

In the summer of 1940, when I was nineteen years old and an idiot, my parents sent me to live with my Aunt Peg, who owned a theater company in New York City.

I had recently been excused from Vassar College, on account of never having attended classes and thereby failing every single one of my freshman exams. I was not quite as dumb as my grades made me look, but apparently it really doesn't help if you don't study. Looking back on it now, I cannot fully recall what I'd been doing with my time during those many hours that I ought to have spent in class, but—knowing me— I suppose I was terribly preoccupied with my appearance. (I do remember that I was trying to master a “reverse roll” that year— a hairstyling technique that, while infinitely important to me and also quite challenging, was *not very Vassar*.)

I'd never found my place at Vassar, although there were places to be found there. All different types of girls and cliques existed at the school, but none of them stirred my curiosity, nor did I see myself reflected in any of them. There were political revolutionaries at Vassar that year wearing their serious black trousers and discussing their opinions on international foment, but I wasn't interested in international foment. (I'm still not. Although I did take notice of the black trousers, which I found intriguingly chic— but only if the pockets didn't bulge.) And there were girls at Vassar who were bold academic explorers, destined to become doctors and lawyers long before many women did that sort of thing. I should have been interested in them, but I wasn't. (I couldn't tell any of them apart, for one thing. They all wore the same shapeless wool skirts that looked as though they'd been constructed out of old sweaters, and that just made my spirits low.)

It's not like Vassar was *completely* devoid of glamour. There were some sentimental, doe-eyed medievalists who were quite pretty, and some artistic girls with long and self-important hair, and some highbred socialite types with profiles like Italian greyhounds— but I

didn't befriend any of them. Maybe it's because I sensed that everybody at this school was smarter than me. (This was not entirely youthful paranoia; I uphold to this day that everybody there *was* smarter than me.)

To be honest, I didn't understand what I was doing at college, aside from fulfilling a destiny whose purpose nobody had bothered explaining to me. From earliest childhood, I'd been told that I would attend Vassar, but nobody had told me why. What was it all *for*? What was I meant to get out of it, exactly? And why was I living in this cabbage little dormitory room with an earnest future social reformer?

I was so fed up with learning by that time, anyhow. I'd already studied for years at the Emma Willard School for Girls in Troy, New York, with its brilliant, all- female faculty of Seven Sisters graduates— and wasn't that enough? I'd been at boarding school since I was twelve years old, and maybe I felt that I had done my time. How many more books does a person need to read in order to prove that she can read a book? I already knew who Charlemagne was, so leave me alone, is how I saw it.

Also, not long into my doomed freshman year at Vassar, I had discovered a bar in Poughkeepsie that offered cheap beer and live jazz deep into the night. I'd figured out a way to sneak off campus to patronize this bar (my cunning escape plan involving an unlocked lavatory window and a hidden bicycle— believe me, I was the bane of the house warden), thereby making it difficult for me to absorb Latin conjugations first thing in the morning because I was usually hungover.

There were other obstacles, as well.

I had all those cigarettes to smoke, for instance.

In short: I was busy.

Therefore, out of a class of 362 bright young Vassar women, I ended up ranked at 361—a fact that caused my father to remark in horror, “Dear God, what was that *other* girl doing?” (Contracting polio as it turned out, the poor thing.) So Vassar sent me home—fair enough—and kindly requested that I not return.

My mother had no idea what to do with me. We didn’t have the closest relationship even under the best of circumstances. She was a keen horsewoman, and given that I was neither a horse nor fascinated by horses, we’d never had much to talk about. Now I’d embarrassed her so severely with my failure that she could scarcely stand the sight of me. In contrast to me, my mother had performed quite well at Vassar College, thank you very much. (Class of 1915. History and French.) Her legacy—as well as her generous yearly donations—had secured my admission to that hallowed institution, and now look at me. Whenever she passed me in the hallways of our house, she would nod at me like a career diplomat. Polite, but chilly.

My father didn’t know what to do with me, either, though he was busy running his hematite mine and didn’t overly concern himself with the problem of his daughter. I had disappointed him, true, but he had bigger worries. He was an industrialist and an isolationist, and the escalating war in Europe was spooking him about the future of his business. So I suppose he was distracted with all that.

As for my older brother, Walter, he was off doing great things at Princeton, and giving no thought to me, other than to disapprove of my irresponsible behavior. Walter had never done an irresponsible thing in his life. He’d been so respected by his peers back in boarding school that his nickname had been—and I am not making this up—*the Ambassador*. He was now studying engineering because he wanted to build infrastructure that would help people around the world. (Add it to my catalogue of sins that I, by contrast, was not quite sure I even knew what the word

“infrastructure” meant.) Although Walter and I were close in age— separated by a mere two years— we had not been playmates since we were quite little. My brother had put away his childish things when he was about nine years old, and among those childish things was me. I wasn’t part his life, and I knew it.

My own friends were moving forward with their lives, too. They were heading off to college, work, marriage, and adulthood— all subjects that I had no interest in or understanding of. So there was nobody around to care about me or entertain me. I was bored and listless. My boredom felt like hunger pains. I spent the first two weeks of June hitting a tennis ball against the side of our garage while whistling “Little Brown Jug” again and again, until finally my parents got sick of me and shipped me off to live with my aunt in the city, and honestly, who could blame them?