



THE THREE WOMEN LEAN INTO EACH OTHER IN THE PHOTOGRAPH, laughing. They are old and they're dressed funny, like toddlers, wearing whatever strikes their fancy. Mismatched patterns. Silly hats. Baggy pants. Florid tops. They are standing on the deck of the SS *Rio Tunuyán* as it steams south through the Atlantic from New York City to Rio de Janeiro in the fall of 1956.

They might as well have been passengers on the ship that Jan Morris called *Geriatrica* in an article she wrote for *The Paris Review* in the spring of 2021. The passenger list tilted heavily towards the senior: The first on-board educational lecture was “Facing Up to Rheumatism,” although “Facing Up to Decay,” notes Morris, would have been more appropriate. “The passengers were divided between those who faced up to the challenge cockily, marching around the promenade deck in obligatory exercise, dressing formidably for dinner, downing G&Ts by the pool. The other half of us preferred resignation, sitting in twos and threes, sipping fruit drinks through flexible straws, playing bridge, adjusting our shawls.”

Morris called the two camps Defiance and Resignation, although she came to see that the denizens of both were alike in toughness and resolution, in energetic enthusiasm for whatever was to come next, all of them determined to make the most of everything. By the end

of the cruise, she had renamed the ship and all those who sailed in her *Indomitable*.

I was seven when I met the three lovely, lively crones in the photo, but they weren't my first old ladies. I boarded that ship still in love with Miss Goetz, my grade one teacher in the four-room red-brick schoolhouse I walked to every weekday morning. Miss Goetz must have been about sixty; she retired when I was in grade six, old enough to tap-dance at her retirement party. I remember her from the ground up: thick-heeled lace-up black shoes, tweed pencil skirt that stopped mid-calf, a frilly blouse, its hint of flair held in check under a cardigan—cashmere, I like to think, although it was probably hand-knit from some stiff wool. I can't conjure her face or her hair, but I will never forget her voice: stern and cool in the classroom as she insisted a girl in grade two clean up her own vomit, yet strangely softened in the living room of her house by the river on a back street of our village in southwestern Ontario.

I don't know why I went there that first time. Maybe I was delivering something from my mother, who was always sending baking here and there in the village. Maybe Miss Goetz heard I was moving to Brazil and invited me over. Her house was nothing at all like the houses of my friends, with their jumble of parents and children. Her rooms were filled with mementoes from her travels—colourful embroidered cushions, painted candy dishes, candle holders fitted with candles that were lit at any time of day, not just on special occasions. Everything had been chosen and placed by her hand, no other, which gave the rooms, I think now, a singular scent, an unclouded tone. At the time, I didn't know anyone who had been farther than Toronto, where my grandparents lived, an hour's drive away. But Miss Goetz had travelled

to Greece, France, Egypt—names that felt delicious in my mouth. I'd sit drinking tea heavily laced with milk and sugar while she told me about those foreign places, speaking to me like a friend.

Even before Miss Goetz, old ladies were a fixture in my life. When I was five, I contracted German measles just as my mother was about to deliver my baby sister. I was hustled off to my grandmother's house a few blocks away, where I lived for most of the summer as the measles recurred again and again. Miss Calder lived next door to my grandmother in a tiny house at the end of a long path through a tall garden. She was small—a sweet china doll of a woman in her nineties, more my size than any adult. We sat and talked, I don't remember about what, but I grabbed every chance to go over for a visit. I took her little bouquets of phlox from my grandmother's garden and fresh eggs I gathered from my grandfather's chicken coop behind the barn, which sat like a bit of farmyard behind my grandparents' red-brick house. If Miss Calder was otherwise engaged, I'd cross the street to Mrs. Baxter's, who, years later when I married, gave me a teapot with a teacup and sugar bowl all stacked into one, a wedding present my grandmother had given to her fifty years before. A gift I will pass on to a granddaughter.

There were a lot of old ladies in our village, women tucked in small, neat houses, living their independent lives, teaching piano, pruning their roses, baking for school sales, women who could be relied on to donate to the Cancer Society or buy boxes of Girl Guide cookies from the troop of us who went door to door.

I wonder now why I found those older women so appealing. Someone to do for, to make me feel needed? I don't think so. These women—Ellen Stafford, who chose her own name in mid-life, taking it from the British shire where she lived, and who published

her first novel the year she turned eighty; Louise in her log cabin on Pimisi Bay, sipping strong coffee, smoking unfiltered cigarettes, getting up before dawn to make her daily bird count, well into her nineties; Erna, who gave birth to her first son in a German barn as she fled the invading Russians—these women didn't need anything from me. What did I need from them?

"They listened," Beth says when I tell her about my lifelong attraction to older women. "Intently."

"I guess they did, but what I remember most is the way they talked to me. Not like other adults, telling me what to do, how to do it. Just conversation. Like what we're doing now."

All of them—from Miss Calder to Beth—lived alone. Some had been married, but when I met them, it was their solitude I admired. Maybe that was because I was the third of four daughters, the mother of two sons, stepmother to two daughters. In my entire life, I have lived alone for only four months: half of one percent of my bygone days. The rest of the time I've lived in overpopulated chaos. The houses of these women were oases of tranquility, a place of cultured, stimulating calm, something I couldn't seem to fashion for myself. They were proof not only that a woman could live on her own but that she could live well. Their resilience drew me. Their forthrightness. They weren't unkind—they had lived too long for that—but they weren't treachery either. They meant what they said. They'd had time to figure out what they believed. Time, too, to open their minds and hearts, to think again. I could rely on them to tell the truth.

"They showed you strength," Beth says. "Consistency."

Now I am the old lady. I dress funny. Today, a long burgundy skirt with sequins and inset lace, a misshapen grey cashmere sweater,

sensible zip-up shoes, striped compression stockings, and a vest made from bright scraps of brocade and signed on the inside by the artist, which I bought at the Bodega de Sorpresa in Mexico for a peso-song. Many of the clothes in my closet come from the Surprise Shop, where gringos deposit their barely worn outfits to make room in their suitcases for souvenirs.

Still, I am not so old that I can't find a woman older than I am. Beth is my old lady now. My last guide into the future.