





A CITIZEN GONE WITH THE WIND.

Story: Melissa Knox - Photography: Alexandra Bildsoe

Like many a co-op owner, I got in when the getting was good: my dad, fond of the expression, “buy land, ‘cause God ain’t making more of it,” acquired the place in the seventies for the price of today’s chicken coop. There was a catch: the previous tenant, an isolated octogenarian, had slumped to the floor, dead, remaining undiscovered until body fluids soaked the floorboards. But Dad girded his loins and got to work fixing up the place. A Southerner from North Carolina, he epitomized a certain ante-bellum possessiveness about land, identical to that of Scarlett O’Hara in the moments before the lengthy film version of Gone With The Wind goes to intermission. On her knees, pulling a scrawny turnip from the earth after the burning of Atlanta, she howls that she’ll “never be hungry again!” and promises to lie, steal, and cheat to make sure. She’s finally learned her Irish father’s lesson, namely that land is “the only thing” worth “fightin’ for, dyin’ for.” My father loved those scenes—as he proudly told me, he’d seen the film over forty-four times.

Alas, the octogenarian whose remains sank into the floorboards was part of a dwindling community of low-to-moderate income Upper West Siders, now as disappeared as the mom-and-pop stores that used to line Broadway, only to be replaced in the nineties by folks who were willing to fight about land. Those older tenants looked after each other, but they all dropped away: the Columbia University librarian, whose doorway opened upon wall-to-wall books, and always left the house short of breath—I could hear her panting out by the elevator. In her eighties, she succumbed to a heart attack. She’d instructed a young colleague to sell or give away all her knick-knacks, furniture and books; she had no living relatives. I met the colleague on the second day of this White Elephant sale, two days after her death. Closing the door of her apartment behind him, he was pale with exhaustion, his hair disheveled.

“It’s a feeding frenzy,” he said. Like the odd curios in her apartment, the apartment market itself was heating up. But the great changes had not yet occurred.

Back in the early nineties, the elevator always smelled of cabbage, a comforting aroma exuded by the culinary efforts of a Polish mother and daughter living on the eighth floor. The mother had braved two world wars and escaped with her daughter in utero, but had been so badly beaten by Nazis during the pregnancy that the daughter, when she was born, sustained hands with missing and overly large digits, a tremulous gait, and severely diminished eyesight. After a post-war escape that took them to India just as the country was celebrating independence from Great Britain, they found themselves in New York, on the top floor of our building in an apartment overlooking what was then the Columbia University School of Social Work. They lived quietly, regaling me with these and other stories when they invited me to dinner, as they did from time to time. The mother provided five or six courses that began with olives, moved through unidentifiable, but creamy, hors d'oeuvres, roast chicken or pork, and large cakes. The daughter worked for the local post office, the mother concocting meat and cabbage dishes, daily. Once, when the mother was taking dishes to the kitchen, the daughter, then in her late fifties, complained that several times her mother had berated her for coming home late, after six, from work.

“Is it so bad that I want a little time to myself?” she asked. I assured her she was well within her rights.

Their neighbor, an ancient Chinese man with Alzheimer’s disease, was forced by members of his gigantic extended family to walk up and down the eight flights of the building daily, despite his groaning protests.

“Exercise!” said his cheerful wife, by way of explanation, whenever I chanced upon the two of them, the wife, cousin, or daughter a step above him, patting his hand and murmuring encouragingly, the old man bowing, pulling in the opposite direction, like a child trying to get his mother to let go.

A neighbor I often met in the elevator reeked of grain alcohol. Lean, elegant but threadbare, he was often seen loping along Broadway, a transistor radio held to his ear.

“Well, how are you this evening?” he always asked, in a courtly manner. I had to lean

close to push the button for my floor; the pungent aroma of Glenfiddich, or something very like it, was almost enough to enhance my mood on our short elevator trip.

I always said I was fine, and asked how he was—although the answer seemed obvious. He sighed, as if perplexed.

“They’ve got me going to meetings! Well! Meetings! Whether they should have abortions. Whether not. They want my opinion.” He shrugged. “I say yes, I say no.”

My father, isolated, ageing, divorced, fit right in with the local eccentrics at the time when he renovated the apartment. In those days, “Feelings” seemed to blare continuously from the amps the super had added to the laundry room; he also provided colorful, neon Christmas and Halloween decorations. Dad’s best friend became a lonely retired fireman whose wife was rumored to have left without warning one day—a topic no one ever touched with him. He and Dad ate together often, and I gather their conversations concerned building rules and who wasn’t following them. Dad ripped down a barbecue invitation addressed to everyone in the building that he found taped inside the elevator; all such things, he believed, had to be approved by the board, which he wasn’t on.

My father soon developed the notion his neighbors were communists who would “ruin your career!” he told me, pointing to his light bulbs, which he felt sure were bugged. I was instructed never to speak to anyone in the building, which housed a number of elderly Columbia University professors with liberal views my father interpreted as otherwise. Herbert Marcuse’s son lived there. In those days, the Upper West Side was riddled with towering, or at any rate, bestselling, intellectuals. I grew up in the building down the block, 404 Riverside Drive, where elevator conversations included an elderly Reinhold Niebuhr, who asked my then five-year-old brother, brandishing a magnifying glass, whether he liked to look at bugs.

“No!” said my brother, disdain dripping from his voice. “Insects!”

Rollo May, another neighbor in that building, so threatened my own jealous psychoanalyst—whose works were not bestsellers—that I learned not to mention his comments on love and developing what one of his bestsellers called “The courage to create.”

After Dad died and I moved in, I occasionally ran into Dad's fireman friend. He asked if I remembered to have my keys out before I was halfway down the block, so that I could avoid being assaulted. During our elevator time, he let me know I should be careful, living alone, and wondered whether I knew what to do in a fire. I said I did.

For my smallish place in a non-doorman building on a safe block with a North light I still pay less than eight hundred monthly maintenance.

The intellectuals are still moving in, but also moving out—maintenance keeps going up. For a while, back in the early nineties, a famous writer of crime novels moved in with his girlfriend. His works included a tale of a teenaged boy seduced by an older woman who turns out to be a former, and illiterate, Nazi—her illiteracy figuring in her defense when, years later, as a young law student, he encounters her in court. The famous writer lived with, and perhaps married, a woman whom I tremendously admired for her take-charge attitude toward writing—and she'd even written a novel, herself, something I longed to do.

But when I returned to the apartment in the early 2000s on vacations with my husband and young children, my baby daughter cried long into the jetlagged night, and the woman thumped my ceiling with a broom, waking up the other two kids, who responded loudly. She wrote me a note I retained because at the time, I thought a successful New Yorker had to be that bitchy to succeed: she was in the process of moving out, having sold her place at tremendous profit and located a bigger place for herself and the famous writer. She wanted, she wrote, to say goodbye, since she had “on and off” considered me a friend. I read on, fascinated: She was sorry she'd woken the children, as she sure that I must be sorry, though, she pointed out, I had not said so, that my child had woken her. The letter proceeded to detail New York City's lease law and the right to quiet enjoyment, of which she wanted me to be aware; she'd hate to see me slapped with an order to insulate that wall.

At the time, I didn't see her letter as a turning point, but rather as a moment's pique. I think I was wrong. A different class of people was moving in, a class I'd call “the rich,”

although not by Warren Buffett's standards. They filled the bill as far as F. Scott Fitzgerald was concerned: "The rich are different from you and me," he said, apparently to Hemingway, who answered, "They have more money." The bible tells us that he who is in a hurry to get rich "shall not be innocent," and the wealthier, the recently wealthier, moving into the building wanted something different from the older folks who had moved in haphazardly over the years and lived by a certain bunch of convenient-at-the-moment rules.

The moment I had children, I found, I ran afoul of the right to quiet enjoyment. When my first son was nursing—five to eight times a night, and he seemed never to close his eyes—my husband would take him around five in the morning, so that I could get some sleep. Immediately, I would lapse into a coma: oblivious to loud blasts, construction workers drilling, horns honking and the shouts of the mentally ill, then roaming our block and occasionally even building nests in the foyer by the building's front door. My husband would let our boy crawl up and down the hallway, making contented sounds. No screams were emitted by baby Leopold, who loved kneeing his way to the elevator and back, and hooted happily occasionally.

A letter appeared, shoved under my door. "It has come to our attention," the thing blared, as such letters do, that my child was waking people up and that I was required to keep him quiet. In my sleep-deprived state, I wrote the kind of letter one should never send, and alas, I sent it: "Short of dangling my child out the window, no, I can't keep him quiet," I wrote. I did not make friends with that epistle, and lived to regret it.

Some of the folks moving in during the early nineties were younger, about my age, and I was then in my thirties. I began to have some sympathy with the notion of a right to quiet enjoyment when, one morning before I'd had my coffee, I wandered into my living room and heard what I imagined was the sound of a murder being committed in, let's call him Ted's, apartment. One cup of coffee later, I realized I was hearing the sounds of ecstasy rather than the sounds of agony. A very happy-faced young woman emerged from Ted's apartment that morning when I was on my way out to get my bagel; his TV was turned up high most of the time, and now I knew why.

The problem is, I no longer live there. I fell in love with a German man, married him, and moved to Germany. Until about 1999, I was allowed to rent almost whenever I wanted. Before September 11, 2001, I could send a friendly note to the Board, letting them know I'd have a house-sitter for eight weeks. Then I'd find a sweet, competent Barnard girl or Columbia guy to live in my apartment, water my plants, and pay my maintenance.

But that was the nineties. My neighbors didn't mind—the board, a member told me, shouldn't be asked (“You know how people are!”) I did know how people were. Reasonable. Likewise, the wonderful old super shook his head: “When they get on that board,” he said, “They all change.” I followed the board member's advice to send my note, written with a fountain pen on cream-colored stock, just letting them know that my friend, Susy Whatever, was housesitting for two months.

“Please,” said a hand-written sign, c. 1992, near the garbage cans in the basement—galvanized stainless steel, innocent of recycling, “Clean out your cans before you throw them away—or the roaches go berrrr-serk.”

The mood of the building changed dramatically, partly after the twin towers fell, and partly because the new clientele—young professionals, or retired professionals with money, wanted the right to keep tabs on everyone in the building, no matter how quiet or nice they were. A woman so silent I could not identify her, and who had been subletting for years from another tenant, was found to have falsely declared herself that tenant's aunt: she was forced to leave. Once, the board agreed to extend a sublet of mine for an additional year, then sent letters saying my tenant had overstayed her term. I learned that our management company had fired the person who sent the email, apparently without letting the board know that she had sent me a “yes.” And of course, I didn't keep her email, didn't find it for months after getting letters that kept me up at night.

I'm told I'm lucky to be allowed to sublet two out of every five years. Fees of several months' maintenance must be paid either by me or by my sublessee, making it virtually impossible for me to do what I want to do: have a nice, responsible person cover my maintenance

and live in my apartment, watering my plants, making sure small repairs are done, and moving out for two weeks at a time whenever my family comes for vacation. In order to break even, I've got to charge several hundred above my maintenance.

You'd think that would still net me plenty of people, and it does, but not people to whom I wish to rent. The more a person pays, the more questions I am asked about whether the place can be freshly painted, why any of my furniture is still there, why my vacation dates have to be at this time and not at that time. I get smokers who say they don't smoke. I get pet owners whose shedding dogs claw the sofa. I get folks who just don't pay. This is all since the Board's rules tightened. Once, under pressure, I rented to the daughter of a member of the board, whose mother said the girl had been burned out of her apartment. The mother, who is the granddaughter of a famous brilliant leftist philosopher, had previously asked for a short stay for her family over Christmas break.

"We'll leave you something for the electricity!" she said. What I found, upon my return, was a Santa hat and a phone bill for over two hundred and seventy dollars. But since this woman was on the board, I agreed when she asked me to rent to her daughter. The two of them (in my opinion!) nickel-and-dimed me, and when I came for my agreed-upon vacation, I found my furniture had disappeared. They now appear to be running a bed and breakfast out of their apartment, which they get away with by residing there themselves and pretending the renters are "friends."

I do understand the desire of those who buy a co-op for peace, quiet, and security. All of which continued with my renters. The number of empty co-op apartments in New York that could go to desirable young people, the number of nervous owners sneaking around running crypto-B&B's, is a sad fact of life.

I'd like to see co-op reform. I'd like to see Boards given the power to remove a loud, undesirable, substance-using subtenant, but not restrict subletting on the grounds of "wanting to know everyone in the building." Boards are notoriously eccentric, paranoid, and petty, but if they had less power to begin with, they might be more careful about exercising it, and the

apartments themselves would be in better shape. I'm lucky to have a super who does check in on my place once a week. But I'd feel a lot better about having a full-time caretaker. And I'd feel good about helping young people afford to live on the Upper West Side. But that attitude? I can see folks shaking their heads. That attitude, they might say, belongs to another civilization gone with the wind. Where do I think I am, in the land of Oz, with such questions? Maybe yes. I'd like to be seen as the friendly, occasionally visiting neighbor, who likes to see her place well cared for, and not the absentee owner presumed to be holding on to my place just to make money. I love my apartment—it's my family's second home, and my family and I love our vacations there. And when I think about the apartment, and I think about New York City, I realize that New York was paradise for me in my young years; and that I'd like to find some yellow brick road leading back to that more-affordable world of opportunities.













In the middle of September when Melissa Knox flew in to New York from Germany, the week before she left I asked her what time she would like to begin the interview that appears within the following pages.

I offered that we could gather for this interview at three in the afternoon; or alternatively, earlier in the day. She suggested seven in the morning. “After having three children — you better be a morning person I still wake up my children.” Alexandra and I showed up at seven. Melissa welcomed us with bagels, tea, and “secret tea,” which was her father’s name for coffee while Melissa was growing up.

She had sent over “A Citizen Gone with the Wind,” in June, and almost right away, I knew that I would want to work with her, to meet her, and to publish her work within these pages. After I read the essay that she sent over, I looked her up, and I read about her book, *Divorcing Mom: A Memoir of Psychoanalysis*. “The other typical Upper West Side thing, I think, which is really from the period of time when I was growing up, would be this very significant rite of passage that would occur in adolescence: to send the kid to the psychoanalyst.”

Here was a writer who was not holding anything back, someone who was interested in telling the truth, backing it up with sources, and letting her readers make their own conclusions. “The thing is, I’m telling my story, and I’ve also made sure I can absolutely document everything that’s in the book, so I have my journals, and I have photographs, if it ever comes to that.”

As part of Melissa’s trip to New York, she had planned on going up to see her mother, who was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was ninety-seven-years-old this past fall. I asked whether she had told her mother about the book, or whether she would tell her mother about the book during their visit. “I would rather let sleeping dogs lie. You have to. Anyone who writes a memoir has to deal with that. It’s your perspective against other people’s and it’s important to tell your own story.”

- Isaac Myers III

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEXANDRA BILDSOE

Isaac: So what have you been up to?

Melissa: So far I've seen some old friends, worked, and have done some writing, that's basically it. Nothing special. I have many things on the agenda, I want to buy a pair of tap shoes before I go back to Germany.

Alex: Are you a tap dancer?

Melissa: Well, I am an amateur tap dancer.

Alex: That's fantastic. I feel like it's an art that I hear less and less of.

Melissa: Oh, it's great, it used to be Broadway but I think a lot of dancers, Broadway dancers, train in tap too, it's not used as much anymore.

Isaac: How long have you been doing that for?

Melissa: I guess I started around 2008 but where I am in Germany it's hard to find good classes. I used to come to New York also to go back to ballet classes.

Alex: Gosh, I had about a two-day foray into ballet and I just wasn't cut out for it.

Melissa: Yeah.

Isaac: Two days?

Melissa: Maybe, also . . . if you have a good teacher it makes a big difference.

Alex: That's a good point. I wasn't jiving with the teacher.

Melissa: That's one thing that I miss about New York. I also miss bagels a lot. The German bagels are more like just bread baked in the shape of a bagel.

Alex: Imposters.

Melissa: They say "it's bagels, we have bagels," and I look at it and think, No, it's just . . .

Isaac: Circular bread.

Melissa: Exactly. Bread in a circle, right. I miss bagels. That's the thing, that's what I've been doing, eating bagels and Eggo waffles.

Isaac: Eggo waffles?

Melissa: I actually like Eggo waffles, everyone I know says, I used to love them but I have celiac disease, or I'm this or I'm that, or I can't eat them anymore, but I eat them.

Isaac: So what prompted this trip?

Melissa: Well, I couldn't actually travel for a long time. I had metastatic breast cancer, it came back — I had cancer in 2015. I got diagnosed in 2016 and then it was treated, cured, and that came back in January and I had an operation on my femur, which removed the tumor, so now there's a rod in there. So then the leg recovered but then the screws were too long so I couldn't bend my leg properly, but now they finally fixed it.

They took out the two long screws on September 5th and then the leg is not quite back to normal, but I can walk almost normally. So I decided to make the trip. I really wanted to go, I hadn't been to a dance class since November of 2016.

Isaac: So your father purchased this place?

Melissa: Yes, in the 1970s. When my parents were divorced my father got this place for around sixty-five thousand dollars. It was cheaper because the previous occupant had died, which left a bit of a wet mark on the floor. Apparently all that was repaired.

Alex: I could understand why they would lower the price for that.

Melissa: The whole neighborhood is completely different. Actually, you can probably see it, I grew up on the corner. [points out the window]. You can see the building across

the way, the one that's having the whole front repainted. That was the building I grew up in, and the second window from the top was my bedroom.

Alex: Wow.

Melissa: I grew up there and I had this great view of the city bank. My father bought the apartment because after my parents were divorced, he wanted to be in the neighborhood so that he could see us.

Isaac: That must be something.

Melissa: It was really a middle-class neighborhood and there were lots of mom and pop shops everywhere and do you know what I notice when I come back now? I know everything always changes some, but do you know the Liberty House boutique that had been there since 1972?

Isaac: Is that a clothing store?

Melissa: It was originally a franchise. There were two or three of them anyway, but it was just the kind of stuff that you might find at Uniqlo but beautiful ethnic clothing, boutique things, designer things. It was just a really nice store and they had great sales and then it got more and more expensive because the rents kept going up and they finally just closed, but that was two years ago, and it's still not rented.

I don't know whether Columbia prefers to leave it empty until they get the right rent. But I noticed there are a lot of empty storefronts — the Drago shoe guy that used to be next to Starbucks is gone. I found a shoe repair place, but there used to be more of them and the rents are too high for these little mom and pop places.

Isaac: That's the thing, in terms of landlords, you see a lot of it in lower Manhattan as well. Empty storefronts with signs, Retail Space Available. It's a real problem.

Melissa: It's sad looking.

Isaac: Of course. What was it like growing up in Manhattan?

Melissa: I went to The Brearley School, which is an all-girl's school, and while I was there it really was class divided. Very monochrome.

It used to be one hundred percent wasp, with a few Jews and one or two Asians and a handful of Black students. When I was there, the Upper West Siders were kind of the underdogs. The girls on the east side got the school bus and girls in this part of town had this really sort of odd little outfit. It was just a big blue van with no seatbelts. Nobody had seat belts then, but at one point a friend of mine fell out of the back of the van and was running after it. The driver hadn't noticed.

Isaac: After she'd fallen out?

Melissa: She'd fallen out of the back somehow. It took a few blocks for the driver to realize it, but the other kids were saying, "Mandy fell out of the back!"

I also remember that when I was in first grade I invited somebody in my class to my birthday party, my seventh birthday party. The mother was really a lady who lunched — the type who never left Park Avenue, except to go to the country, or maybe to shop on Fifth Avenue.

So after I invited my friend to my birthday party, my friend's mother called my mother and said, Oh, it's too far and we don't go to that part of town.

Isaac: The Upper West Side?

Melissa: Yes. It was my first experience with, Oh my god, I'm not good enough for her to come to my birthday party. Of



course this is prime real estate now, but back then it was, We don't go to that part of town. It's hilarious.

Alex: And it's so close too.

Melissa: That's what I was saying. I was seven and I was thinking, But you just take the bus. I wonder why it's so far for her.

Alex: Exactly.

Melissa: There definitely was an old guard in the building, and the population has really changed. Now it's young urban professionals, if that's still a term. Is that an obsolete term?

Alex: No. I just was talking to a young urban professional yesterday who used that very term to describe himself.

Melissa: But when I first moved in I was one of the youngest people in the building, and I was in my thirties and most people were older than sixty, and there were a lot of very old people.

If I wanted to sublet or I wanted to go away for the summer and have someone look after the apartment, I would write a handwritten note, "My friend Susie is staying," — and that would be enough, but that doesn't happen anymore.

Alex: So, there's been a lot of turnover in this building recently?

Melissa: I've been told that there are a lot of new people. I know on our floor, one woman married and moved to the suburbs, but she hasn't sold her apartment.

And then there's a pianist at the end of the hall who's been here for a very long time, years. And the guy next door has been here forever too.

He's originally from Greece and he now has a baby boy and a wife in Greece. So he keeps

his job here because the Greek economy is a disaster. I ran into him yesterday and he was very very happy. He's my age and he's a father for the first time.

Isaac: How often do you make it back?

Melissa: Not often. Once or twice a year.

Alex: And how long are your stays when you're here?

Melissa: Usually a week to ten days. I arrived on the 26th. Tomorrow I will go to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to visit my mother who is ninety-seven. She's actually the subject of my book, but she doesn't know anything about the book and I'm not going to tell her anything about the book. The book is called Divorcing Mom.

Isaac: When the book is out, will you tell her?

Melissa: I won't. I would rather let sleeping dogs lie. You have to. Anyone who writes a memoir has to deal with that.

It's your perspective against other people's and it's important to tell the story, but at the same time it can be triggering for other people.

Alex: Exactly.

Melissa: Or they want to contribute, so they'll say, "No, this is what happened." But the thing is, I'm telling my story, and I've also made sure I can absolutely document everything that's in the book, so I have my journals, and I have photographs — if it ever came to that, though I hope it won't.

Isaac: So were you looking in old journals from back then that you still have?

Melissa: I still have piles and piles of old journals.

Isaac: So where did you start, where did you dive in?

Melissa: I started writing them from about age fourteen.

Isaac: I meant for working on the memoir, how far back did you look into your journals?

Melissa: From fourteen and up.

Isaac: Got it. You just started with the earliest one.

Melissa: Right. I went skimming through them. I especially looked at the ones from the mid-Seventies and on, so the Eighties and the Nineties. The other typical Upper West Side thing, I think, which is really from the period of time when I was growing up, would be this very significant rite of passage that would occur in adolescence: to send the kid to the psychoanalyst.

Psychoanalysis was my family's religion. And when the time came, my family sent me off to the analyst. It took me years to realize how crazy the analyst was. That analyst was crazy.

We pause for coffee and tea.

Isaac: What do you think of Gone with the Wind, do you enjoy the film?

Melissa: I do. It was my father's favorite movie. He had been to see it forty-two times. He took me to Gone with the Wind when I was about ten. "That's the South," he would say.

He wanted me to read this rather well written but very sentimental and nowadays would definitely be considered racist period piece memoir called the Red Hills and Cotton. Have you ever heard of it? It's kind of

obscure, but I read it. And then after I read it he said, So that's the South that I grew up in.

Alex: Wow.

Melissa: He sort of talked out of both sides. He left the South for a lot of reasons. He left the South to come to Juilliard.

He left the South because of the racism, but still his version of the story was that in the segregated South, black and white got along really well in the fashion that they did as disclosed in this book. In that way, the book is certainly a portrait of Southern life.

Isaac: What about your mother's side of the family?

Melissa: The other side of the family is this [points to paintings on the wall]. My mother's father was a painter and he painted these. That's his mother and that's his mother and that's my grandmother, his wife. He wanted to imitate Sargent and that's the two of them up there on the wall.

In the painting, my grandmother is standing behind a chair because she was pregnant with my mother. A couple of these . . . actually one of them really does have a story. This one is the daughter of Mark Twain's best friend, William Dean Howells.

She apparently met my grandfather in an ocean voyage and he did that chalk portrait of her and she apparently said, You can tell your grandchildren you've met William Dean Howells.

And he thought that was indelicate of her to mention the possibility that you would have grandchildren, which implied that you would have had sex. No kidding.

Isaac: That's the implication.

Melissa: I'm really not kidding.





Alex: That's funny.

Melissa: So that is William Dean Howells' daughter.

Alex: With the funny hat.

Melissa: Then there's this one. This was a magazine cover: his name was Richard Field Maynard.

He painted, he painted and sculpted on a screen. He was friends with Anaïs Nin. He's probably the only man that she knew who did not sleep with her.

Alex: I love her writing.

Melissa: Do you really?

Alex: I do.

Melissa: I like her criticism but the diaries — erotica is one thing, and it can be really interesting, but the diaries, they're overwritten.

Isaac: She felt very intensely.

Melissa: Very. But she wrote novels and they're all just bizarre, "I am printed on strings of emotion." I can't even imitate it. It makes no sense. But then she wrote very straightforward criticism of D.H. Lawrence. It's really pretty good.

Isaac: I'll have to check some out. There's this book of letters between her and Henry Miller, A Literate Passion. Have you read any of those letters?

Melissa: I have. Pretty hot stuff.

Isaac: I would say so.

Melissa: That was apparently one of the reasons for the ending of her friendship with my grandfather. She worked as a model, he was painting her and then she sort of became

friends with my grandparents and then she had all these adventures with Henry Miller and other men.

There's one of her diaries, Fire: From a Journal of Love, and in one of the entries she writes about how in Paris she had four affairs going at the same time.

Every day she would go to meet one guy on his houseboat and then meet Henry Miller someplace else, and as I was reading the book I was thinking, Wow, that takes a lot of energy!

Four guys . . . having sex with four different guys in four different places every day. Apparently she wrote up some of this stuff and showed it to my grandfather and he was really shocked.

Isaac: And you said that was the end of the friendship?

Melissa: Apparently. But the interesting thing is they were both going as patients to Otto Rank, who was an analyst who broke with Freud, and who wrote a lot of books on the will — he's actually not a bad writer; he's a pretty good writer. And Rank had an affair with Anaïs Nin and he called her Puck, as in Shakespeare. She called him Huck, so they were Huck and Puck.

Isaac: Very cute. As for the psychologists or psychoanalysts who you're familiar with, who do you enjoy reading?

Melissa: Freud is a really good writer. I think he's a really good writer, and Otto Rank. I've also read Jeffrey Mason who did the forward for my book. He debunked some things that Freud had written.

Isaac: Do you have any go-to books?

Melissa: I read a lot of Freud. He's a very clear writer and a lot of the ideas I still go along with. I think what happened to me,



and also to a lot of people is that the patient goes in for help, and rather than just helping the patient, the analyst imposes their vision. That's my impression of what happens.

Isaac: And when did you start working on *Divorcing Mom*?

Melissa: Well, I started writing the essays that appear in the book, and I wrote three or four and then I thought, well maybe I could make this a book. And then I hired a freelance editor who really helped me put it together.

She helped me figure out the shape of it — when to hold back information, and how to hold back information. For instance, in a long form essay I really took my time to sink into the piece, and she said, “it's going to break your heart, but you have to like break this up into two essays, so that there's a chronological consistency for the book.” I felt she was right, so I did that.

Isaac: Did you enjoy the process?

Melissa: I did. But then when I had to break up the small essay I thought, No, I can't stand this. But I came around. There was a lot of rewriting and then there was submitting the book, which resulted in one hundred and sixty or more rejections, but that's normal.

I think a friend said, “Every essay you send out will get at least twelve rejections,” and I've often found that to be the case.

Isaac: What was it like when the book was finally accepted?

Melissa: I thought, Oh, Wow. I couldn't believe. it.

Isaac: Do you have any favorite restaurants in the neighborhood that are still open?

Melissa: Do you know what place I miss so much? Columbia Cottage. That place was great.

Isaac: What was it like?

Melissa: It was a Chinese restaurant that had cuisine from different regions of China. It had some Hunan, some Szechuan, and also some things like melon soup. It was on Amsterdam, right across from the Cathedral. That's gone. The bagel place. That's gone. There's *Absolute Bagels*, they are good. The place to go when I was a child — it became very famous and immortalized by Paul Auster — was the *Moon Palace*.

Isaac: Where's that? Or where was it.

Melissa: It's gone, but Paul Auster wrote a novel called *Moon Palace*, about that restaurant and we went there almost every week. It was on the corner of Broadway and 112th, I think.

It's where the Bank Street Bookstore used to be, but now they've moved too. It was before the wave of Szechuan came in.

There were all these Empire Szechuan restaurants that came in later. *Moon Palace* was very bland. It was Cantonese and we thought it was very exotic.

Isaac: And this was in the Eighties, Nineties?

Melissa: No, Sixties and Seventies. From about 1965 on. I used to go walk up that way in order to take the Broadway bus, back when I was in about Fifth grade.

I walked up 111th street and it was all like SROs, single room occupancy hotels, which are basically the modern equivalent of the flop house, places from the 19th Century, where old drunk guys stay. It's actually pretty sad.

Isaac: Do you remember your first cup of coffee?

Melissa: Yes. It was with my father, he used to make very strong coffee. It was a brand called Luzianne that had chicory in it.

This was over in the other building and we would wake up very early, between five and six, and have what we called ‘secret tea,’ which was actually coffee. That was the first time that I had coffee, in the sixth grade.

Alex: Secret tea.

Melissa: Secret tea. What he really liked was biscuits, not in the English sense, but Southern baking soda biscuits.

We actually had a housekeeper who made them, because my mother was no cook. My father liked to make them.

He hired somebody from South Carolina who knew how to make biscuits, so she would make biscuits and then if there were leftovers she would heat them in the oven and we would have those for breakfast with butter and they were delicious. Maybe that why I like Eggo waffles, it’s all a childhood thing.

Isaac: Would you say you’ve always been a morning person?

Melissa: Definitely. And certainly after having three children — you better be a morning person I still wake up my children. That’s one thing I’m not doing here.

I have a fourteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old at home. The sixteen-year-old comes out like a shot, but my daughter, she’s dreamy in that fourteen-year-old sort of way, and she’s more like, Yeah . . . I’m coming down . . .

Isaac: Do you enjoy teaching writing?

Melissa: I like teaching writing, but in Germany, I think writing is really not taught the way it’s taught in the states. I actually wrote about that.

Isaac: I read that piece, it’s interesting: “Just tell me what I need to know to pass the exam.”

Melissa: Yes, it’s very much like that. It can be a challenge to have them read criticism, rather than memorizing a bunch of terms.

I’ve found that if you let students write their opinions it helps for two reasons: First, it helps me learn something about how they think, and then second, even if they get something wrong within the essay, I always think allowing to have their own thoughts, and then attempting to defend those thoughts is far better than having them just write whatever it is that they think the teacher wants to hear.

Isaac: Engagement.

Melissa: Yes. Occasionally they’ll come to realize that the idea that they’re trying to build upon is actually a god-awful idea, but you have to let them have the idea.

Alex: If you get mad at people for their ideas, then they just shut down.

Melissa: Exactly. So, I let them say what they say. But usually this is never the problem. I think usually the problem is getting an idea at all. Especially with the German students. They say, ‘You wanted an analysis?’ And I would say yes, but then I realized that, to them, what analysis means is not trying to figure out the components or why does this make it sound like that. It’s, ‘This is a quatrain. This is iambic pentameter.’ And that’s what they mean by analysis.

Isaac: It’s solving an equation.

Melissa: Yes. It’s asking them, What do *you*

think? And a lot of times they'll ask me, What do *I* think? They really are not used to answering that type of question.

Isaac: What's it feel like to have the book behind you?

Melissa: I'm really glad.

Isaac: Do you miss working on it at all?

Melissa: I do. But I have other things going. I have a draft of a novel done and I want to work on that. I have another memoir and then I was going to do a breast cancer book.

Isaac: How is that one coming along?

Melissa: I have already written a good bit of it, but I want it to be humorous, because I meet so many women, if they find out you have breast cancer, they say, "I'm a survivor too," And I hate that. I really do. It's just self importance.

Isaac: So you want the book to capture that spirit?

Melissa: It's something you go through. A lot of crap happens and I'm exactly the demographic.

So I've written about that idea, and I also have a very short article that touches on similar ideas, I'll see if I can work it into a longer piece. I just want to keep writing.

Isaac: I guess it's therapeutic, right?

Melissa: Yes, but it can't just be that — it has to be interesting for other people too. If it's just therapy that's . . .

Alex: Journaling.

Melissa: Exactly.

Alex: If you just sit down and start writing, what do you gravitate toward?

Melissa: Just observing and writing in a journal?

Alex: Yes.

Melissa: If I'm journaling, then anything goes . . . I also use journal-writing for whining.

The journal is for everything. Then very often I'll pick something out of that. Something bizarre, or about family, or the thing that keeps me up at night.

Alex: Something that keeps turning over in your head.

Melissa: Yes. I think what you should write about is what you don't want to think about.

Isaac: Why's that?

Melissa: That's the thing. That's always it.

Isaac: You should write about what you don't want to think about?

Melissa: Yes. That's actually a theory. There's a sort of a list on the net by Ann Hood, who is a good novelist: You write about what keeps you up at night but you don't want to think about, because I think what you don't want to think about is something that you have to explain to yourself.

Then after you do that, it's usually not as bad as you thought it was. It's better than therapy in that way.

There just has to be some perspective. It has to be interesting to someone besides yourself.

Alex: What do you miss about New York when you're away?

Melissa: Just the city. I like walking around the city. I miss the food. The people, the subway, the noise, the bagels. The water towers.

Isaac: Would you say the Upper West Side is your favorite neighborhood?

Melissa: I would. I like the Upper West. Neighborhoods change so much . . . I used to go down to the Lower East Side and I don't know if the Lower East Side is still there anymore; if it's still the way that it was.

I used to buy a lot of clothes down there, near Hester Street and Orchard Street, but it's completely different now.

Isaac: Is there anything that you specifically want to get done before you leave?

Melissa: I'm going to go up to Cambridge to see my mother. Other than that, just walking around and having some time to write, and maybe getting those tap shoes.

Isaac: Do you have a regular writing routine, things that you do in order to get into it?

Melissa: I really try to write in the morning. I try to get started at around four.

Isaac: Four in the morning?

Melissa: Yes. Because nobody can ask me for things. The rest of the time it's . . . I write two sentences and then — ‘Mom, I don't have any sweatpants,’ . . . or something.

Isaac: That makes sense then. Congrats on finishing the book. I'm excited to read it.

Melissa: Thanks, thanks.











