

A Friend Commits Suicide

by Nancy K. Miller

Carolyn often pictured our friendship as a pairing of opposites. In her foreword to a British collection about women of a certain age and their experience of menopause she describes our differing views on the subject through sartorial metaphors:

I will wager that two friends with more diverse views on aging and menopause than Nancy and I have would be hard to find. But then we are friends readily distinguishable on many grounds. I, for example, am often asked how I can bear to endure constant intimacy with someone who always looks so fastidiously groomed. This question, asked in the face of my own apparel, suggestive of one who has just returned from herding sheep, ought to be reversed: how can she, so very French in her put-togetherness from hairstyle to shoes, bear to confront, as she weekly does, my rumpledness.

Even though I was, at least when we first met, the structuralist critic, Carolyn was enamored of polarities. Our friendship, as she saw it, somewhat mysteriously depended on how unlike we were. Naturally, Carolyn never looked as if she had just returned from herding sheep (though the phrase still makes me smile), and I never looked French. My friend Naomi Schor was the one who looked French, and sort of was. For one thing, my kinky, gray hair—no matter how good the haircut (OK, I did have good haircuts given the situation)—would have disqualified me, let alone glasses and my (peasant ancestors) low-to-the-ground silhouette. But Carolyn enjoyed posing our personas as polar opposites, hence the implausibility—and value—of our bond. And she loved hyperbole.

Hyperbole and generalization, especially about women and aging:

The answer is that such things no longer matter to friends such as we; friendships with women are perhaps the choicest rewards of aging. ...Had we met when young I doubt we would have ventured upon friendship. But age has offered us the chance to love across what earlier might have been insurmountable barriers.

At the time of writing the forewords (we each wrote one) to the 1994 volume,

Carolyn was sixty-eight, I was fifty-three. We had met officially in 1976, when we were both teaching at Columbia, Carolyn was in English, I was in French. Carolyn was turning fifty and I was thirty-five. We were both part of the newly created Society of Fellows—I was the junior fellow to her senior. I agree that earlier we would have not been tempted to become friends, since even in 1976 the difference in our status was still significant enough, if not an insurmountable obstacle. Put another way, the difference in age between us meant both that we would age differently—Carolyn with relish, me with anxiety--and that our histories would remain in dialogue but on separate tracks: an asymptotic relation, closer and closer but never finally touching. For one thing, Carolyn was my mentor—and that is not a reversible relation.

Oddly, or perhaps inevitably, as I approach the age at which Carolyn committed suicide, I feel the gap closing in unexpected ways. In her brief suicide note, addressed to no one in particular, she wrote, “The journey is over. Love to all, Carolyn.” And we all kept thinking we’d get our own note in the mail. No one did. More than a decade later, I have not come to the end of pondering her suicide, of living in its aftermath, and writing about it; feeling somehow abandoned, guilty, and dumb. Why didn’t I believe her when she said (and wrote) that she was planning to kill herself, when the time came, whenever that was?

At seventy-four, I have begun to wonder daily whether I too should consider seventy-seven the end of the journey, her metaphor for the kind of life she had wanted to live. First, of course, I’d have to retire, which I don’t seem to want to do just yet.

“Aging set me free,” Carolyn goes on to write in her foreword and elsewhere. It became her great theme. And it was in the wake of her turning fifty, when Carolyn had

made the decision to age, to decide that she *was* aging and that she intended to express that physically, that we began our weekly dinners, at the tail end of the 1970s. She inaugurated her aging process by giving in to gaining weight. The hell with living on celery, she said, or something along those lines; I was still devoted to celery. At the same time she developed a look that would continue in the years to follow. A kind of tunic top over loose fitting pants. No more skirts or dresses and the panty hose they required.

One of the ways Carolyn marked the change was by handing me a suit she would no longer wear: a dusty rose-colored, almost pink ultrasuede suit—belted jacket and below the knee skirt. I was touched but also floored. I could not imagine her wearing the suit, and I wondered even more how she saw me, how she could imagine me in that fabric and style (though ultrasuede was popular at the time), imagine that it would fit me (I was two sizes smaller than she was at the time, not just eating celery but smoking to stay thin—thinnish—never thin enough, of course, it’s all relative). Fortunately, the suit didn’t fit since I was much too intimidated by Carolyn in those years to say: what were you thinking? or to admit that I was miffed. Ultrasuede, moi?

After enumerating our many likes and dislikes, dogs (Carolyn)/no dogs (me), children/no children, walk/jog, like cold weather/like warm weather, love aging/hate aging, and so on (for my sake, she even got to like eating “raw fish” as she always referred to our Japanese restaurant phase as if wanting recognition for bravery), she then goes on to explain what made it possible for us to become intimate friends, despite our differences in taste and style.

Feminism, humanism, a passion for reading and writing, and because of our very dissimilarities, the chance to cheer each other over the fences that stall our purposeful journeys and our idle rambles.

I've always remembered Carolyn's self-portrait as a rumpled looking sheep herder. (In truth, she dressed neatly.) But I had not remembered until I sat down to revisit our bond, the invocation of feminism she makes here: not our institutional, academic commitments, team-teaching, the Gender and Culture series, but something more abstract and at the same time, oddly rural for our strictly urban excursions.

I'm tempted to reread her journeying metaphors through my experience last summer, while rambling (to pick up her word) with friends in Yorkshire, and climbing the fences we encountered along the way. Carolyn, confirmed Anglophile, would have loved the scene. I needed help getting over the more daunting stiles, designed to mark the boundaries of green pastures in which flocks of sheep grazed.

The much younger friends cheered me on, as Carolyn says we cheered each other, until the ultimate fence she decided to cross alone.

There are some things you just never get over.

