

The Company of Women

(*Vogue*, 1998)

Every man I know has a confession or two he would prefer not to make to the world at large under any circumstance, even at gunpoint. Many such revelations, no doubt, would seem banal in our age of compulsive confession, and yet to a man who has harbored them since childhood they have about them an almost Jungian allure; they are among the kernels of mystical truth, he believes, behind his strange adult nature.

I am talking here, of course, about myself.

For instance, I grew up with miniature Dachshunds. No, don't laugh. They are not a manly dog, it's true. Mine were sweet and chestnut-colored and low to the ground. I loved them. I won't tell you the terrible fate which befell them; let's just say that the next thing I knew we had no dogs and I'd been given a parakeet named Ollie. Ollie was sweet too, in his budgie way. It was only later, as I entered junior high, that he started defecating on the heads of the girls I brought home from school.

But these pet confessions are just diversions, a smoke-screen from the past meant to obscure a more formidable secret: namely, that my best friends are women my mother's age or older. The truth is that here and now in my life - - at thirty-three years old and happily married and blessed with an assortment of the most companionable male friends one could ask for -- the place where I feel most like myself is the same place it's always been for me: seated at a kitchen table in the late afternoon, drinking coffee, surrounded by the voices of women.

I am not one of those men who grew up in a house full of women. I had no sisters, no aunt who lived around the corner and was always dropping in. Ours was a small family with a distinctly male bias -- my father, my older brother

Matt, myself, my mother. If there was a predominant language in our household other than books, it was probably the language of sports. My brother and I were taught by our father from an early age to play all of the sports he knew how to play, to root for the right teams from the right towns (New York), and generally to obsess over and compete in sports with the same blind passion that has so distinguished our sex through the centuries. We were boys. We sat before the tube cheering or groaning and then went outside and tried to kick some ass for ourselves. We fought fiercely, and just as in the games on TV (only far more visceral), someone always won and someone always lost. I was younger and shorter than my brother. Tears of frustration were shed. Knees and noses were occasionally bloodied. And we would go inside to our mother.

This was on weekends mostly, when my father was not at the office, and when we as a family would make the long drive to a house we owned in East Haddam, Connecticut. During the week it was a different story. We lived in an apartment in Manhattan, and my father worked late hours and was gone much of the time. In the city my brother and I played our sports not with each other but with our classmates in Central Park, and when I walked home in the afternoons I was usually alone. I'd let myself into our apartment and drop my knapsack on the floor and walk down the hallway towards the back of the house, where my brother and I had our bedrooms. The kitchen lay that way too. Usually as I approached I would begin to smell the scent of cooking -- a sauce of some kind, a roast, the as yet unwashed bowl in which a batch of brownies had just been made. I would see the yellowish light edging out of the open doorway onto the dark wood floor of the hallway. I would hear the sounds that I knew: my mother's voice and that of a friend; the tin pan percussion of a lid being fit carelessly onto a pot; the rustling, surprisingly audible, of the pages of the "women's" magazines that seemed to reside on the kitchen table in the afternoons only to be gone, like Cinderella from the ball, by dinnertime. Often the radio would be on low, almost always a piano sonata by Beethoven or Mozart, a kind of murmuring that made me feel somehow embraced.

All these years later I still feel it: stepping into a room of such known warmth. Familiarity too can make the heart quicken. There is my mother in her usual position, standing by the rectangular butcher-block table, a thick glossy magazine open on the table before her, the sleeves of her sweater pushed up to the elbows, her forearms quite possibly dusted with flour. And there, say, is my godmother, her oldest and best friend, also standing by the table with a magazine open before her. Though neither of them is reading in the usual sense of the word. They are both holding lipsticked mugs of lukewarm milked coffee. Something is simmering on the stove. They move between stove and table, stove and table. They are talking to each other -- talking ceaselessly, thoughtlessly, seamlessly -- and it is this verbal music that I love, and I step into the kitchen and slide onto a stool, to wait for my glass of milk.

But this is not a Fifties scene; it is the Seventies. This is not the Midwest, but New York City. Divorce was in the air. Few couples one knew would survive the decade intact.

To be privy back then in a constant way to a mature feminine world -- to have a seat (or stool) at the table -- was to witness, however uncomprehendingly at first, the gradual accumulation of despair and the unraveling of hopes in matters of love. Marriages were failing, or being dishonored or threatened, and the private costs of this for my mother and her friends -- expressed in snippets of gallows humor and in sympathetic gossip about the tribulations of other friends' marriages, and, when they thought I was in my room and out of ear-shot, in the subdued, pained, and sometimes frightened offering of advice -- gradually came to seem inseparable in my mind from the intimacies of friendship. It was like finding myself on a raft of survivors.

There were afternoons, of course, when I'd I choose to remove myself. I'd take my glass of milk into my room and close the door on the kitchen and that world. I'd sit on the windowseat and stare out over the buildings towards the park and get lost in myself. Or I'd read. But the truth is I was tuned into my

mother -- and, by extension, to her friends. It was the ambient sound of my childhood.

And they were tuned into me. After all, I had been sitting there on my stool year after year, getting a bit taller, graduating from milk to chocolate milk to Coke, increasing the size of my vocabulary. At the very least, my mother's close friends and I were used to each other; there was trust. Perhaps, like veterans of a private war, we were drawn to each other by shared experiences and unspoken sympathies. At any rate, it didn't feel forced when, as I crossed into double digits in age, and as my mother's part-time work teaching remedial reading turned into full-time work in children's book publishing, her friends and I would sometimes spend an afternoon on our own. Some of these outings took on the rituals of friendship. Nearly every one of the horror movies I saw as a kid (and I saw most of them) was in the company of my godmother -- often followed by a piece of blueberry pie a la mode at the Schrafft's on Madison. We were a regular tag-team of horror, covering our eyes and screaming our lungs out. No movie-watching experience I've had since has equaled the pure adrenaline of those early viewings of "The Fog," "The Fury," and "The Amityville Horror."

Then I was a teenager and at boarding school and my parents were getting divorced. The kitchen was sold along with the rest of the apartment; the Connecticut house too. A dispersal was taking place in our family, an emigration that felt final to me and that I did not understand. My parents were deeply preoccupied. And I reached out with greater urgency and need, I suppose, to those people, my mother's women friends especially, who had been a part of the world I had belonged to.

The summer I was sixteen I spent several weeks with my aunt at her cottage on Nantucket. My aunt, I should point out, is fifty-four years older than I am and not a blood relation. Still, I have known and loved her all my life. She had staying with her another family friend, a woman my mother's age. Between the three of us the distances between generations might easily have been unbridgeable -- more like a bizarre experiment than like friendship. As it

turned out, we were ready for each other's companionship. After just a week together we were as crazily set in our ways as cellmates in an institution. And though it must have appeared a little odd to the neighbors -- the three of us tooting through town in my aunt's lipstick-red '67 Buick convertible; the three of us glimpsed through the kitchen window, trying to decide about dinner; the three of us out on the porch, drinking wine and roaring with laughter -- it felt to each of us, I am sure, despite our having known each other for years, like the birth of something new.

On the whole, thankfully, the women I grew up knowing are like my mother now -- which is to say, happier. Some, like my mother and godmother, found true love the next time around, the real thing, all the more astonishing for coming late. Others, having found love a second or third time, now feel themselves slipping again, or losing interest, or fighting loneliness. They are holding on tight to their courage and their hopes and their senses of humor. They are wonderful, funny, sympathetic friends.

We are, I guess -- whether sitting together in New York or Connecticut or Kentucky or California, or talking on the phone -- bound by the peculiarly intense geometry of the years we have known each other; years of fundamental change and vulnerability. To one degree or another, for better and for worse, these women have all seen me grow up. And I -- with my own eyes and through my mother's -- have been granted a glimpse, now and again, of the changing shapes of their dreams in the face of circumstance.

I still visit my aunt in her cottage every summer. The neighbors may have changed, we are all certainly older, and I am married, but otherwise the scene is much the same as it ever was. As it is over at my godmother's house in Connecticut, where my wife and I dropped by one Sunday last month. My mother was there on one of her biannual visits from her home in Hawaii. The two women were in the kitchen talking and making tea when Aleksandra and I arrived. We climbed the steps to the kitchen and there was the round wooden table with the tea cups already layed out. A kettle was set to boil on the stove.

Thick glossy magazines and cookbooks and scraps of paper with phone numbers and messages written on them covered one counter. The room was warm.

I won't lie -- I tried to ignore the feeling. While Aleksandra fell in happily with the older women around the table, I joined my godfather upstairs in front of the television, where the Yankees were battling the Indians in the playoffs. It was a good, tense game. Somehow, though, I couldn't settle in; call it memory or imagination, but I thought I could hear, amid my godfather's and my calls for more hits and better fielding, the feminine voices rising up from downstairs, the voices of my life, overlapping and joyous, careless and caring, touching each other and me.

At first it was just during the commercial breaks that I went down to join them. Then I gave in and went down for good. I took my seat at the table.

John Burnham Schwartz