they'd ask. "By Dizzy Gillespie? Never heard of it."

The next time Gillespie and his band appeared at Storyville, I told one of the musicians I had looked everywhere for what I thought was one of the band's best tunes and asked why it hadn't been recorded.

"Which one?" he asked

"I'll Never Go Back to Georgia."

"You went all over looking for 'I'll Never Go Back to Georgia'?"

"Yeah."

He started laughing. "No wonder," he said. "The song is 'Manteca.' We sing that intro on some of our gigs," he explained, "sort of a comment on how we feel about the South."

I started working at Storyville in 1956, a year after Charlie Parker died. People in the club were still talking about Parker; they said they knew something was wrong when he didn't show up for his gig.

The club was located in the Copley Plaza Hotel, Copley Square, Boston, and was small by today's standards, seating a couple hundred people. Couples were paired with strangers at small, round tables barely able to accommodate the drinks of a jammed-in foursome. The fragrance of alcohol and stale

cigarette smoke permeated the club. Two bars catered to the hip crowd; people came for the music, not to get loaded. A dozen stools graced the bar to the left of the foyer; a service bar hid behind swinging doors to the right in the main room.

The headwaiter could be a bit snooty at times. He would put "Reserved" signs on the front four tables. They would remain empty until someone greased his palm with an appropriate-sized tip. One particular night the headwaiter was checking out the crowd standing behind the velvet rope. His eyes passed over the older, white-haired black couple who stood at the front of the multitude waiting to be seated. As the headwaiter motioned to a threesome at the back, Dizzy Gillespie jumped off the stage, walked down the center aisle, unhooked the velvet rope and escorted the older black couple to a front table.

On a busy night when I was serving the front tables, one of the primo locations seemed to stay empty an agonizing long time. After the lights were turned down and the quintet began playing, the headwaiter finally escorted two men to the empty table. As I approached them in the dark, the back of the man sitting closest to the aisle caught my attention. Wow, I thought, those have got to be the best-developed trapezius muscles in the world! The man turned his head, and I was staring into the face of Ted Williams.

The other man (whom I recognized as a newscaster) said, "Hi, my name is Ed and this is my friend, Joe."

"Hi, Ed! Hi, Joe! What can I get for you?" I asked.

As the set ended, the headwaiter escorted the baseball hero and sportscaster out a side exit. The two players thanked me for not blowing their cover and left a sizable tip.

Without a doubt, my tenure at Storyville was the best waitressing job I ever had. The only down side for me — the owner George Wein closed Storyville each summer to concentrate on the Newport Jazz Festival. All his employees had free entry to the Festival and many went to the big event, but I had to stay in Boston and fill the unemployment gap.

Tips at the club were good, and if someone left an extra generous amount, I'd leave it on the table for a few minutes, hoping to stimulate similar generosity from surrounding customers. Of course I never took my eyes off the cash.

Standing in the shadows one night, my eyes protective of a five-dollar tip, I saw a hand reach over and start to grab the bill. I pounced and placed my hand atop the purloiner's forearm. "That's mine," I said. The customer made some lame excuse that he was going to save the money for me.

Storyville was a mixed club of "coloreds" and "ofeys" (i.e., whites). Some of the waiters and waitresses were students; others were single mothers working nights so they could be home with their children during the day. One waiter, well over sixty, had been a silent film actor, and a Rubensesque waitress of undetermined age was rumored to be an ex-burlesque queen.

My first night in Storyville, a musician came up to me and asked if I was a *cool chick*. "When I finish my gig, how about splitting and taking a spin in my new wheels to my pad and we can ball."

I looked at him blankly, barely understanding a word he had said. Another waitress whispered in my ear, "He's got a new car and after work wants to take you for a drive to his place and go to bed with you." (We didn't say, "have sex" in those days. "Go to bed" was the common euphemism.)

I politely declined the man's invitation.

As a new waitress I put my foot in my mouth and got into hot water with Freddie, one of the bartenders. Freddie was tall and slim. I marveled at the smooth way he moved and the dexterity with which he mixed drinks. "You remind me of Stepin Fetchit," I said.

Freddie slammed down the glass in his hand. His eyes blazed with anger. "What do you mean?" he yelled.

Oh, my God, I thought. What did I say? Why is he so mad? I fumbled for words, trying to explain that I was giving him a compliment. "Ever since I was a little kid," I said, "I've admired Stepin Fetchit. He's so graceful, the way he moves. And you're like that. You move so gracefully." I explained my father took me to see him once, when I was about ten or eleven years old. A carnival had come to Medford, and Stepin Fetchit was performing in one of the side tents. We stood up close to the rope and my father shook his hand. I had wondered why a movie star like Stepin Fetchit was in a carnival.

"Mary, Mary." Freddie repeated my name as if he was talking to a small child. "Mary, I'll accept it that you meant it as a compliment. I sorta see what you mean. Stepin Fetchit does move gracefully. But we think he's being used to make fun of colored people, like we're all lazy and dumb."

"I just never saw it that way." I said.

Freddie shook his head and went back to mixing drinks.

The first night Al Hibbler, the blind jazz singer, appeared at Storyville, one of my co-workers gave me friendly advice: "Hug your tray to your chest when you're not serving. Al Hibbler leads with his hands."

After working at Storyville a few months, I was invited to one of the Saturday-night parties by Crawford, the manager. I

was hesitant, not sure what I might be getting myself into. But what the heck, I thought, I could always leave and hail a cab home. Fully prepared to handle any difficult situation that might arise at the party, I was taken aback by the scene that greeted my eyes and ears. People sat around listening to records and talking quietly. That's it! No wild shenanigans. Talking! This particular night the talk was about the saxophonist Paul Gonzalves, his solo at Newport, and about Gillespie's new trombonist, a *woman*, Melba Liston.

I sat in a corner listening to a musician from Gerry Mulligan's band describe his flight over Seattle, breaking through the clouds and seeing the city below come into view, then looking up and seeing a rainbow against the brilliant blue sky.

I went to several more parties — all low-key affairs, like old friends hanging out. At one party in a hotel, people would leave and come back in a half hour or so. Later I found out “weed” was being smoked in another room down the hall. Around Boston, if you were in the presence of marijuana, even if *you* weren't smoking, you'd get arrested. One musician told me he escaped a bust down the Cape because he had gone for a walk. Everyone who was inside the cottage was arrested. The musician said Count Basie ran a very clean band. “No hard stuff, man. If Basie gets word that you're hooked on the hard stuff, man, you are *out*, man.”

The night Basie was due to open at Storyville, Crawford told us to come in early for a meeting. As we took our seats, Crawford, in as stern a voice as he could muster, proceeded to reiterate Storyville's policy of *no fraternizing* with musicians. I wondered what was so special about Basie's band that we had to be reminded about the policy. Does that mean no

fraternizing unless Crawford is also invited, a sort of *sanctioned* get-together? As I was pondering such a weighty question, the first Basie musician walked in, a handsome six-foot-plus dude, and then the second walked in, and the third, and the fourth. They kept coming — all tall, all good-looking, until five-foot-five or thereabouts (but also good-looking) Sonny, the drummer, ended the parade. Grinning as if he had been tipped off, Sonny yelled, “Hey, what’s the meeting about?”

One night a policeman who often dropped by Storyville, took me aside and offered me advice. “Be careful of the company you keep,” he warned. I was puzzled by his remark until I remembered a few nights before he had seen me waiting on the curb and then getting into a car with some of my black co-workers. We were headed to an after-work party.

I realized I no longer categorized people by race, whites and coloreds, but saw only individuals — Bennie, Freddie, Alice. The atmosphere of tolerance that permeated Storyville now encompassed me, a protective cocoon that helped those who worked there to almost forget the taboos existing outside — almost, but not quite.

Marlene, a white waitress who was seeing one of the musicians from Count Basie’s all-black band, would take Jackie, a black waitress, along on dates. In public Marlene wanted people to assume she was a white friend of the black couple, lessening the chance of anyone being beaten up.

Another waitress, a college student, received a rude awakening when she became engaged to a Harvard student of part Japanese descent. The father of my co-worker, an Italian immigrant who owned a barbershop, told her no daughter of his would marry a “Jap.” He didn’t care if the Harvard student’s Nisei father and Austrian mother were both college

professors. His daughter was given a choice: either end the engagement or be disowned and lose all financial support for college. She ended the engagement.

Most of the musicians hated rock and roll. The club's die-hard jazz fans passed that music by, but a couple of waitresses admitted to liking Little Richard and Earl Bostic.

When playing a gig the musicians wore suits, sometimes with contrasting jackets and pants. Singers usually wore evening gowns. Dinah Washington's gowns fit so tight she couldn't sit down. Rumor had it that Dinah tried to take the cost of her outfits as a tax deduction, claiming she could only wear the gowns when performing, but the IRS wouldn't go for it.

Dinah Washington had an amazing, powerful voice. At the end of each set she'd leave the bandstand and belt out the last song a cappella. I still get goose bumps when I think of her walking down the aisle and singing: "I'm sorry, Baby, you let my love grow cold ..."

The first time I heard Duke Ellington and his band, I noticed an older musician with dark circles and bags under his eyes sitting in the sax section. His alto saxophone rested across his lap; he looked tired and bored — until his solo. The musician stood up, put the reed to his lips and out flowed plaintive wails, filling the room with haunting, mournful sounds.

"Who was that?" I whispered to the waitress next to me.

"Him? That was Johnny Hodges playing 'Jeep's Blues.'"

I dressed well during my tenure at Storyville, rounding out my Filene's Basement lingerie with a few second-hand, slightly worn stylish dresses sold by the hatcheck girl. A Bergdorf Goodman number brought forth many a

compliment. The soft-woolen, long-sleeved, Glen plaid dress was princess-cut and buttoned down the front to mid-calf.

Like the other waitresses, I purchased my shoes from a customer who brought high-fashion samples into the club. He'd take our order, noting our shoe size and style preference. A few nights later he'd collect a nominal amount way below list price and give us the high-fashion shoes we had ordered. Walking on the stilettos was tricky. I learned to avoid sidewalk grates when wearing my favorite pair, a navy blue and white spectator shoe with a two-and-a-half-inch heel.

In October 1957, when news broke the Russians had launched a satellite orbiting earth, I was busy serving drinks and thought the bartender was putting me on. "No, no!" He said. "It's true! It's true! The Russians call it a *Sputnik!*"

I came close to losing my job at Storyville once. George Shearing was the headliner. The blind pianist, considered one of the great jazz pianists of the era, was somewhat of a prima donna. At the end of each set, Shearing would signal the musicians to leave the bandstand, and insisting on absolute quiet, play a solo — a classical number. If Shearing heard the slightest noise, he would stop playing, sit upright and wait for the sound to subside before resuming. During the musical interlude, drinks could not be served, the cash registers not opened. I usually stood in the shadows close to the wall. One night, the drummer Percy came over, stood beside me, and with a resonance that overpowered the soft tones of the tinkling piano, broke wind (i.e. farted). Percy scampered away. When all eyes in the room turned in the direction of the offending sound, they rested on me, standing there — alone. A few feet away Percy, all innocent, flashed me a wide grin.

Crawford, the manager, was furious and ready to fire me. Percy finally confessed he was the offending party.

My boyfriend Dutch was certainly right when he said losing my job at the hotel might be for the best. Dutch, real name Richard Van Valkenberg, was an art student who was also studying the saxophone at the Berklee School of Music under the G.I. Bill. Blues was his thing — alto sax.

In 1955 we were co-workers at the Hotel Touraine. During the six-month waiting period for my divorce to become final, whenever Dutch asked me out, I'd tell him I couldn't. "But," I said, "you'll be the first man I'll go out with when my divorce becomes final."

I was living in the semi-squalor of Brookline Village — my apartment a small, two-bedroom, in a run-down duplex featuring dank walls covered with grime and mottled gray ceilings. At sixty-five dollars a month, it was all I could afford.

After our first date, Dutch sent me a dozen roses. "To give some cheer to the dump," he said. Dutch looked like Humphrey Bogart. Sometimes he'd meet me after work. He'd be standing in a doorway at the end of the alley, only the smoke from his cigarette visible. He'd step out from the shadows and utter something like, "Well, sweetheart, I never thought you'd get here." He'd be wearing a dark trench coat with the collar turned up. Dutch also did great imitations of baseball game announcers and could wiggle his ears.

At Christmas Dutch splurged, buying me presents, mostly stylish clothes that at the time I could not afford, and a few toys for my children. "This Christmas is for you," he said. "They're small now, so they don't know the difference. They're happy with a few things. Next year will be for them."

I was leading a very discreet life. Dutch never slept over — except the time he came down with chicken pox, and I insisted he couldn't go back to his apartment without someone to take care of him. Dutch had said he wasn't feeling well and couldn't finish his dinner. As he spoke little blisters started popping out — on his face, his ears, his hands. I swear I could almost hear them pop. The doctor who came to the house said it was the worst case of chicken pox he had ever seen. The itching was almost unbearable for Dutch. Once when I was dabbing the calamine on him, he grabbed the bottle and started pouring the lotion on. My babysitter said if worse came to worst, she'd testify he was much too sick for any hanky-panky.

It was important I not be reported to authorities as an "unfit" mother. A man sleeping over was a definite no-no. In the Boston of the 1950s, any indication of sexual activity was evidence of a divorced woman being "unfit". Your children could be happy and healthy, but if you were caught sleeping with a man, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would step in. Social workers protecting the children from an "immoral" mother would take the children away and place them in foster homes. It was a constant threat for a divorced woman and worse if she was on welfare — investigators might make a surprise "bed check", waking a woman up in the middle of the night to see if they could catch a man in her bed.

Dutch helped me when I moved out of the Brookline Village slum into a new heated apartment. I have Hawk Zamparelli, my old Medford boss, to thank for the step up.

"Yes, I remember you," Hawk said when I called. I explained my water had been frozen for five days and the only heat came from the kitchen stove. My three children and I

were sleeping in the kitchen. Could Hawk help me get into Medford Public Housing? Hawk said he'd check around and for me to call him back in a couple of days.

The news was both good and bad. Medford Housing had a long waiting list, but someone in Boston owed Hawk a favor and he thought he could get me into Columbia Point, a new housing project in Dorchester.

Neither Hawk nor I realized the project was considered one of Boston's most notorious — fifty acres of bland, yellow-brick buildings with highfalutin street names like Mount Vernon and Monticello. Columbia Point, I learned after moving in, was nicknamed "Sin City" because the main tenants were husband-less women with children.

The seven-storied buildings had four apartments to a floor, averaging three children per apartment — approximately eighty, rambunctious children per building. Fairly soundproof walls preserved an element of sanity. The apartments, which were touted as fire-proof, were warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and all the kitchen appliances worked. There were two additional selling points: a public beach a half-mile walk from the project and rent of forty dollars a month.

Dutch painted over the "institution-green" walls of my second-floor apartment with off-white latex paint and covered one of the living room walls with gray faux bricks. He constructed a couch out of a solid door, wrought iron legs and a thick piece of foam covered with bright red corduroy. Multi-colored throw pillows, a couple of basket chairs and a black metal tree lamp from the Studio Shop on Boston's trendy Newberry Street completed the modern 1950s decor. A place

of honor above the couch was reserved for one of Dutch's abstract paintings

I had acquired the redecorating money from a windfall during a brief stint as a carhop. One moment I was carrying trays across the drive-in lot, and the next moment, *bam*, I lay splayed on the ground, hit by a car backing out.

I stood up, glanced at the distraught driver and continued to the kitchen sans trays. The boss took one look at my ghost-white face and exclaimed, "What on earth happened to you?"

"I was hit by a car."

All work came to a halt. Everyone — except the boss — ran outside to jot down the auto's license number. My boss ushered me into the break room and sat me in a chair. "You should go to the hospital and get checked out," he said.

I demurred, saying I was fine. Then my legs began to jump up and down — uncontrollable spasms that denied my protests of: "I'm okay, I'm okay." My boss grabbed his keys and steered me toward his car.

"Shock," the emergency room doctor proclaimed, "But apart from bruises, you're fine." I was discharged and told to take it easy for a few days.

The driver's insurance company contacted me right away, offering a few hundred dollars. My boss said they probably were worried I'd file a nuisance claim. He encouraged me to take the money and sign the release. I had never been on such a shopping spree — clothes and toys for the children, household goods, redecorating supplies!

The pride I felt in my new acquisitions and modern decor was short-lived, a mere two months, thanks to faulty wiring. As I walked into the living room to once again savor Dutch's handiwork, flames leapt from the television set and curled into

the new drapes. I ran to retrieve my two girls from the bathtub. I tugged at Marilyn — she had stopped to dry herself — and grabbed Billy from his room. We headed for the one and only exit through the now blazing living room. Janice, wrapped in a towel, clutched my skirt as we headed for the one and only exit through the now blazing living room. Loud popping sounds could be heard from the exploding TV as we made our way out the door.

The fire engine, stuck in Boston's infamous rush hour traffic for about twenty minutes, cut across a field to reach the building. By the time the firefighters arrived, my front door, a metal fire door, was sweating. A woman from the top floor had the elevator jammed with her belongings. Another woman was running up and down the hallway screaming. One of the firefighters went over to the screaming woman at the far end of the hallway.

I tried to get the fireman's attention. "Excuse me, please, excuse me," I said, tapping on his arm.

Exasperated, the fireman turned toward me. "Lady, can't you see I'm busy! What do you want?"

"That's my apartment on fire."

I was very calm. I think I was in shock.

The fireman apologized. "I assumed the woman screaming ..." he explained. After answering a few of the fireman's questions, I brought my children to Claire, a friend in another building. When I returned to my apartment the fire was out, my babysitter, a co-worker's nephew, had arrived and was in the kitchen trying to wash off the black smoke that coated the cabinets — a hopeless job. The fire had been confined to the front room, but the smoke had permeated the whole apartment, coating almost everything.

That night as I surveyed the blackened ceilings and walls and inhaled the acrid stench of burnt objects, a major shift occurred in my thinking. The transitory nature of material objects had become painfully apparent, their importance greatly diminished. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, amassing material goods had ceased to be my goal.

The housing authority gave me temporary quarters while the damaged apartment was cleaned and repainted in the offensive institutional-green color. I came to realize “fireproof” at the Columbia Point Housing Project meant a fire would be confined to the blazing apartment and not spread from one residence to another.

The Asian flu visited my apartment during the outbreak in 1957. I awoke one morning, my bones aching and my throat sore. When I tried to stand I became so dizzy I fell back onto the bed. One call to the clinic at Boston City Hospital and a doctor was dispatched — a Boston Health Department’s policy to keep communicable diseases at bay. The young intern listened to my heart and lungs and said, “You should quit smoking.”

I told the doctor, “I don’t smoke.”

The doctor was skeptical. He checked my fingers and teeth for nicotine stains.

“Hmmm, you’re right. You don’t smoke. But your lungs sound like a smoker’s.”

“There’s a lot of smoke at work,” I said.

“Hmmm, interesting. Well, you have the Asian flu. Nothing you can do for it except tough it out. Take aspirin every four hours and drink lots of liquids. One good thing, you’ll develop immunity from other flues.”

I was sick for ten days. Billy came down with a lighter case. At one point, five-year-old Marilyn scampered from room to room bringing glasses of cold water to her sick brethren and me. Dutch visited after work each day, replenishing our beverage cache and bringing soup. His kisses made me feel so much better. Despite repeated exposures, Dutch escaped the nasty bug.

During my four-year stay at Columbia Point I met some very fine women. Most led frantic lives, working, but preferring to stay home and be with their children. We'd meet for coffee, laughing and joking, forgetting for brief moments our problems and the circumstances that had brought us to Columbia Point. We were very loyal to each other and lived by the unwritten rule of never becoming involved with each other's exes. Often we shared information that might help ease each other's financial burdens. "No need to go without a turkey over the holidays," one woman announced just before Thanksgiving. "You just call up your state representative, and he'll have a basket sent over to your house — a turkey with all the fixings. And all you have to do is vote for him in the next election."

My first Christmas at Columbia Point presented a dilemma. Marilyn wanted a bride doll from Santa. My mother spent hours making a bride dress out of scraps of satin material and lace ribbon for a doll she had bought. On Christmas Eve, when my ex-husband brought over gifts to put under the Christmas tree, including an expensive bride doll complete with trousseau, my mother could not hide her disappointment.

"You don't have to give Marilyn my doll," she said.

I called Claire, one of the coffee klatch women. "I have an extra bride doll. Do you know anyone I can give it to?"

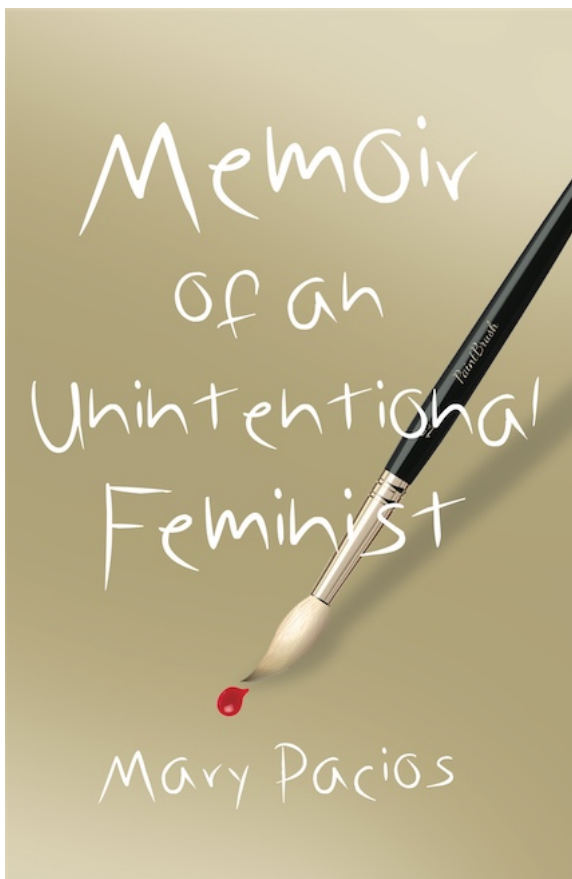
"I can't believe you called! There's a woman in my building. You're the answer to her prayers!" exclaimed Claire. "She has a truck for her son but doesn't have anything for her daughter!"

When I knocked on the woman's door and handed her the doll from my ex-husband, she kept thanking me. "I couldn't believe you had a bride doll," she said. "My daughter wanted one so badly! I thought she was going to wake up Christmas morning so disappointed. What would I tell her? My husband is in prison, and I just didn't know what to do!"

Each woman in the project had a story: husbands who gambled, deserted their families, drank, beat them up. Living at Columbia Point was temporary we told each other, just long enough "to get ahead" so we could "get out of the projects."

My friend Claire, a freckled strawberry-blonde in her mid-twenties with brilliant blue eyes, had been deserted, left to bring up her son without money or help from the boy's father. Yet Claire stepped up when her unmarried cousin gave birth out of wedlock. Claire volunteered to take care of the baby boy while her cousin worked; the cousin's family wanted the "illegitimate" baby put up for adoption.

No one had suspected the young woman was pregnant. Claire said it wasn't clear if her cousin realized she was pregnant. The young woman's mother had found her collapsed on the bathroom floor; the baby, alive and surprisingly well, lay beside her, the umbilical cord still attached to the placenta. The cousin was hospitalized in serious condition. She couldn't work for a couple of months and needed a doctor's slip to return to her job in the secretary



A young woman, divorced with children, struggles to find a place in the repressive culture of the 1950s. She lands in the middle of Berkeley, California's war protest and environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s and adds her own budding feminism to the simmering pot of social change.

Memoir of an Unintentional Feminist

by Mary Pacios

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