

## PATSY

From the moment I met Patsy I adored her. One does not analyze relationships at seven years old, they either are or aren't. Over the next 10 years of my life my summers were spent at our family beach house. From the second school ended in June to the second it resumed in September I was barefoot and blissed out on the beaches, boardwalks and playgrounds of our beloved village. And Patsy was my best friend. There are too many memories to count. Since she passed away many have been flooding to the forefront of my brain.

Patsy grew up in a large, Irish Catholic family. She carried the middle name of her mother, Eugenia, a relaxed, ethereal matriarch who, to put it mildly, gave her children lots of leash. Patsy was a beautiful, feral creature. She lived apart from us other seven-year-olds. We all went to the village day camp (which we called "group") from nine to noon Monday through Friday. It's just what you did. So when I would see Patsy at-large during these hours it was confusing—and fascinating.

I started tracking Patsy at the much less mature age of six. I observed her eating ice cream cones in the morning; standing atop the monkey bars like the child of a Wallenda, waving her arms wildly and wiggling her tush—a clear taunting of the fates; swimming outside of designated lifeguard areas (you just did not *do* that), and sometimes heard her letting somebody really have it with the ferocity of an angry Hell's Angel. She was a feisty, scrappy force, even at six.

One day, at the wizened age of seven, I approached her in the playground, a place kids would converge upon every evening after dinner. There was no parental supervision in those days; it was glorious revelry that somehow always found its own order. (It could be a little 'Lord of the Flies' sometimes but that's how you learn.)

My strategy of approach was one of cautious curiosity. I vectored in across the sand, planting myself in her general vicinity and began casually digging a hole. Holes were cool. They invited interest. It worked. We started digging together and hit water before you knew it (jackpot!). The next night we started two separate holes about three feet apart. This advanced version of hole digging involved burrowing down a ways then tunneling laterally until hands met at a midpoint. Sometimes upon connecting the ceiling would collapse (poor technique) but we'd both gone deep enough that the structure held.

One day soon after at the bay, swimming in the designated area, I nonchalantly dog paddled up to her and said, "Hey you should join group." And she did. Just like that. She was there the next day.

Patsy worked her magic without really working at all because she just was what she was. Others were drawn to her untamed magnetism; she was no longer mine alone. In retrospect I see I could have been upset by all of this, but I remember not a whiff of it. Our bond must have been so solid, so sure, that the forces of jealousy, insecurity and cattiness that can play so freely among little girls was just not there.

Here are a few more vignettes culled from my rich collection of remembrances:

Patsy and I were a performance force. We would begin rehearsals for the annual Labor Day Show early on. Just days into the summer I would call the first production meeting, held in my 'office', the bunkhouse. Out of those meetings emerged some of the community's most memorable theatrical moments: 'For It Was Mary'-inspired by Patsy's older sister Mary; 'High Hopes'-a number we meticulously choreographed and probably rehearsed more intensively than any Broadway show (and I'm sure people still remember the intricate harmonies and brilliant costumes, created from pillowcases). But our tour de force was 'The Beach Beatles'. By that time we were a powerhouse of a production team, adding composing to our list of credits. Some of our best: 'Eight Bikes a Week', 'Before This Race is Through We're Gonna Capsize You' and our signature song, 'There Were Bells (In a Church)'. Sitting on the rooftop deck of Patsy's house, overlooking Clam Cove, we would sit for hours creating compositions with all the seriousness of a Lennon and McCartney.

And that brings me to the real Beatles. Patsy and I were rabid Beatlemaniaics. We wrote letters throughout one winter referring to ourselves as 'Mrs. Harrison' and 'Mrs. McCartney'. No, you don't understand—we *really believed* we were Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. McCartney. In August of 1965 we departed on a morning ferry along with every other 14 year old girl in the village to see The Beatles at Shea Stadium. We all stayed at Patsy's house on Wendover Road and stayed up all night nursing our tired teen-age throats with Campbell's soup and crying into each other's arms. Delicious adolescent madness.

And have I mentioned that Patsy almost got me sent to hell? Patsy was Catholic and I was entranced by the ritual and drama Catholicism came with. I would accompany her to church on Sundays and longed to participate in the pageantry. Patsy (always willing to leap on a directorial opportunity), agreed to coach me in being a Catholic. We began with receiving Communion. As usual, rehearsals were held in the bunkhouse. One afternoon, deep into the process, we were rudely interrupted by Sheila, a lovely au pair my parents had hired for the summer. Sheila was red-headed, Irish, and fiercely Catholic. She took one look at me with a napkin bobby-pinned to my head, kneeling and genuflecting, and at Patsy expertly mimicking a priest whilst placing a sacramental Saltine in my mouth and screamed, "*What* are you girls *doing*?!!!!?" Patsy temporarily silenced Sheila with, "*None*- of -your *bizz*-ness - Shee-*lahhh*!!!!". (She would have said 'bitch' but hadn't yet

learned that word.) Sheila subsequently made a good case that I would go to hell, not being a Catholic and all, and Patsy, always my protector, decided that going through with this plan wasn't such a stellar idea. It may be one of the only times I ever saw her back down but it makes perfect sense, as Patsy always guarded those she cared about like a mama lion.

Patsy had my back. She could be coarse and abrasive, but I saw through to her vulnerability and keen sense of fairness. She did not tolerate attacks on those she loved and she did not spare those she loved from telling it to them straight.

Patsy's mother died suddenly one August day. It was a brain aneurysm. We were both nine. Her parents had been off the island when it happened getting moved in to a new family home. At the same time they were mid-construction on a novel new beach house, the first of its kind in the village- an 'upside down house' with the kitchen and living area on the top. Eugenia had also born a sixth child just a few months before. It was suddenly an upside down world indeed.

As one nine-year-old to another what does one say? What does one feel? What does one do? We played, we had sleepovers, we fiddled around with my mother's make-up, we made BLT's, we swam in the ocean, we swam in the bay. We played wildly in the playground and without even trying to organized throngs of kids into intricately constructed games. We never talked directly about her mother but we did. I would look into her huge, brown eyes and she into my little blue ones in such a real and present way. We were right there together.

This was an early and poignant lesson in loss. I do not recall experiencing feelings that might be expectable of a young child witnessing another child, at such intimate range, losing her mother. Avoidance? Denial? Too much to process? That would be an easy assumption to make except I do not hold it in that form. I see two little girls, exquisitely in tune, making their way through the waves (literally and metaphorically), always resurfacing to the air and sun and sky.

After the death of her mother Patsy took on an even greater luster. Her soul seemed to be polished on a cloth we'd not yet been offered. Life went on and we did what kids do—grow up.

By thirteen Patsy'd lost her patience with me and insisted it was time I made-out with a boy. Under duress I did one night, on the dock, amidst a convention of pre-teens expressing their hormonal rights. Poor John, poor me. Two shy kids trying their best to apply due diligence to stage-of-life obligations. Our shared experience, I'm sure, was equally heat-free. I still occasionally run in to him at cocktail parties. He's now a polished gentleman, distinguished in his field—but across a crowded room he will pucker up his lips and smooch them in my direction. Golden. Thank-you again Patsy.

As adolescence unfolded we began to choose different paths. I did summer stock; Patsy did drugs. I would return from my pursuits expecting my childhood world would be there waiting for me. I learned life doesn't work that way. It was a coming-of-age moment. A rude awakening. What I'd known to be real had vanished. Suddenly it seemed the entire population of the playground had exploded into the maelstrom of the times: Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll all tied up in the shiny bow of Viet Nam. I was not ready or equipped to deal with it. Patsy, ever my insightful and staunch supporter, stuck by my side. Nobody messed with Patsy so nobody messed with me. My place in the group was safe, no matter my comparatively chaste ways. I remember one moment when a stoned out boy was aggressively coming on to me. Patsy jumped in and shrieked at the poor young man: *You leave her alone....Pam's a lady!!!!!!* I will say she even terrified me in that moment. After that my safety was assured, backed up by Bennie who, metaphorically, had the biggest mane in the pack. In becoming my protector he gained even more prowess. I was learning the laws of the jungle.

Life of course continued. We grew *up* up.

Patsy bypassed formal higher education, married young and had a daughter she raised as a single parent, eventually to marry Harry, a boy she had teased mercilessly when we were kids, nicknaming him 'Scab' due to his skin's unfortunate sensitivity to the sun.

Once through those formative years and catapulted into the vast outer space of adulthood, our lives took very different courses. I was as confused as anyone in 1969; those times did not lend themselves to cohesion. Everything was in upheaval and chaos was encouraged (thank-you Abbey Hoffman).

I felt lost and scared a lot then. Still, looking back, I made sage and intuitive choices. I certainly did not take the beaten trail but in retrospect recognize, even in the swirl of havoc and pain, I was always able to keep my eternal flame of 'self' lit. Sociologically I'm glad I grew up in an era that did not seem to ride your tail too closely; we were given a wide berth—there seemed to be an infinite amount of time to 'find yourself'. Of course some drowned in that pool of freedom and I almost did a few times. But I'd always come back up for air knowing more.

I went to college (a few times) before completing my undergraduate work fourteen years after finishing High School. In the meantime I'd studied acting with Sanford Meisner (who I'll credit with planting the seeds of true listening in me) and cobbled together a career in a notoriously difficult business. I learned a lot in my travels as a journey-woman actress, performing in all manner of venues. My favorite was on a stage erected in the middle of a cow pasture with the cows roaming around and moo-ing as I played my heart out as Helena in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Another nugget was a brilliant performance in an Off Off Off Broadway black box basement theatre where I was hung

suspended in the air over the stage. To this day I'm not sure what I was doing up there, but I got good reviews. (It was the 70's and avant-garde was king.) I eventually landed a major show on Broadway after just a few years and Patsy, upon learning this, sent me a Western Union telegram opening night reading: From the Bunkhouse to Broadway!!!! It went right onto my dressing room mirror, the yellow of the paper glowing even brighter than the congratulatory daisies and tulips already adorning the room.

It's funny, we never saw each other 'during the year'. We always met on the stage of our youth. So she didn't come to my show even though she lived only a borough away. No matter. Our friendship was immune to the normal ego-insults that can be suffered between those who love each other. I knew she was busy with a very different life than mine and respected that. We fully accepted each other, period.

I'd always had a keen interest in what made people tick-what made me tick-and psychology was my hobby. It went hand-in-glove with what drew me to acting—a place I could find out about myself through stepping into the costumes of other characters. I loved the craft, camaraderie and excitement of it but as I matured tired of the lifestyle. After two decades in theater my 'hobby' pushed itself into the forefront and guided me to the next right chapter, allowing me now to become a clinical Sherlock Holmes-a psychoanalyst. I'm fortunate in that I've had two careers that were vocations. I always knew my path (even when I didn't always know I knew). Patsy pointed that out to me one day. She often got me before I did.

Patsy was proud of me. She said so and to back it up began taking psychology courses with the idea of becoming a psychotherapist herself. She would have been great.

Patsy's passing has deepened my reflections on life. As I write seventy is in sight. I like having seven decades of experience to look back on-it lends a sense of gravitas to my being. From this vantage point I can see things with equanimity: the bad relationships, the great vacations, the missteps, the successes, the health issues, the heartbreaks, the growth, the bad hair years, the lost years, the found years et al.

At my 50th High School Reunion I had a revealing experience. When asked about my personal life (i.e. marriage and children) 'The lady (me) doth protest too much' in explaining my lack of either, to which my sensitive and wise classmate responded, "You really don't need to justify yourself." It was a good 'get' and I got it.

Men have played a large role in helping me shape who I am constantly becoming. I went through years of longing for what I wasn't getting-even given my best and most beguiling efforts-and suffered royally for that. I also enjoyed the perks of those kind of situations which were ecstatic. In my third year of analytic training I had an evocative dream. In it my father's dead body was laid out on a granite slab—quite a Shakespearean scene. I was there kneeling beside his remains, feeling deeply sad and loving. Then, from within the

dream another part chimed in saying, “Gee, I’ve felt more pained by boyfriends.” This was not a reflection on the depth of love I had for my father, but a wake-up call that something was terribly wrong here: a massive mis-assignment of feelings was in operation. It was a mutative dream.

Relationships became different- more stable and inclusive. But over time I’d landed more solidly in myself and in so doing no longer needed a man in the same way. So the connections were valuable but no longer so vital to my being.

And guess who interpreted that to me?!

Since growing up Patsy and I have seen each other every single June and September at the place of our precious past. We’d be immediately *there*-close and dear. She would come over, unannounced, and scratch like a playful cat at the screen door of the bunkhouse, entering without invite indelicate moments notwithstanding. She owned the place and I hers.

Not so long ago Patsy began scanning me old letters between us written in tender youth. This brought delight to my heart accompanied by a subtle rumbling.

Shortly after that, at 4:00 o’clock on a Thursday afternoon, I opened an email with the subject line reading “Very, Very Sad News”. Patsy had come home from a game of tennis, lay down for a nap and succumbed to a brain aneurysm— just as her mother had. My hands hovered above the keyboard as I read it and remained there for I don’t know how long before lowering slowly, settling palms flat onto my desk. The wood felt cool and grainy, a clock ticked, a sunbeam moved slowly across the room then faded as the afternoon did.

There was no funeral, no memorial-she was fiercely against “all that shit” and *nobody* wanted to challenge the wrath of Patsy-even in death. I always thought she combatted the overwhelm of such early, traumatic loss with a provocative cynicism. One day, sick of this defensive brevity, I flung my thoughts in her face and she punched me in the nose.

So in the aftermath of her death all who loved her were left to create their own structures for grief.

For me, all deaths are different and all mourning unique unto itself. I’ve experienced numerous, stirring losses. One I met with anger, with another the grief was ragged and sharp-edged which, when touched, felt like an emotional paper cut. Sometimes mourning felt obligatory and other times there was relief that their suffering had ended. All versions ached, my heart hurt but never broke.

This was a seminal loss that dropped a plumb line deep down into me. There is no explanation nor is one needed to explain our poignant closeness. We were soulmates from the start. To borrow from the movie 'Jerry Maguire': We had each other at hello.

In searching through the ample literature on loss Marilyn McCabe's words spoke best to me:

“When someone dies, particularly someone we love, who has become a very real part of our selves, the ultimate paradoxical experience occurs. We cannot negate the reality of physical death. Nor can we deny the reality of the emotional loss caused by this physical annihilation. Yet paradoxically, not only in the first moment or the first months of the loss, but perhaps on and on for years to come, there is a presence of the person who has died. A remembrance of what was, in varying possible levels of concreteness and salience. And there is the reality of that person inside ourselves that contradicts the fact that he or she is no longer physically alive. There is both a presence and an absence, each seeming to illuminate the other.”

The last time we saw each other we sat at the ocean and talked about spirituality and the vicissitudes of life. Then she took off for her 4 o'clock tennis game, giving a last little wave before disappearing over the top of the dune. She left the beach that day but the bond is alive and forever.

I love you Patsy. Although I know you would probably hate all that schmaltz.

**Book Citation:**

McCabe, Marilyn. (2003). *The Paradox of Loss: Toward a Relational Theory of Grief*. New York: Praeger, p.54.