

## The Precarious Situation of the 1950s Woman

When I entered her apartment, my mother was seated in her lift recliner, the latest addition to the arsenal of enabling paraphernalia. When appropriately pressed, the small remote control would gradually raise her to a standing position, where she could grab onto her cane. She was having trouble locating the proper button on the device, and, increasingly, from removing it from the side pocket.

The chair, covered in a greenish-brown tweed, was situated in the corner of her small apartment. It was the center of mom's life. Her aide, Julie, had placed a few items within reach—lozenges, tissues, a water bottle, a peeled orange—but mom still hadn't gotten the hang of using her hands for eyes. Tissues were all over the floor, along with orange slices. She was facing a blaring television that she could no longer watch. On her small, white, round table sat another remote control with more useless buttons.

Mom could no longer see me clearly but as soon as the door opened she beamed her "I'm so glad to see you" look. The warmth of her smile usually was infectious but I was too distraught to reciprocate. It had been a few months since I'd visited and her deteriorated condition hit me anew, like someone punching me in the stomach. How could this be? Dorothy Katz, my sturdy, resilient, and spirited mother, didn't even have the energy to get up and greet me.



I eyed the hybrid bicycle that my cousins had given mom for her 75th birthday. It was a well-worn deep blue, with twenty-one gears, probably

overkill for the endless flat terrain of Hollywood, Florida, where she lived. She already had a racing bicycle and a mountain bike crammed into her tiny apartment. During her youth in New York City, Dottie had always delighted in the freedom of riding around the neighborhood, hair blowing in the wind. She wore a helmet only in her later years.

As a child of poor Eastern European immigrant parents, and the youngest of nine siblings, she had never actually owned a bicycle. But my ever-resourceful mother told me that she often “borrowed” one for the day. When I asked her to clarify, she just chuckled. “In those days we often ‘borrowed’ things.” She particularly relished pedaling to her favorite basketball court and watching the boys play. Occasionally she would “borrow” one of their balls and practice her shots. “I was good,” she said. “I rarely missed. They were surprised that a girl could play so well.” Later on, some girlfriends would join in and they even challenged the boys. Mom and dad had met on the basketball court when she was sixteen.

She gave up riding after Denise, Anne, and I were born. “Too busy for bicycles,” she told me recently. “Taking care of three children was a full-time job.” She promptly added, “No, four. Your dad was always so needy.”

Nevertheless, she had bought a bike for me, basic black with no shifts. Mom would periodically use it to cycle up and down the sidewalk of our apartment building in the Bronx. At nine years old, I had been too embarrassed to notice the elation on her face. I’m not sure if anyone else censured her but I knew that none of the other respectable middle-class mothers rode bicycles. After all, it was the 1950s.

Dorothy Katz, like others of her ilk, conformed to the mores of the day. She nearly always wore dresses, sometimes a skirt and blouse, even when vacuuming, washing and drying the dishes (which she did without our help), cleaning our rooms, and making the beds. Our family had a “magic spot,” a clothes hamper, where we dropped our dirty garments—they presently appeared clean and pressed in our drawers. Since we didn’t have a washer and dryer, mom hauled everything to the laundromat once a week.

In the evenings, while the family sat around one of the first television sets in the nation, she ironed our clothes. Mom even pressed our sheets, something I never appreciated until I crawled into the wrinkled bedding in my own first apartment. She shopped every day and cooked our meals. She never packed a lunch box for us. Similar to many other mothers, she always had food and snacks waiting for us at home; few young children stayed at school for the midday meal.

We had lived in a tiny three-room apartment in the Bronx until I was thirteen. The three girls squeezed into one bedroom, whereas the living room served as my parents sleeping quarters. The family had been ecstatic when we graduated to five rooms in the same building. As the eldest I now had my own space, which my sisters forever resented. Even then we were cramped but didn't realize it.

My mother had dreamed of moving to Levittown, in Long-Island, and my uncle drove us there a few times to check out available places. We didn't have a car. The mass-produced, identical dwellings in this suburban development, complete with white picket fences, small manicured front lawns and modern kitchens, had looked like heaven to my sisters and I. And dad qualified for a VA loan guarantee under the GI Bill. But he balked, probably because he dreaded the responsibility of homeownership. Dad was the head of the household and that was that. Only years later did his three daughters, attired in jeans, tie-dyed T-shirts, and high leather boots, dismiss these tract housing as bourgeois, namely Pete Seeger's "Little boxes made of ticky-tacky . . . little boxes all the same." To say the least, we were much less disappointed about having stayed in our tiny Bronx apartment.

Although a stay-at-home mom for many years, Dottie had not exactly been a June Cleaver. She obeyed most of the rules of her era but had a rebellious streak. Her dresses were selected mostly for comfort rather than style, even during those infrequent occasions when my parents went out together. Instead of the fashionable high-heeled pumps, mom preferred saddle shoes.

At five feet, eight inches and roughly 170 pounds, with broad shoulders and ample breasts, she was sturdily built. Mom had beautiful greenish-brown eyes that were nearly always covered with plain Cat-Eye glasses. She never powdered her face, wore eye makeup, or polished her nails, though she did apply the obligatory lipstick. She rarely went to the beauty parlor or used curlers. My mother generally just brushed through her medium brown wavy hair and let it fall into place.

Dad had been more conventional, both in appearance and attitude. An electrical engineer, he wanted to fit in. Sol Katz epitomized the "IBM look," a company he eventually would work for during the last year of his life. I remember an occasion when I met him at his office, probably around 1966. Every one of his coworkers looked alike: dark pin-striped suits, white button-down shirts, striped rep ties, and shiny wing-tipped shoes. His hair, prematurely white, like the others was cropped close to the scalp in a crew cut.

By then, my sisters and I were haranguing him to let his hair grow longer but dad was too much of a traditionalist. He was not very political but his response to protesters of the Vietnam War was typically die-hard patriotic. “Love it or leave it,” he would say to my college friends, chanting the conservative slogan of the day. Mom was more supportive of the demonstrators, probably because she liked to be in tune with her children. She was highly responsive to our growing radicalism. However, I don’t ever remember her reading a newspaper or even watching current events on TV.

For most of my high school and college years I was in constant combat with dad, often over my unconventional outlook. Much to his consternation, I immediately absorbed the progressive views of my classmates at the High School of Music and Art, in Manhattan, which I attended from 1959 to 1963. It was not mainly the politics, however, that irritated him. Rather, it was my stocking-less feet, sandals, wide bell-bottom jeans, casual T-shirts, and work shirts, although such attire increasingly appealed to mom. Even so, she continued to conform to the stodgy dress code of the day.

My father and mother fought as well. He had a raging temper that could be triggered by the smallest incident. They argued over everything, especially mom’s attentiveness to us. I think he sometimes felt left out, like a little kid barred from an exclusive club. I could hear them at night, spitting anger at each other. Dottie was not a pushover, which probably escalated dad’s fury.

In spite of everything we were a tight-knit family because my mother would have it no other way. Every weekend we took long walks to the Botanical Gardens or some other park, where we devoured the generous assortment of deli sandwiches, pickles, coleslaw, potato salad, and desserts that she conscientiously packed for the excursion. I drifted a bit in high school and even more in college, even though I lived at home during those years.

My father’s modest income had been expected to support the whole family—and it did. There were a few extras, such as music lessons, but the budget was tight. Mom controlled the money, which he dutifully handed over to her every payday. He worked hard, car-pooling to Long Island five days a week. When he arrived home in the evening, exactly at 5 o’clock, dad expected his dinner to be ready, which my mother supplied in ample portions. And we were required to be at the table as well, although that was more likely to meet my mother’s needs.

When my youngest sister, Anne, was in third grade mom found a part-time job, first selling *World Book Encyclopedias* and later *Parents Magazine*. She worked for “pin money” we were informed, a commonplace symbolic gesture

intended to reinforce the father's role as family breadwinner. Yet dinner was still always punctual as were the expectations for us to be there. Mom rushed in at 3:30 and, after soothing herself with a hot shower, prepared the meal. The extra money, though relatively negligible, allowed Dottie to indulge her girls with a few "nonessentials."

Then in 1967, my senior year of college, dad suddenly died. He had been having heart palpitations for a while. When we went for a walk together he had to stop, rest, and regain his breath. My boyfriend's brother, a physician, had given me the name of a cardiologist and, with great persistence, I convinced dad to make an appointment. The doctor gave him a prescription for nitroglycerin, the only makeshift remedy available during those years. Every time he felt the excruciating pain across his chest, which was more and more often, he would grab for the medicine. Unknowingly to us, it treated just the symptoms, and his heart disease progressed unabated. One Saturday night, while I waited anxiously in bed for my parents to return home—it was 4 o'clock in the morning—mom arrived, sobbing. His death was fast and painless, something I later learned to be grateful for. My father was only forty-five years old.

We now had no income except for mom's "pin money" job. Even worse, my parents had spent dad's retirement pension, to make ends meet, when he was unemployed during 1965. After over a decade of working for the Sperry Rand Corporation, he was laid off because his division had lost a lucrative government defense contract. The company gave him his retirement accumulations, just enough to sustain the family for a year. Nothing was left. There wasn't any life insurance either. Insurance salesmen had periodically come to our apartment but my parents said they couldn't manage the high monthly premiums. I rather think that dad had been superstitious and was afraid that if he did buy a policy he would die.

Mom grieved pretty hard. Sol had been her companion since she was sixteen and now she was on her own, with two teenagers and me. Yet she didn't have the luxury to let her anguish interfere with the reality of our financial situation. As with many women of the 1950s, mom was intelligent, in a street-wise sort of way, but had no marketable skills. She barely completed high school before getting married.

Dad's current employer, IBM, gave us \$3,000 as a death benefit. Dottie was forceful and decisive: the family would use the money to piece together a counterculture shop in order to engage her girls. We rented an empty store and called it the "Out of the Way" place; nearby retailers dubbed it "The

Mud Pie"! My sisters, our respective boyfriends, and mom purchased inexpensive wooden crates, painted them black and white, and designed displays. We had to use countless coats of paint since, unbeknownst to us, the crates were porous. Denise and Anne, though only sixteen and fourteen, respectively, were both talented artists and produced much of the initial inventory: earrings, crepe paper flowers, decorations, tie-died T-shirts, peasant blouses, beaded necklaces, head bands, hand-painted posters and cards, and brightly colored candles. As money trickled in, mom acquired a huge glass counter and gradually purchased a wide variety of avant-garde items, including silver rings and necklaces.

My mother mourned dad's death for years while simultaneously blossoming in her own right. Her dresses and skirts gave way to jeans, and the button-down blouses to T-shirts. She began wearing sandals, love beads around her neck, and the lipstick vanished. She became "mom" to an entire neighborhood, it seemed; young people dropped into the shop just to confide in her. She always had such a "sunny" disposition and optimistic outlook that I dubbed her "Pollyanna."

Dottie decided to take a second chance at homeownership now that she no longer required her husband's permission. After rambling from house to house for a few weeks, real estate agent in tow, she spotted what she viewed as the perfect place. She was excited but nervous and asked me to go with her to the bank. She had already filled out the forms and had the required documents in hand. Managing a house by herself wasn't going to be easy and I admired her spunk in taking on the challenge. What we hadn't foreseen, however, was the loan officer's out-of-hand rejection of her mortgage. After hemming and hawing around for several moments he informed us that they don't lend money to single women. She needed someone with sufficient resources, clearly not me, to cosign for her. I protested. After all, mom had saved enough for the requisite 20 percent down payment. It soon became clear, after trying a second bank, that my mother would not get a mortgage without a cosigner. Adamant about not relying on her sisters or brothers, she abandoned the effort.

But she managed to purchase a new car, paying for it outright. She traded in the bronze Plymouth Belvedere, which Dorothy and Sol had bought on time payments during the last year of dad's life. It had been an exciting experience for my parents since neither of them had ever owned an automobile before. But it was mom who loved being behind the wheel and, despite the usual norm, became the sole driver; dad navigated. Her new

car, which she chose on her own, was a first-rate, ultra-safe bright red Volvo, unlike the low-end, conventional Belvedere her husband had preferred.

The “Out of the Way Place” remained a diamond in the rough for the entire twelve years my mother ran it. Still, it was an appealing store that permeated with a powerful blend of aromas. As soon as customers opened the door they would catch whiffs of lemon, lime, chamomile, lavender, spice, peppermint, cinnamon, and sandalwood oozing from candy sticks, incense, and multi-shaped candles, spread everywhere. They were also assaulted by a dazzling display of vibrant colors, like a kaleidoscope, everything bursting with the energy of my sisters’ creative touches. Mom had special clients who regularly bought odds and ends and, overall, she sold just enough merchandise to support my siblings, both of whom worked part time in the store for several years. They eventually drifted away to lead their own lives: Denise to Colorado and Anne to Brooklyn.

Having mostly withdrawn from the shop soon after it was established, I finished college, travelled, went off to graduate school in Colorado, married, had a child, and started my career as a professor at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. My main contribution in the later years of the store had been to periodically bail mom out when it was robbed—which occurred more and more often. Eventually she had to give it up and, at age fifty-six, headed to Florida in the Volvo, with her bicycle attached to its rear.