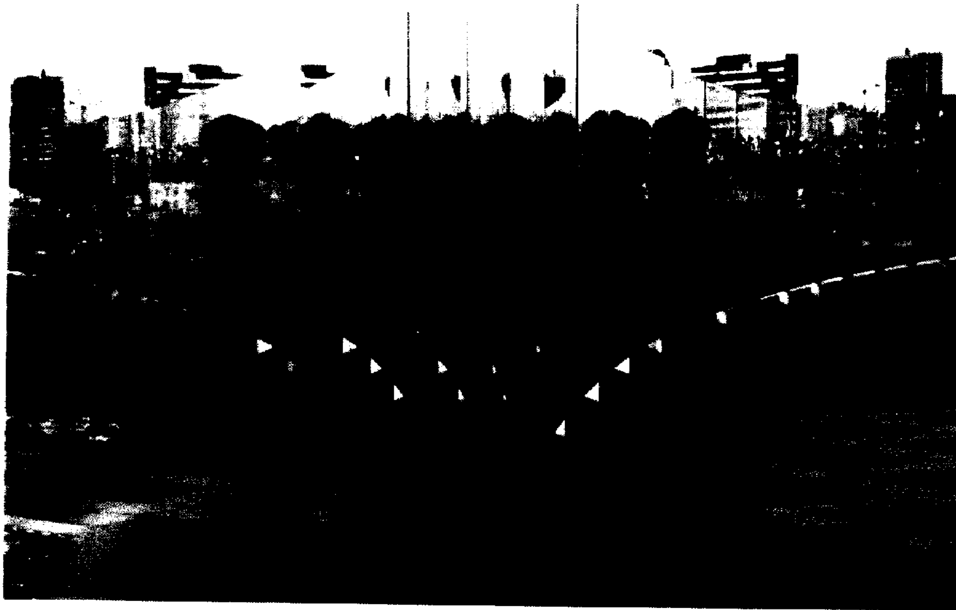


Photo by Taisia Eltsina

An opportunity to self-reflect offered by sheltering in place due to the Corona virus pandemic.

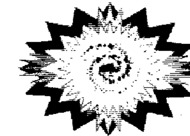
Social Greeting in Time of Physical Distancing

From a car: Raise the index finger of the right hand. (Old custom in rural USA, usually with the hand at the top of the steering wheel.)

On the street: Lower and raise the chin (nod) while making eye contact. Works even while wearing a mask or head phones, carrying groceries, speaking on a cell phone, pushing a walker.

EVENING STREET REVIEW

NUMBER 25, AUTUMN 2020



. . .all men and women are created equal in rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, revision of the American Declaration of Independence, 1848

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Dedicated to the millions of people worldwide who stayed home, physical distanced, and supported the work of the brave men and women who fought to save lives during the Corona virus pandemic of 2020. As well as those incarcerated and detained. And to those who gave their time and lives.

And to Dave and Chris Cooper of The Ink Well, Columbus, OH, and all their crew and printing staff who have helped to produce the works of Evening Street Press over the years.

And to the dedicated Associate Editors past and present who have given their time and talents to vetting our publications.

And to the writers from all over who send us their work, hoping to be published.

To you, dear reader, we offer this volume.

We are all in this together. "Stay safe, wash your hands, we love you." Seth Meyers

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MARJORIE PRYSE
CLASS MATTERS

Tall for my age and wearing a bright red coat and patent leather shoes with a strap, I walked the sidewalk to my new elementary school for the first time since my mother had enrolled me the day before. I spoke English, but with an accent, and Mom had given me a back-to-school permanent wave, even though the school year began several months before I arrived. During recess, I sat by myself on the wall and watched the other girls playing horse, their hair long and straight, as they chased each other up the tree-lined hillside that bordered the playground in our small Kentucky town across the river from Cincinnati. In the classroom I tried to concentrate but when I looked up at the teacher, I saw other girls passing notes to each other but none to me.

In the weeks that followed, they began to tease me. I had come into their community from outside. I wore clothes my mother had sewn for me. I did not have the last name of the biggest department store in

Cincinnati; my father did not care for patients; our house did not boast a tennis court or a swimming pool. I did not yet know what happens at a birthday party. Although according to my age I should have been enrolled in kindergarten, I instead entered first grade because I already knew how to read, and because I also knew how to write and to spell, the teachers moved me to second grade. By the beginning of the next school year, as I passed into third grade, I welcomed my height because I thought it masked my age. I had suddenly become, and would forever after always be, two years younger than my classmates. American educators in the 1950s, at least in the upper South, had not yet begun to focus on students' social development. Whatever a child learns in American kindergarten I never did; nor did the few months I remained in first and second-grade give me enough time to find my way in the social world. When my teacher called me "the baby of the third grade," my schoolmates called me "queer."

I had started school in England, where children enter at the age of five, not six, and where everyone welcomed children of families who had followed deployed U.S. servicemen like my father. I have no memories of having been singled out as different there. My fellow classmates must have perceived me as normal during my first year in school and only after we came home from England did I encounter my own strangeness. The English accent I brought back with me ostracized me as much as my accelerated grade level. In this way I learned how prejudices against difference even among otherwise homogeneous groups intertwine to turn the playground into a different kind of education.

After we returned to the U.S. and Mom and Dad bought a house in Fort Thomas, leaving behind the Northern Kentucky riverfront towns in which they had grown up and moving their family up the hill, I entered school sometime during the winter of 1954. Fort Thomas remains demographically almost 97 per cent white, and it was closer to one hundred percent in the 1950s. The class structure in the town followed the ridge: the old homes, many of them mansions occupied by the children of the men who owned Cincinnati's long-established companies, stood in the northern-most region of the town, a "bedroom community" of the city. The middle-class lived in the middle, away from the river, in neighborhoods inhabited by fathers who did not own or manage the companies in Cincinnati but merely worked there. The third elementary school taught the children who remained within the town's city limits but had one foot in the country, across the railroad tracks that separated Fort Thomas from Kentucky's rural towns that fanned out southward, eventually into the coal-mining region of the state.

When we first moved to Fort Thomas, our old house gave me access to neighborhood children who were not as advanced in school, and so the mismatch between my years on earth and my school grade did not affect our games. Linda lived across the street, and although she was two grades behind me, she was my age and we played well together. Sometimes during the school year Linda and I would walk home with André, an older girl who also lived on our street. One day some boys challenged our little group, and André came unexpectedly to our rescue. The boys formed a line of three, larger than Linda and me, their legs spread apart on the sidewalk, one of them carrying a stick. I don't know whether it was because she was afraid or whether it was just her time, but I remember blood trickling down André's leg below her skirt. The boys saw it and they pointed and began to run away. She saved us unwittingly from who knows what additional humiliation and unexpectedly introduced me to the realities of bleeding: girls do it, it happens unexpectedly, it frightens boys, and somehow there must be a way to prevent the embarrassment André felt, despite the inadvertent heroine Linda and I believed her to be.

We only lived in our first Fort Thomas house for two years, subsequently moving into a brand-new ranch in one of the emerging middle-class subdivisions. Although I now entered my third school by fifth grade, this time Mom figured I could really make a fresh start. Recognizing that my being two years younger than my classmates in my previous school had put me at a social disadvantage, Mom told me that I should now begin to lie about my age. Instead of eight I called myself ten, although of course I was still really only eight. I began a kind of passing. While my parents, suffering from the nation's political anxiety, outfitted a corner of our basement as a bomb shelter intended to protect us from any nuclear fallout, I was much less worried about any cold-war bomb than I was about what was not even close to exploding in my own body.

Although I did not seem to know the rules, instruction still hit from all sides. During fifth and sixth grades, recess included organized softball games. First, the teachers chose the team captains, who then, with excruciating singularity and after much study of the as-yet-unchosen line of classmates, took turns selecting their team membership. For the first time in the world of school, the point of the game seemed to be to create another hierarchy, one that differentiated between boys and girls. The team captains, always boys, chose boys first, but the process of forming teams gave these boys a chance to demean certain other smaller or

bookish boys. Eventually they began to tap girls for their teams, and the girls first selected might have been considered "tomboys," although the process always managed to include popular girls among the first to be added. At last, the teachers assigned a small group of left-over "rejects," whom neither captain wanted, to randomly join the teams. As the newcomer I was the last to be chosen for a team and then was given a glove when it was not our turn to bat and sent to the far recesses of the outfield, where, fortunately, no one even among the boys had the strength to power the ball.

"Girls can't hit or catch," the team captains said, and complained that we "played like girls"—but the fact that they were mostly right only served to underscore the humiliation our teachers forced my fellow girl classmates and me to endure. Up until this point, baseball was only what my Dad listened to on the radio when the Cincinnati Reds were playing. I didn't know how to wear a glove or catch a ball. I had never held a bat and when it first came my unfortunate turn to do so, I swung unsuccessfully at the pitch three times in a row. Why hadn't my father taught me the skills I would need to participate in what, apparently, was expected of us fifth-graders? When I raised this with him, he did produce a couple of ancient leather mitts and agreed to throw me a few balls, but his heart wasn't in it. He mostly helped me learn, in 1956, that boys owned team sports even if I could on occasion eventually get myself to first base.

What led our teachers that year to mix girls and boys together in a game where boys clearly possessed the advantage of strength, experience and ambition? Although I have long faulted the boys for causing me and other girls to feel inadequate, I believe that the teachers had expected this outcome, and therefore were trying to implant in us something that had nothing to do with softball. Although we were growing up in the fifties, many years before Title IX, I would look back on what those teachers had taught us long after I began to claim the name "feminist." We had previously endured occasional relay races with the boys but at least the rules for such games were fairly easy to learn, and some of the girls demonstrated determination and speed, matching their male counterparts. I could only conclude that the lesson I and other girls learned on the softball diamond was deliberately and viciously taught. The teachers allowed the boys to decisively establish their superiority in spite of the fact that girls already dominated in the classroom; by means of this co-educational team sport, our teachers clarified second-class status for girls, as if this were part of the unspoken curriculum of advanced elementary

school. Perhaps had my physical body matched the age I asserted myself to be I would also have developed a bit more coordination, but instead of trying to find a rational explanation for my lack of athletic ability, I merely internalized it as another social failure.

In seventh grade, all three elementary schools re-united for junior high in a building shared with the high school. Although I was ten when I entered junior high and eleven when I attended the seventh-grade prom, my girl classmates had turned twelve and thirteen, and most of them were, as we said, "developing." My own body had thinned out and was putting on height; I saw no signs of body hair but clearly life for everyone else but me had begun to change. Mom decided that what I did not have time to grow into and learn gradually, she could fix more quickly. After all, the day I celebrated my eleventh birthday in the family, I became a teenager to the outside world and so needed to look the part. In this way began my instruction in female underwear, and Mom became a makeover artist.

I learned how to roll up stockings past my toenails without creating runs and to fasten them to a garter belt, which I accepted when Mom said she was willing to buy me my first pair of pumps with small heels, but bras presented an underwear dilemma more difficult to resolve. Had Penney's offered "training bras" during those years, I might have jumped at the chance to wear one, since for me, the tell-tale sign of popularity was less the protruding chests than the mark of the straps and the hook-and-eye closures under the clothes of my more physically-advanced classmates. Instead, Mom chose some padded horrors for me after allowing the saleslady, much to my dismay, to measure my chest. Even worse, she insisted on calling Dad's attention to my new appearance the first day I began to wear one of these bras, as if congratulating me on entering a new stage in development when I might as well have been dressed in drag.

Any newfound confidence I had achieved by moving to a different elementary school began to erode, as former classmates asked me whether I was the same person they had known as the "baby" of their grade. I denied this, holding fast to my new age. Little did I know what challenges lay ahead. In junior high we were required to take gym class in the middle of the day, to put on our gym uniforms, and then to shower before changing back into our school clothes. Because I had no breasts, I dreaded the very idea of showering in front of my classmates. Mom naively suggested that I talk with the girls' gym teacher, Miss Fields, who would surely make some accommodation if she knew my situation.

The most unfortunate aspect of the required shower after gym

class was that Miss Fields entered each of our shower areas—that included four to six dressing niches and two showers, with the entire class divided into four or five separate areas—while we stood wrapped in nothing but towels. She did not trust us to bathe, insisting that she had to confirm that our shoulders were wet before she would allow us to get dressed again. I had to negotiate getting into the shower fast, then into a towel, then the agony of waiting, flat-chested beneath the small covering, for Miss Fields's inspection. Much later I would recognize Miss Fields as a closeted lesbian, a single woman with no outlet for her identity in the homophobia of the 1950s. Although she might have insisted on the shower inspections because of the glimpses of adolescent nudity they offered, she more likely relished the power her rules gave her over so many female bodies.

I already knew she didn't like me when I met her in her office. Later I concluded that because she didn't know my parents—we would not have appeared on any list of the town's wealthy families—she owed me no favor. Still, I explained that being slow to develop physically made me vulnerable to the popular girls, and I wondered whether I could either avoid the shower or, if not, secure her permission to dress as soon as I dried off. While telling my story, a half-century before transgender youth would begin to assert their need for privacy and fear of exposure of their bodies to classmates, I carefully watched her face for any indication that she might sympathize with me. She revealed none. When I finished and made my request for special treatment, she denied it.

My new neighborhood friend Vicki and I took up tennis when we entered high school. The school announced a meeting for everyone interested in joining the tennis team, and we decided to attend. Unlike softball, tennis required individual skill and performance; there would be no team captains to select members of the squad, and Vicki and I had discovered that we could walk to the new, lighted courts created at the town park. My father had played on his high school tennis team and offered to hit balls with me—a sign that times were changing a bit in our family. Initially I played with his old racquet, but for my birthday I asked for a new Tad Davis Imperial because the boys who played on the courts used this one; to my astonishment, this very racquet appeared with my other gifts at the breakfast table the winter I turned thirteen (my actual age). The one-season delay in acquiring a proper racquet did not affect my chances with the tennis team. The coach, also a math teacher in whose class I excelled, took Vicki and me aside after the meeting he had called in the fall of our freshman year and explained that although the

announcement had not specified interest in the *boy's* tennis team, we could see from the fact that we were the only two girls who attended the meeting that everyone else understood. However, he also told us that he would approach Miss Fields about starting a girls' tennis team soon.

And so she did, by the time we were sophomores. In retrospect, perhaps she was motivated by the fact that entering seventh grade that year was the daughter of one of the richest families, early and well-known citizens even before the town was incorporated in 1917. This girl, call her Amanda, lived in a mansion built around the turn-of-the-century, and her family owned a clay tennis court that stood across a dead-end tree-lined street with other large old houses clustered in the vicinity, lots of land between them. Miss Fields had arbitrarily assigned her new recruits to positions on the girls' tennis team. Amanda played first or second singles; I played second doubles, the lowest-possible position on the team, and sometimes didn't play at all if Miss Fields wanted to give her singles players additional game time. I tried to reassure myself that Miss Fields would have forgotten our exchange about the showers a couple of years earlier.

To her credit, though, Miss Fields allowed the girls on the team to challenge each other, and somehow I managed to convince her to allow me to play Amanda. One day after school, instead of meeting at the public park where the team usually practiced, I carried my books, tennis clothes, and racquet to Amanda's house, where I was allowed to change in a small room just inside the side door. Then Amanda and I, accompanied by Miss Fields, crossed the small lane to the family's tennis court. This court stood on a bluff overlooking the Ohio River. A really high lob that cleared the fence might have eventually ended up in the water, since the court was situated on a cliff or escarpment high above the river. I had never entered a mansion like the one in which I changed clothes that afternoon, and I could hardly walk from nervousness as we approached the court. Still, I felt confident. I had one of the best racquets on the market and, since Mom had taught me how to sew and by this time I was making most of my own clothes, I knew I looked great in my tennis skirt. I had seen other girls playing tennis in the clothes I envied, but the Simplicity catalog had just what I needed. I entered the court in my best tennis whites, having brought along a new can of balls to contribute to the match.

Surprisingly, due to our vast differences in the positions we held on the team, Amanda and I found ourselves evenly matched, perhaps because we were only a year apart in actual age. Although she won the first set, I put up a good fight, and by the second set, where I knew she

expected to win, I overpowered her complacency with a few ace serves, and the second set fell into my column. By this time of day, the shadows had lengthened on the court, and I felt both tired and exhilarated by my performance. However, after we took a break and started the third set, I began to realize that Miss Fields was actually whispering suggestions to Amanda. I understood for the first time what it means to have someone "in your corner"—I didn't and Amanda did. This observation should have increased my resolve, since I saw I would now have to win against two people, including the team coach, who, by rights, should have had no vested interest in what had now become, to any objective observer, a David and Goliath event. Instead it made me want to cry. There I was, competitively dressed with my Davis racquet, serving up aces and racing into the backcourt to return almost everything Amanda sent my way—and even rushing the net once or twice to power a shot down the line, where it passed her by. By all standards of meritocracy, I had proven myself equal to my opponent.

What did Amanda have that I didn't? By the time the third set hit yet another tie, at nine games each—we were playing years before the U. S. Tennis Association created the sudden-death tie-breaker rule—and Amanda then had me at 10-9, the enormity of my struggle hit me hard. Not only did I have the coach against me, but Amanda—a girl I really didn't know at all but thought she was perfectly nice—owned, or her family did, the very court on which I had been trying to beat her. Even with no understanding of property values, I still knew that owning land with a river view and using that land only to build a tennis court meant that I was attempting to overcome privilege. It would be several years—not until I went to college—before I would read F. Scott Fitzgerald and discover the seeds of the desire for wealth that would transform James Gatz into Jay Gatsby, but I finally recognized a small part of what I was up against there on the clay court, battling to improve my lowly position on the team, and even though I would learn to dissemble it and struggle against it, a part of me would always understand and share James Gatz's ambition.

At deuce in the final game, my head began to spin. Perhaps dehydration had set in; later I would discover the blisters on my feet. I knew that each time I served, it required enormous effort. I had to make two points in a row to win the game, or else we would remain frozen at deuce forever. I lost the first point when Amanda returned my serve with a high lob. As I raced to the line, too late to catch the ball, the Ohio River reddened in the distance, the now-setting sun reflecting off the few tiny

boats that remained on the water. As I picked up the ball and returned to the service, I saw Miss Fields watching the lines carefully on the other side of the court. My first serve hit the net, making my next serve game, set, and possibly match point for Amanda. No one needed to utter these words. We all understood what I needed to do in order to return us to deuce, try once again to win the game, and create a 10-10 tie. When I made the toss, I pulled my racquet over and behind my head, wanting not an ace but just a successful serve. When I hit the ball, I already knew that I had not tossed the ball high enough. My second serve also hit the net. I double-faulted my way home. And in an outcome that seemed entirely unfair, Miss Fields did not tell the rest of the team how hard I had worked, what skill I had shown, and how close I had come to beating the girl supposed to be our best. In fact, I did not move even one position up from my caste status as a second-doubles player.

I learned from that match that the fault was in fact doubly my own. Unlike Amanda's, my parents had had the bad luck to be born in flood-soaked riverfront towns and barely survived the Great Depression.

I moved away from Ft. Thomas with my family right after high school graduation. Yet on a recent visit back to Northern Kentucky, I drove up the hill to find the tennis court. Grass had grown through cracks in the clay, and the court lacked a net. I saw myself that afternoon not missing but beating Amanda's last high lob to the baseline. This time I caught the ball. When it dropped, I lobbed it high back to her, so high that it cleared the back fence of the court.

I watch it now as it climbs further, picks up the reflection of the setting sun, and begins to disappear. I do not see it fall into the river or the current carry it far away. Amanda still wins the match. But I rise up with that lob and don't look back.