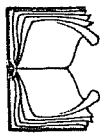


VERTIGO



A Memoir

Louise DeSalvo

P R O L O G U E

IT IS 1956, and I am thirteen years old. I have begun my adolescence with a vengeance. I am not shaping up to be the young woman I am supposed to be. I am not docile. I am not sweet. I am certainly not quiet. And, as my father tells me dozens of times, I am not agreeable. If he says something is true, I am sure to respond that it is most certainly not true, and that I have the evidence to prove it. I look up at the ceiling and tap my foot when my father and I argue, and this makes him furious.

In the middle of one of our fights, the tears hot on my cheeks, I run out of the house, feeling that I am choking, feeling that if I don't escape, I will pass out. It is nighttime. It is winter. I have no place to go. But I keep running.

There are welcoming lights a few blocks away. It is the local library. I run up the stairs. I run up to the reading room, sink into one of its comforting, engulfing brown leather chairs, pull an encyclopedia down from the shelf, hold it in front of my face so that no one can see me, so that no one will bother me, and pretend to read so that I won't be kicked out. It is warm and it is quiet. My shuddering cries stop. My rage subsides.



Soon, though, I become restless. Decide to go downstairs to my favorite room, the one where they house fiction. I've already decided that I will stay here until closing time because here, I know, no one will bother me. The librarians have very strict rules. So, while I'm here, I think, I might as well read something, might as well not waste my time.

I pick a book off the "New and Noteworthy" shelf. Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. I read a few pages here and there so I know it will interest me, know that I'm not wasting my time. It's about a family; it's about the war—two subjects about which I want to know more.

I take the book back upstairs. The hours pass. The lights flicker off and on, off and on, the signal that the library is about to close.

I take my book downstairs, cruise the fiction room again, pull down a few other books to check out just in case I run out of books to read. It's time to go home. If worse comes to worst, I tell myself, I can sneak into the house through the coal chute, and hide out in the coal cellar. It's the best hiding place in our house because nobody thinks to look for me there. But there's just space enough, behind the coal bin, for a smallish girl to hide. Often, when my mother and grandmother fight, I read there. It's quiet and I don't mind the dirt.

What drives me, what impels me to be so disagreeable, my father has often asked me. I don't know how to answer this question. But I am restless, questioning, trying to find something that I want that I don't have, but I don't yet know what that something is. I am certain, though, that I will find it, and that when I find it, it will make me happy. I know that I'm not happy now, and that I haven't been happy for a very long time, though I don't know why. When I try to remember the last time I was happy, I think back to when my father was away at war, and when my mother and I lived in Hoboken, New Jersey. Then, I tell myself, I was happy, so I know I can be

happy again. Somewhere, I tell myself, I will find this something that will make me happy.

It is 1957. I am fourteen years old, standing behind the window of the bakery where I work to earn my spending money. What I do inside the bakery is fold paper boxes before I put the pastries and cakes inside. And then I tie up the boxes with the red-and-white string that always tears into my flesh.

Across the street there is a park where all my friends hang out while I work. Through the window, I can see them fooling around. There is one special boy I care about. He's there with his girlfriend. I see him put his arm around her, kiss her. I stop paying attention to what I'm doing. My boss yells at me.

On Halloween, children come and paint the plate glass window. They paint witches and goblins in black and in primary colors. Now I can't even see what is going on in the park across the street. But I still put the buns in bags, the coffee cakes in boxes. Work is work. And work permits no play. I have to work. That is the way it is. But I know that someday I want to find work that I will enjoy, someday I want to learn what it is like to play. What I don't know, can't anticipate, is how long this will take me.

It is spring, 1986, some two years after my sister Jill kills herself. My sister's suicide in 1984 surely has been the most important and traumatic event I have experienced in my adult life. But I have tried hard to put it behind me, to keep it out of my mind, though, often, I try to explain to myself the mystery of why Jill died yet why I have survived—for, like our mother, both Jill and I were inclined to depression.

My life, as usual, is too busy, too near chaos. I am always tired, irritable, and fearful—it is just after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, just after the United States bombs Libya. I seem to have no emotional resilience these days because I am not sleeping well. And

I am not sleeping well because a family of ducks has taken up residence in a huge puddle of water in our next-door neighbor's backyard. These ducks are insomniacs, I think. They quack all night long, and I can't get any sleep. I need my sleep because I am trying to restore order and balance into my life and this takes energy. (It seems that I am always trying to restore order and balance into my life.) I am also trying to enjoy the spring. I haven't enjoyed a spring since my sister's death.

One night, in a fury, after being awakened yet again by the quacking of the ducks, I leap out of bed, run outside, grab a handful of stones from our garden, and start flinging them over our fence. It is a clear night with a bright moon. I can see the ducks clearly. My aim is perfect. I tell myself that I am merely trying to scare the ducks away. But I also know that I am angry enough to want to hurt them.

"Some pacifist you are," my husband chides wearily, when I come back inside, when I explain what I've been up to. "I think you better do some writing," he tells me.

"I can't," I tell him. "The kids have stolen all my pens."

This is true. My sons *have* stolen all my pens. But I know it's a ridiculous excuse. I can reclaim my pens. I can buy some new ones. My husband knows what I always seem to forget. That I am happier when I am writing, more tolerant, easier to live with. I need to write my way out of pain. If I were in the midst of writing something, the ducks would be safe. (I would be safe.) I better start writing something soon, my husband says, or I'll go off the deep end, cook up some crazy scheme, kill the ducks, get arrested, be shipped off to Sing-Sing. Our home will be torn apart, our children will be motherless.

"Stop," I beg. "I get it. I'll start writing."

As I pull the pillow over my head—for the ducks have already returned to the puddle that has become their home—I am grateful, now, for this husband of mine, though I have not always been.

* * *

A few days later, as I am taking a walk, I suddenly know what I will write next. It will be a book about how my sister killed herself, about how and why I survived. This has been prompted by my seeing a wild rosebush on my walk, like one that, years before, had grown in my backyard. I had loved that neglected bush. I had never given it rose food. Never pruned away its dead branches. Never put a trellis behind it to support its growth. Yet somehow it had survived, and it gave me pleasure. I loved its profuse blossoms, its heady scent. One day, when I wasn't home, my father came over to our house and chopped it down. He thought he was doing me a favor because it had taken over much of our tiny back garden. I considered my father's action a terrible violation, and I suspected, privately, that he had cut it down because, like me, it had overstepped its bounds.

I run home. Pick up a yellow pad and a pen, sit on the sofa in my study, tuck my knees up, and begin. Fortunately, my children are occupied. I give the work a title. I call it *My Sister's Suicide*. I write for an hour; I am beginning to write a novel that is not really a novel because it is the story of my life and yet I don't know what form it should take. I write about how I have to write about my life to give it some shape, some order.

Even as I write, though, I am wary of what I am writing. I am, inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working class. I come from a people who, even now, seriously distrust educated women, who value family loyalty. The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (and am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was scripted for me by my culture, how, through reading, writing, meaningful work, and psychotherapy, I managed to escape disabling depression. It is the unlikely narrative of how a working-class Italian girl became a critic and writer.

* * *

I wish I could say that I wrote steadily at the story of my life after that sudden burst of inspiration. But I did not. I stopped after about thirty or so pages. Instead, for seven years, I wrote the story of other people's lives, and taught, and lived a woman's life—I saw both of my sons through college, watched my mother die, saw one of my sons marry, did about three thousand loads of laundry, took care of my father after his open-heart surgery, and cooked about four thousand dinners (each, delicious, like the sauteed pork chops with Cajun spices, baby spinach with garlic and balsamic vinegar, and yams with candied ginger that I will cook tonight).

But every few months, I would haul out the manila envelope and read through my tentative start and decide, yet again, not to throw it away. Sometimes I would scribble a sentence or two into a notebook, or onto a napkin, to remind myself of what I wanted to write. Some subjects required just a word or so to jog my memory. "Fights." "Food." "Fires." "Fainting." "Long Island." "Depression." "Mom." "Despair." "Jobs/Work/Reading/Writing." "Jill."

One Saturday, in September 1995, my pulse races, I get dizzy, and feel faint. I have come to the end of a big writing project. This is a dangerous time for me. I know I need to start writing something soon. But I don't know what I want to write. I'm tired of doing research. Weary of libraries. Tired of delving into other people's lives. If I see another note card, I have told my friend Kate, I'll scream.

That day, when I get a telephone call from a friend, I tell her what I'm feeling, tell her I need a big project. Why don't I write that memoir we've talked about? she asks me. She makes it sound so simple. I should start with a few pages describing what I want to write. Maybe begin a small piece. The one about my sister's suicide. See how it goes. Send it to her to read.

Sure, I tell her, I'll give it a try. And soon I'm at my desk, and though the words I am putting down aren't yet making very much sense, I am writing, blessedly, writing.

That night, to celebrate, I cook myself a special meal of roasted chicken stuffed with artichokes, roasted potatoes with rosemary, and steamed asparagus. I have begun to work, though I don't yet know where the work will take me.

The next morning, I go downstairs to my basement. And begin to unpack one of the many boxes I have stored down there since my mother's death. Boxes containing my sister's clothing, her treasures, her pottery, her kitchen utensils. And others containing my mother's collection of family photographs, and recipes, the letters I have written her, the ones she has written my children. I work awhile, until it is time for me to write, and then, go back to my desk, and begin. This is, I think, a good place to start.

"My basement is a complete mess," I write, "and has been, for years." And it is through the contents of these boxes in my basement that I piece together my family's history. In the two years it takes me to write this book, each day, as I go to my desk between the hours of one and five in the afternoon, I feel revitalized, as I take up the work, as I reclaim my past, as I learn who I am.