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Valerie Steiker. The New Yorker. New York: Dec 24-Dec 31, 2001.
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Abstract (Summary)

Steiker reflects on her mother, Gisele Neiman Steiker, who had left Belgium at the age of nineteen to come to America for a new life. Whereas her mother would be overgenerous with her and her sister, lavishing them with affection, Steiker's mother and grandmother were rivals.

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I come from a long line of small, elegant, dark-haired women who are somewhat excitable and look good in red. In my memory, I see my mother in a bright-red coat, a ring of fur at the neck and hem, a shiny black belt around her waist. Her poise, her presence, her easy glamour--these are all things she inherited from her own mother. My grandmother, of ivory skin, dark hair and eyes, apple cheeks, was a coquette.

It was from my grandmother that my mother got her sense of vogue, so that during my childhood, in New York in the seventies, my mother would look back to her childhood, in Belgium in the thirties and forties, to the memory of her mother in fox stoles, clip earrings, crocodile handbags, a jewelled pin ever present on her lapel. Whereas my mother would be overgenerous with my sister and me, lavishing us with affection, with loving words, with presents, my mother and her mother were rivals. When my mother, age eighteen, in Antwerp, came home one day and told her mother about a beautiful coat she had seen in a boutique--Will you go look at it for me? she asked. To see if you like it?--my grandmother returned the next day with the coat in a shopping bag, having bought it for herself. It's too old for you, she said as she hung it up in her closet. My mother reacted to this minor cruelty by going too far in the other direction. She always offered us the first cut of an apple--the best piece, with its sweet flesh preserved under a shiny red back.

Two, three afternoons a week, I find my mother at the beauty parlor. She uses it like an office, talking on the telephone while her hair is being combed out, her nails painted. She doesn't call it a hairdresser's or a beauty salon, like American mothers. With throaty "R"s, she says "beauty parlor," the words repeated together so often

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in our household that they almost become one word. My mother, speaker of nine languages, has her own way of saying things, which I unconsciously adopt. Later, my sister and I will cherish these linguistic oddities, the way we always get an adage slightly wrong--"Will wonders never cease!" my mother writes to me during my sophomore year in college. But, for now, friends tease me because I say "valise" instead of "suitcase," or they try to imitate her French accent when she calls me or my sister from the other end of the apartment, "Valerie! Stephanie!"

My mother can't do her own hair. Before her hairdresser can get to work, he turns her head into a mass of ringlets. Then, depending on my mother's mood, either her hair goes up, teased into a seductive pile of curls, or down, a more "natural" style, with spraystiffened waves softly reaching to her shoulders. Whichever one she picks, when she gets home and looks in the mirror, she likes it better than the way she had it before. Why were we trying to keep her away from her true look? she asks. I prefer it up. After the first night of her sleeping on it, the upsweep becomes a little lopsided, my mother adding combs and bobby pins haphazardly to keep it upright. By the third morning, the curls are quite matted down, my mother vainly pulling at them to make them come back to life. This is why she loves hats. With a hat she is ready--for lunch, for walking up Madison Avenue, for her next appointment at the beauty parlor.

At home, she has baths, not showers, careful not to get her hair wet. She puts oil in the water, and we visit her, washing her back with a soapy wet cloth, dragging it pleasurably over the right angles of her shoulders, the jutting knobs of her spine. Her skin is lustrous, warm to the touch. The water as she leans forward beads off her skin quickly and obediently. Her back is wide and even, browned from years of sun. She is a real woman, full of curves, with floating breasts, sunken hips, a tiny waist. We have a game. When I rest my hand on her arm, she tenses it quickly, her secret way of saying I love you, which I understand as clearly as if she had breathed the words directly in my ear. In her bathrobe, she hugs us, her face slick with moisturizer. This is her private side. Hair in disarray, pins protruding, she organizes our lives, scheduling doctors' appointments, planning trips, keeping up with her family in Belgium. No one else sees her this way.

After her bath, she sits on her bed, pulling on her stockings, demanding her silver-tipped shoes, her beaded handbag, a glass of club soda from the kitchen. She is quick-tempered. My sister and I scurry about, trying to keep up. We are allowed to vote on what she's wearing, putting in a plea for a certain bracelet, shoes whose shape or color we feel will work better than the ones she has chosen. We learn how an outfit is constructed, the disparate pieces fitting together just so. We watch in the bathroom as she blackens her lashes, applies different lipsticks, one on top of the next, until she hits on her own inimitable shade of red. My father has safely removed himself to the library, where we hear him fooling around on the piano. He plays one of several standards, ranging from his and my mother's song, "All of Me," to his own anthem, "The Sunny Side of the Street." The minute my mother is ready, she stands in the library door. "What are you doing, Jerry?" she asks. "We have to leave, we're late."

At the age of nineteen, my mother, Gisele Neiman, left Belgium to start a new life, much as her mother had left Hungary. Born in 1908, my grandmother, Blanca Gancz, was the oldest of nine children, raised in the town of Sighet--a hub of Jewish life since the seventeenth century--in a remote province of northern Transylvania that went back and forth between Hungary and Romania over the years. Blanca went to Belgium in 1928, because one of her younger

sisters was already there, having married and moved to Antwerp a year or so earlier. Two years later, Blanca met my grandfather, Avram Neiman, through a local matchmaker. Avram was a good-looking young man from Romania, passing through the Belgian port on his way to Australia to make his fortune. He took one look at Blanca and his dreams of Australia (or America, depending on who's telling the story) evaporated.

In October of 1932, my mother was born. Within a couple of years, Avram had entered the diamond trade, beginning as a polisher in the Bourse, Antwerp's diamond exchange, and slowly working his way up, eventually becoming a dealer in his own right. In one of the only photographs we have of him, he stands, under a small-brimmed hat, with his wife and daughter (my mother, age six, wears a large white flower tucked behind her ear), leaning toward them slightly in a gesture of protection and proprietorship. He used to bring my mother sweets--oranges and chocolate, mostly--and when I envisage him I see him as sepia-toned, standing in that same gentle pose, the only spot of color a bright, round orange he holds firmly in one hand.

Blanca had furs, jewels, the latest dresses. She developed a liking for tchotchkes, collecting animal figurines and other small objects that she displayed in glass-fronted cabinets. In 1938, Blanca returned to Sighet. She arrived in a fox stole, with her six-year-old daughter, wanting to show her mother how well she had done in life. It was the last time she saw her parents and most of her siblings. Soon after this trip, right before the outbreak of war, Blanca gave birth to a son, my uncle David.

Despite the growing rumors of how Jews were suffering at the hands of German occupiers, my grandfather didn't want to leave Belgium. At one point, he got papers to go to Cuba, but he gave them away. He was a Romanian citizen, after all, and the King of Romania famously had a Jewish mistress. How my grandfather thought this would protect him in Antwerp is unclear, but, in an increasingly senseless world, people seem to have clung to whatever logic they could.

I've been told that Avram escaped from the Germans seven or eight times. Each time, the Germans announced that Jewish families would be spared if the head of the household turned himself in. Each time, my grandfather escaped from custody. Responding to an order of requisition for Jewish workers in November, 1942, he once again turned himself in. This time, he was deported to Auschwitz.

My grandmother immediately changed her identity, becoming Victorine Van Belle, a Belgian celibataire. As she and Avram had decided beforehand, she put their money and diamonds and a few personal effects in safekeeping with trusted Gentile friends; she sent David to stay with a childless Christian couple who had a farm in the countryside between Knokke and Ghent; and she took my mother and went into hiding. Over the next two years, my mother and grandmother stayed in seventeen places. They kept moving, never knowing how long a situation would stay safe, always having to plan the next escape.

When I think of my grandmother's actions during the war, I picture a woman of impressive resourcefulness. But my mother saw a more melancholy side. At night, Blanca would fold my mother in her arms, and they would cry together. My mother, relying on half-remembered school lessons, tried to distract her by teaching her to read and write in Flemish. Other times, she watched as her maman played long games of solitaire, softly crooning Yiddish folk songs under her breath. As a child, I occasionally caught my mother playing solitaire in

her room, and I liked to sit beside her and watch the silent permutations of the cards.

When my mother was ten, she embroidered a sampler at school, the letters "A," "B," "C" stitched in multicolored threads. In our apartment it hung, framed in black, with these words written on the matted border: "1942. When my world fell apart. My mother, brother, and I went into hiding and my father died in Auschwitz. To my children and all children to come. May they never live through this experience."

My mother was a collector. In silver bowls and Lucite boxes, she kept every key that ever passed through her hands. She held on to all the letters she received, every photograph we ever took. In the early days of her marriage, she made albums for these stockpiles. Later, as their numbers grew unwieldy, she just crammed them into boxes and drawers.

My father, sister, and I took my mother's caches for granted. She was teaching us that it gave life meaning to have a record of it. She had boxes filled with notebooks, short stories, and essays. It was clear to us that at some point she would sit down and produce something truly spectacular. In the meantime, she gathered the accoutrements of a writer's trade--tapering silver letter openers, graceful Japanese scissors, marble-papered journals. She had a set of Victorian lap desks, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and filled with all kinds of compartments, that she said gave her a "great elegant feeling" when she used one of them to write in bed.

My mother collected friends, too, women who were strong and funny, as she was, as well as those who were not so fortunate, either because they were divorced, married to the wrong man, or just couldn't seem to find happiness temperamentally. My mother filled my head with women's hidden secrets, their touching vanities, their sorry and glorious stories of love and loss. She was a good storyteller, with a passionate sense of right and wrong, but her morality was supple, interwoven with sympathetic strands, and it cloaked whomever she was talking about in a forgiving sheen. I was nine, ten, eleven, twelve, but having these conversations with my mother made me feel as though I were a part of the world at large. She would stop midsentence if my father came into the room. He didn't think I needed to know yet about divorce and sadness and human folly.

Within months of my grandmother's somewhat precipitous second marriage--after she and my mother and my uncle had come out of hiding--it became clear that her new husband was a mean-spirited man. He took pleasure in thwarting my mother and her brother. He ordered them to do the dishes after dinner, but if he sensed they were having too much fun while doing so he would make them stop. If he noticed they were enjoying a song on the radio, he changed the station.

The day my mother got her first period, she told her mother in the morning. Her mother and stepfather were having a dinner party that evening, and as the guests settled in the living room her stepfather called for her to come in, then announced to all the adults what had happened that day, embarrassing her in front of everyone under the guise of celebrating the fact. She stood there, shamed, not wanting to believe it was happening, hoping that she could crawl back into bed and that this news, this horrible man, would go away.

Unhappy with her stepfather, frustrated with her mother, my mother felt that life in Antwerp was becoming unbearable. The initial euphoria of the war's ending had worn off. Soon she was expected to marry.

Boy after boy was presented in Antwerp. Deals were struck, then broken, since my mother exhibited no interest in anyone. She begged my grandmother to be allowed to leave, always using the same argument. "If you loved me, you'd let me go," she'd say, day in, day out, until finally my grandmother had no choice. My mother told me that as soon as she was on the boat, about to sail for America, she started crying. "She doesn't love me, she's letting me go!"

I have a set of black-and-white photographs of my mother taken at Knokke Le Zoute, on the Belgian seacoast, in the summer of 1952, right before she came to New York. Although she couldn't swim, she makes a convincing bathing beauty, with a tousle of short dark hair and a smile slipping across her lips. In one, she is lying on a beach towel in a strapless cream-colored swimsuit, her body held in perfect restraint by a combination of modesty and hidden corsetry, her skin as luminous as a seashell. Underneath is a caption of sorts, in her handwriting, that says, "What was I dreaming of? Did I think about New York?" Another shows her seated, with prettily bent knees, looking off to the distance, and above and below it the words "What am I expecting? What am I looking for?"

One summer afternoon, I walked into my mother's bedroom and caught her in tears while she was watching television. A musical was on, and it was in the middle of a deliriously happy flags-flying number, with hundreds of smiling tap dancers in red-white-and-blue sequins.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"Because," she said, pointing to the extravaganza filling the screen, "that is why I came to this country."

My mother had three stories of love. The first was a boy named Aby. He was the golden boy of her group. They spent summers in Knokke, the girls riding around in a red convertible, waiting for the boys to notice them, all of them going out at night to a dance club called De Hoeve. Aby was loved by all the girls, and he loved many of them in return. At some point, though, he let it be known that he preferred my mother. She was not strictly beautiful. She did not have classic features, but she had something else, what her favorite aunt--rubbing her fingers together and pursing her lips--would describe as a "comme heeerrre" look. When I examine the photographs of my mother at that time, I am struck by the mindfulness she holds in her eyes. It is after the war. She has lost her father and three years of her life. She knows pain and sadness and fear, but she knows other things, too: how to get a tailor to fit a suit, what shoe will best show off her leg, even, when necessary, how to steer clear of her mother.

One night, they all went to a ball. There were many after the war. Young and old would go. Toward the end, when the band was getting ready to play its last number, my mother looked up and saw Aby walking toward her. She said to herself, "If he is not coming for me, then it's over." Her heart is pounding. He is walking, walking. It seems as if it will take him forever. When he gets to her, he keeps going, straight past her to his mother, who is sitting on a chair on the sidelines. My mother watches him bend down handsomely, offer his arm, and ask his mother for the last dance. My mother runs out before she has to see them dancing together. Years later, she bumps into Aby in New York, on the main floor of Bloomingdale's, of all places. She is eager to show off her happiness, pulling out pictures of her family--her husband, her two daughters--us. He is subdued, his hat in his hands. He has never married. It is sad, but my sister and I love this story, this ending. This is how it had to be.

My mother's second love is more dangerous. After she has moved to America, she visits Mexico, and a short trip becomes a year-and-a-half stay. Weeks in Mexico City, weekends in Acapulco--this is when she perfects her Spanish. He is a Mexican filmmaker, full of machismo. He orders her around, decides where they'll eat, what she should wear. A photograph shows her in a sleeveless white pants suit with tassels at the hem, a white cap slanted rakishly over her dark hair. She leans provocatively against a flower-covered stone wall, looking like a James Bond heroine. While she is in Mexico, she becomes a model and an actress. She appears on television, the beautiful girl singing and dancing and pointing in variety and game shows. For one brief week, she even dyes her hair blond.

She is in love, and only then does she learn that he is married. He lets it slip, knowing it will make no difference. They spend a night together during which he calls his wife at four o'clock in the morning to accuse her of cheating on him, while my mother listens. She can hear the woman crying and protesting on the other end of the line, swearing on the Church that she has been faithful. Despite herself, my mother loves this man, his brute strength, his cruelty. She almost loses herself down there, in the Mexican sun.

By the time my mother met my father, she was tired of love. It was a hot day in July, 1966, and she was sick of everything, of living in New York, of meeting men. She couldn't even imagine wanting to be friends with an American man, let alone falling in love with one. I know these were her exact sentiments because she was halfway through a letter describing them when she went out that night. She had the flu and wanted to stay home, but her best friend persuaded her to go to a party to meet a banker, the best friend of her boyfriend. My mother wasn't interested. She thought he sounded dull. On his side, my father was curious but he wasn't about to stake his night on someone he had never met, so he went to the party with a date, a blonde whom he never saw again. At the party, my father took one look at my mother and didn't leave her side for the rest of the evening. (To this day, the family joke goes, there's a blond woman who walks around saying, "What ever happened to Jerry Steiker?")

The next day, my father called. I have to see you, he said. By this time, my mother felt really ill. But I don't feel well, she answered. My father, proving himself to be more than just a banker, had a gig downtown playing the saxophone, and asked if he could meet her for a quick coffee. They went to a place near her apartment. At one point, my father reached his hand across the table and looked my mother in the eyes. How are you? he said. My mother, overwhelmed by the directness of the question, the kindness of this man she had just met, tremulous that this would become another story of failed love and she wouldn't be able to stand it, started crying and couldn't stop. I used to think that love meant suffering, she would later say. Until I met your father.

They were married four months afterward. My father proposed in La Grande Place, in Brussels, on his way to meet my mother's entire family at her brother's wedding. At the bottom of the letter she never finished and never sent, my mother wrote, in different-colored ink, "That night I met Jerry Steiker, who became my husband."

The winter that I was nineteen, we took what would be our last family vacation together. The four of us went to Saint-Moritz, ostensibly to ski, although there was no snow that year. I had a boyfriend at college, but I was feeling bored and rebellious. On the plane ride over, I announced to my family that I wanted to have a fling. No one

paid much attention.

Every night, we dressed formally for dinner. It was the eighties, so the general feeling was the more black tie the better. There was a stately Persian couple who sat across from each other night after night without uttering a word, a famous Russian ballerina with her turban, husband, and child, and a Swiss family with five boys, ranging in age from ten to twenty-five. I cast my eye in their direction, and my gaze settled on the twenty-two-year-old. He wasn't my type—he was too slender and too blond—but he was gallant, and that was enough. Seated next to me at dinner one night, he picked up one of my hands, my nails gleaming red like my mother's, and declared, in all seriousness, "They are perfect."

It was a pleasure to dress up in the evenings as our mother did. In the month before our trip, our mother had come home from department stores with shopping bags full of dresses. We had fashion shows for my father in the living room. We loved the excess, but we also felt as though it were make-believe. Life was about other things. Our mother was in remission from breast cancer. This was a sumptuous gift my parents were giving us, but we didn't confuse it with reality.

That New Year's Eve, I wore a strapless black gown. It had a gigantic black bow in the front, which cinched my waist and spread out on either side of me like wings. After dinner, my sister and I went to the local night club. Mr. Gallant was there. I felt jittery, regretting what I had started. As the clock blazed midnight, he pinned me to a wall and kissed me. Later, on the walk home through the deserted streets of the village, he stopped and said, "I guess I love you." I cringed, thinking how little he knew me. He was a fool, responding to this show of womanliness, a wan, delicate imitation of something that was actually vivid and fierce. I avoided him the next day. By the time I reemerged, he had found another girl, and I was free. My family was amused, and I left chastened, aware that I had somehow mistaken the flares of womanhood for the real thing.

When I lost my mother, in the spring of the following year, I lost the color in my life. My father, sister, and I went away that summer, the three of us alone for the first time, and we brought only black-and-white film, as if we all intuited that it would be impossible to live in color without her.

A year later, I found myself driving through Connecticut to a friend's graduation party. My own graduation was two weeks away. I had rented a car. I was daydreaming. I didn't know where I was going to go, who I was going to be. In the left lane ahead of me was an eighteen-wheel tractor-trailer. It had been there for a while, and so I decided to pass it on the right. As I came neck and neck with the cab of the truck, I looked up and saw it moving in my direction. I honked my horn madly, but it kept coming toward me, so I swerved farther to the right to get out of the way. Within seconds, we made contact, and my car was sent spinning in front of the truck counterclockwise. I let go of the wheel, which had locked in place, and braced myself against the seat, watching the landscape speed through the front window in slow motion, a green blur. When the spinning finally stopped, the car had been flung onto the grassy embankment. A thick net of bushes had stopped it from going into the opposite lanes. I opened the door and shakily stepped out onto the grass. Still trembling, I looked down at the nose of the car, and there, stuck to the front of the grille, was the broken body of a monarch butterfly, the burnt-orange panes of its wings framed dramatically in black, like a rare fragment of stained glass. The sight of it flew straight to my heart, where I understood two things at once. Everything was different, a way of life I had known had

ended, but, in this new life without my mother, all that she represented--her extraordinary spirit--would save me.

And other things my mother knew.

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