

Doris and Me (Mostly Me)

.....
CYNTHIA BROUSE

IN 1971, WHEN I WAS 13, MY MOTHER AND I READ AN ARTICLE IN *CHATELAINE* about a woman named Bernice Huxtable. A paragon of frugality, Mrs. Huxtable became a running thigh-slapper in our house, an emblem of domesticity taken too far who provided for her large family on her husband's average salary by canning rejected tomatoes and sewing blouses from bleached linen blueprints—not because she was poverty-stricken but because it was fun. In between our explosive arguments, Mom and I could always get a laugh out of one another by invoking the woman's unattainable saintliness. Poor Mrs. Huxtable deserves the last chuckle, all things being relative and my mother and I being a tad hypocritical: Mom has been known to vacuum her eavestroughs and records the purchase of every last stick of gum and shoelace by hand in a ledger—and, partly as a devoted greenie but mostly because the anal-retentive gene runs true, I wash and dry my ageing collection of Ziploc bags and save used wrapping paper and ribbons.

But back then, Mom and I desperately needed something we could laugh about together. I saw no similarities between us, nor did I want to, and most of the time we looked at *Chatelaine*, and life in general, through disparate lenses. My mother was born in her parents' bedroom in 1937, and during a heat wave 20 years later she delivered me in a hospital next door to a paper mill that smelled like rotten eggs and filled the river it dammed with thick sludge. Though we both grew up in the same small northern Ontario town, it felt as though we lived in different worlds.

Mothers and daughters are, as a rule, the product of clashing generations, but 1957 was an auspicious year in which to make an entrance. If you take Nova Scotia-raised rapper Buck 65's word for it, it was "maybe the most important year in history," perhaps a nice bit of hyperbole intended to generate buzz for his last CD, *Situation*, which



High school photo of the author, circa 1973.

he devoted to the remarkable number of radical ideas and innovations that debuted then: Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward; the Situationist International movement; the launch of Sputnik; Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and the obscenity trial of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl". Elvis Presley yanked rock and roll onto mainstream radio (and got drafted); the Little Rock Nine enrolled in a segregated Arkansas high school; and Lester B. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize. (Mr. 65 also saluted the Frisbee, the '57 Chevy, the plastic pink

flamingo and Tang orange drink powder, though not *The Cat in the Hat*, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Avro Arrow or Osama bin Laden, all of which were in baby booties that year, too). Still, being born in 1957 meant coming of age not in the earth-shaking '60s, but in the '70s, when the heavy lifting of social revolution had been accomplished and its effects began to be felt for real.

As it happens, 1957 was also the year Doris Anderson became editor of *Chatelaine*, a position she held for the succeeding 20 years, throughout my own growing up. Anderson, who died last year at 85, was just part of a global stirring that changed how women live everywhere, but that part made a big impact on me. Though *Chatelaine* was one of the few things Mom and I shared, Anderson and her magazine came to complicate our already shaky relationship during my choppy teen years.

When I leaf through tattered back issues of *Chatelaine* from the '70s, I'm shocked by how sharply familiar I find not only the covers and articles, but also the ads (shocked because I almost never look at magazine ads today)—for Confidets sanitary napkins and Massengill douche solution and Yardley's Oh! de London cologne. In fact, I have scrapbooks in which I lovingly pasted those ads, though my mother threw out the vase I made from a Cointreau bottle painted black and decouped with slogans cut from *Chatelaine*. "Do you live with a man?" was one of them; at the time, it sounded titillating to me, though it's hard to say whether such lines signalled a sea change in the world of women's magazines, or whether my own hormone-fuelled sea change was simply at play.

Perhaps it was a bit of both. *Here Come the Seventies* was the name of a CTV program much beloved by me

and my siblings, mostly because of the naked woman in its opening sequence who languorously strolled away from the camera into a lake, accompanied by futuristic synthesizer music. Its more serious subject matter was pretty exciting, too. Nonetheless, though we knew little about the world outside our town, what I did know came as much from magazines as from our two-channel TV universe.

My parents subscribed to *Chatelaine*, *Parents* and *Reader's Digest* and the then monthly *Maclean's*. For teenaged girls, there was *Miss Chatelaine* and *Young Miss*. Both of those mags later dropped the dusty honorific, the latter to be rechristened *YM* before it finally morphed into a website only. But back then, we devoured *Young Miss's* digest-sized pages at pyjama parties—usually just before somebody produced a purloined copy of *Playboy*—especially our favourite section, “Was My Face Red!” (These reader accounts of humiliating escapades were of the “After my class presentation, I realized my slip was showing” variety. Such a column today would contain something more along the lines of “After I gave my boyfriend a blowjob, a photo of it showed up on Facebook.” My generation’s blowjobs were not discussed in girls’ or even women’s magazines.)

Later, I became an avid reader of *Rolling Stone* and *Cosmopolitan*, and much later *Harper's* and *Vanity Fair*, but in my early high-school years, *Chatelaine* was queen. As it does today, *Chatelaine* appealed to women with recipes and fashion tips (“Crafts: A Washable No-Iron Caftan You Can Make in an Hour”), its covers displaying the fresh-faced Margaret Trudeau and Anne Murray and Nancy Greene and a parade of light-lipsticked models. But among the food and decor and health advice in the pages of *Chatelaine* in the 1970s seethed a world that my mother never talked about and that lured me with its frankness and challenge. Anderson, an early second-wave feminist, filled out

much of the magazine (in striking contrast with U.S. women’s magazines of the time, and, indeed, with most women’s magazines today) by featuring lengthy articles on abortion, native rights, day care, suicide, environmentalism, sex, women in the workforce and the lack of women in Parliament; barely an issue passed without an article about poverty in Canada. Writers such as June Callwood, Jack Batten, Fredelle Maynard, Philip Marchand and Myrna Kostash told me things about life, and about Canada, that never came up either at our dinner table or in Home Ec. or even history class.

There was fiction, too: stories by Marian Engel, Sylvia Fraser, Jane Rule and Margaret Laurence, occasionally suggesting that nice young women might have sex before marriage. My mother’s generation and mine had in common a penchant for sex before marriage (though I didn’t figure this out till I was in my 20s), but hers did not read literature that condoned or even discussed such a thing. In fact, I got the impression that few of the adults in our town read very much at all.

The feminist message, as presented by Anderson and her team, hit me hard when I was 15. Sometimes I forget just how different life was then for women in Canada (though it all comes back when I watch the current TV series *Mad Men*, where the 1961-era women working on Madison Avenue are nothing more than toys for their male bosses, or a movie like *M*A*S*H*, a film about the '50s released in 1970 in which women play a distinctly subhuman role). In any case, I was keen on an advice column in *Chatelaine* called “Hotline on Women”, by a writer named Bonnie Kreps, a sort of feminist Ann Landers. It’s hard to imagine such a thing in a women’s magazine today, but readers asked questions such as “Can you suggest any material on how to run a women’s consciousness-raising group?” or “I would like more information on self-help gynecology.” (Would any woman under 30 today have a

clue what self-help gynecology was, or consciousness-raising, for that matter?) Kreps responded with earnest, not to say angry, words of wisdom.

I turned to that column first whenever an issue of the magazine arrived in the mail. Dripping with the self-righteousness and lack of humour that some consider the hallmark of the dyed-in-the-wool feminist but I think is the hallmark of the young woman who has just discovered that the way men look at her and the way she looks at herself are frighteningly at odds, I wrote a letter to “Hotline on Women” to complain about my lot in life. It read, in part:

As a 15-year-old, grade eleven high-school student, I am faced with that question, “What can I do about women’s liberation?” I’m only a schoolgirl and I live in the freezing north. My mother thinks I’m mentally unstable (could be true...), my fellow classmates think I’m off my gourd. My history teacher, although he says he’s on my side, loves to tease me and delights in making derogatory remarks in class (I love him anyway). He is the one I turned to when I heard that a certain teacher was telling his students that males would always be dominant. He spoke to the man in question and stood up for the cause. The girls in my class are beginning to respond to my little tirades. The other day one of them stood up for herself and the other girls in our French class, when we had to repeat the sentence, in French, “I am not strong because I am a woman.”

Simply typing this passage makes my face burn—it’s not hard to see what made me a prime target for teasing. And my ambivalence about pleasing my male teacher makes it clear that some part of me enjoyed the attention, the banter. Yet my heart aches for the girl—for any girl, or boy—who feels no one takes her seriously.

I don’t recall telling anyone about the letter I’d

written, though I may have told Mom. Just printing *Chatelaine’s* Toronto address on the envelope made me daydream about the exalted world I imagined magazine publishing to be. I don’t recall daydreaming about New York or wanting to be Helen Gurley Brown or to intern at *Vogue*. In my world, Canada was where I belonged, and Toronto was its exotic apex. The only time I’d been to Toronto was to spend a month in the Hospital for Sick Children when I was nine, and my consolation had been the fact that the hospital was located on University Avenue, then home also to *Chatelaine* and *Maclean’s*.

A few months after I mailed my letter, I picked up the May issue of *Chatelaine* from the post office. The cover featured Princess Anne and a story about her beaux, as well as an article entitled “Four Myths About Mothering” and the announcement of the 1973 Mrs. Chatelaine. Turning to “Hotline on Women”, I found “As a 15-year-old, grade eleven high-school student...” staring back at me, the first item in the column. It is not an exaggeration to say that the publication of my letter was the most exciting moment of my life to that point. I shook, I screamed, I jumped up and down. My mother was too busy with my three younger siblings to make much of a fuss but was quietly proud, I think.

I may have shared this little honour with some friend or other, but if I did it wasn’t with much fanfare. I knew the perils of bragging or putting on airs, the wisdom of keeping my mouth shut about the things that really mattered to me. (It struck me five years later, when Alice Munro’s book of short stories *Who Do You Think You Are?* was published, that its title should have been emblazoned on our town sign, just below “Home of Broomball.”)

I actually don’t remember telling anyone about the publication of my letter except my biology teacher, a smart, sympathetic, iconoclastic guy who, during the

reign of a particularly rigid principal who imposed a dress code on teachers and students alike (we weren't permitted to wear purple at one point), sported the required tie but hung it from his belt loops instead of around his neck. Sitting on a stool at the black science lab table, I slipped my copy of *Chatelaine*, the one with my letter in it, out from beneath my binders and showed it to Mr. Baker. I was near tears from the stress of trying to balance shame with pride. He was delighted. Though I don't recall his words, he made it clear that, to him at least, it was OK to be excited about such a minor literary accomplishment, and it was OK to dream about working for a magazine one day, even if I was a girl and even if I did live hundreds of miles from Toronto and even if my father did look askance at people who made their living sitting at a desk.

How did Bonnie Kreps reply in her column to my letter? She recommended a book called *The Young Woman's Guide to Liberation*, Marlo Thomas's kids'-lib LP *Free to Be... You and Me*, her own booklet *A Guide to the Women's Movement in Canada*, and a radical feminist newspaper called *The Other Woman*. She also sent me an encouraging letter, under the familiar orange *Chatelaine* logo. I sighed and dreamed of the day when I could live around people like her who took things *seriously*. In *italics*. My tiny brush with *Chatelaine* kept me going for weeks.

It didn't end there. Not long afterward, another letter arrived in the mail from Bonny Kreps, this one on lime-green personal stationery. In it, she explained that the magazine had received letters from readers who thought it highly inappropriate that a 15-year-old girl be exposed to such subversive publications as *The Other Woman*, especially a recent issue containing articles on lesbianism and masturbation. Apparently, Doris Anderson herself had been a bit perturbed. Kreps

had insisted that I deserved a chance to respond. She wanted to hear what I thought of *The Other Woman*, had arranged for some copies to be sent to me, in fact, and if I wanted to write down my opinions, she'd publish them in her column.

More shaking and screaming and jumping up and down, in the confines of my bedroom. Was I actually being asked to write for *Chatelaine*? And Doris Anderson herself had discussed *me*. Down there on *University Avenue*. I could think of nothing else.

But where were the copies of *The Other Woman*? I squinted deep into the back of our mailbox for weeks, in vain. Finally, an aunt I was close to told me that my mother had confiscated them, and had asked her if she thought I was a lesbian.

When I confronted Mom, she marched into her bedroom and pulled some grubby-looking folded-up newspapers from beneath the mattress of my parents' bed. "I don't want the kids to see them," she said. I was furious as only a 15-year-old girl with an attachment disorder can be (I later learned in the pages of Doris Anderson's autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*, that she, too, had had trouble bonding with her mother, with similar results. Of course, my mom had been less than superglued to my grandmother, truth be told.)

I snatched the newspapers from my mother's hand and looked inside one of them. There was a full-page blow-up photo of a woman's vulva. I suppose it was the self-help gynecology page. (Was my face red!) The idea of a bunch of women gathering in a community centre basement to take turns looking at their own and one another's cervixes with a speculum and a mirror made me a little sick to my stomach, though if asked I would have said that it was an important step toward countering the oppression of a phallo-centric consumerist medical system. Actually, I doubt I could even have come up with that. It did sound like kind of a neat idea, but still—blecccchh.



In any case, my reaction was a tad less mature. I screamed at my mother that she didn't understand. She told me stiffly that she and Dad didn't approve of my reading such material, but that she trusted me to use my head. Her expression of trust made me, perversely, more angry still. It would have been easier to maintain my high dudgeon if she'd been less flexible.

The subject didn't come up again, but the lime-green letter from Bonnie Kreps glowed monumentally on my desk. What should I write? What did I think? May wore on and turned into June, and each day I told myself, "You could be writing for *Chatelaine*." "You have nothing to say." "You're an idiot."

Soon after that, the teacher who'd teased me in history class pulled me aside and told me he had a lead on a summer job for me, at a tourist resort where he spent his vacations. It was my first time away from home; I brought with me the Kreps letter and the copies of *The Other Woman*, and told myself I'd spend my spare time writing a response to *Chatelaine*. Shortly after I arrived, I met a young man named David who was from Oakville and had wild, curly dark hair, beautiful wiry limbs and the tongue of a pathological liar. He and his cousin invited me and my cabin mate on a double date, which consisted of a motorboat ride to an island and a long evening taking turns alternately being eaten alive by mosquitoes and mauling one another in an unlit tent.

The next morning I felt as though I had been permanently reshaped into a different kind of human being. I had seen God, and he/she/it was sex. (Though we did everything but what my mother would have called "going all the way"; my girlfriends and I preferred a woolly locution employing the word "with," duplicated multiple times according to the degree of intimacy: "I was with Kevin last night." "With or with-with?" "With-with-with!"). Of course, then I'd have called it love, and my heart got jerked around

thoroughly all summer. By the time I returned home, I was not only lovelorn but so in thrall to the call of David, I had failed to answer the call of the national women's magazine. The following spring I wrote a rambling missive trying to explain why, but it went unfinished and unsent.

After I completed Grade 13, I didn't go to journalism school, because I'd never had the slightest desire to be a newspaper reporter and I didn't think I could pass an economics course. There was no magazine program in those days, so instead I went to broadcasting school at Ryerson, now a university but then a polytechnical institute. I should have known I was in the wrong place when in second year, assigned the task of writing a profile of a "media manager," other students wrote about CBC producers and radio DJs, but I somehow gathered up my nerve and wrote to Doris Anderson at *Chatelaine*. To my surprise, she agreed to an interview. Armed with a clunky tape recorder, I walked over from my room at Neill-Wycik College to the Maclean Hunter offices on University Avenue. Emerging from the elevator on *Chatelaine's* floor, I stood very still and took a deep breath. This was it, the Mother Ship. And there was Michele Landsberg, walking down the hall with no shoes on and saggy pantyhose. I was charmed.

Anderson seemed to me a little greyer and more portly than her photo, and I was surprised at her deep, gravelly drawl. Stumbling all over myself, I explained that I'd need to plug in the tape recorder. "Doesn't it have batteries?" she asked. "I'm not sure there's a power outlet handy." Mortified, I admitted that I didn't have any batteries. Anderson showed not a trace of impatience, and proceeded to wedge her middle-aged frame awkwardly under her desk in search of an outlet. Then she trotted down the hall to find an extension cord. I

could not believe that someone as important as she would do such a thing, and so gamely.

I asked her some questions, and she spoke matter-of-factly about her years as editor, her membership on the Trilateral Commission, her community work for women's rights. Years later, I realized that between the lines one could detect her disappointment that, despite her qualifications, she remained editor of the magazine and never became publisher, or editor of *Maclean's*, both positions she coveted. She would resign from *Chatelaine* a few months after our meeting.

At the end of the interview, I told her that I had been the high-school student whose letter to "Hotline on Women" had been the cause of a tiny stir four years before. She remembered the fuss, or said she did, and explained an editor's responsibilities to underage readers.

When I later transcribed the tape, I realized that my ears had not tricked me: at one point Anderson had said to me, "*Chatelaine* is a continually changing orgasm." Certain she'd intended to say "organism," I changed the word when I quoted her in my paper, in which I also gushed that 481 University Avenue filled me with awe. My Media Management instructor, a weary marketing veteran, wrote in the margins of my paper that the building didn't exactly have that effect on him. He also suggested that I was a born writer.

But I was still only 19, and the confidence to write was a long, long way away. The lime-green letter nagged at me. It nags at me still. When I started Grade 12, at the end of my lust-struck summer, I made two promises to myself: one, I would lose my virginity before the next summer rolled around, and two, I would never again allow a man to get in the way of my writing career. In the end I met both goals. How much each one was at odds with—and would distract me from—the other, as well as some equally important goals, I was too naïve to understand. I've remained single and childless. Most of my career has been in magazines, and I teach part-time in Ryerson's journalism department. It took me until my 50s to be able to say that I am a writer and not blush with embarrassment, though I've won some awards. Although I mainly stayed away from women's mags, recently I've been working at *Chatelaine*, where I'm the grey-haired matron, telling tales of the old days and not even trying to hide my hot flashes. It's a different magazine today—it's a different time—I'm a different me. My mother is even a different mother. And elegant, whip-smart Doris is gone.

How much control did we really have over our respective journeys? And how different is different? Some days, I think, not different enough. Others, too different by far.