

Tribe of the Breakaway Beads

BOOK OF EXITS AND FRESH STARTS

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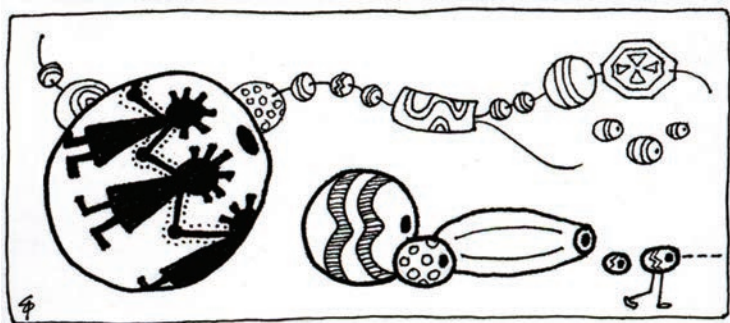
***NOTES**

1

ARCHEOLOGY OF MEMORY

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O1 :: Stringing The Breakaway Beads Canaltown, Not Long Ago



MARY LIKED HER STORIES, WHERE HAVING A BIG IDEA OF herself became a virtue and wrestling with discontent, an art. They added up to who she turned out to be: a woman, wised up; a woman with a history, more than six decades now—and still smiling.

During a bout of reorganizing old notes and journals, she was struck by the repeated accounts of her special *I'm outta here* moments: leaving behind her childhood, abandoning her first stab at adult independence, turning her back on a marriage and walking away from a career. She put those stories into a “grand exits” folder. A pattern emerged.

Each exit was the climax in a saga about the thinning ice of comfort finally breaking through into the deep restlessness below. The life she'd been leading was not what she had in mind for herself—not her idea of who she was supposed to be. Enter

moodiness. Self-pity. Then—a lonesome decision to make a break for it—*it* being some mysterious half-planned adventure she couldn't wait to get started on. Exit. Fresh start. The new Mary.

Where did this flair for reinvention come from? Mary's parents and their World War II generation of extended family and friends all seemed so stable—an oak forest of civilization. Mary liked oak trees and their deep roots. Yes, she too could shine as the steady old reliable, a trusty stagehand painting scenery in someone else's theater. But then a certain disquiet would seep in and Mary would need to be the hero of her own drama. *Enough is enough. Gotta go.* And, like that, she'd switch from solid oak to errant acorn—gone.

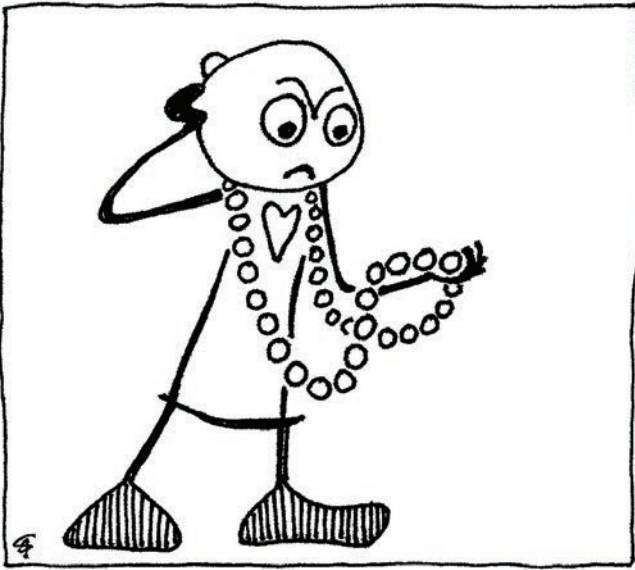
Where did that come from? At her advanced age, she began to pay attention to the women in her family history. They had their breakaway moments, too. Maybe she wasn't such a misfit after all. She added their tales to her "grand exits" folder.

After a while, the stories strung together like so many odd beads, collected wherever they were found, forming their own design. Maybe, she thought, they were the makings of an heirloom necklace—a gift to the next generation of smart women, who might find themselves dangling between the easiness of yesterday and the puzzling risks of tomorrow, trying to decide whether to dig in or bail out. The big dilemma. *Do I stick it out? Or do I pick up and go?*

Where does a woman find the wisdom to know?

OZ :: The Bead Collector: False Pearls

St. Louis, 1956



MARY'S FIRST BEADS WERE POP-BEADS, A 1950'S FAD. SHE coveted them and competed with her girlfriends for the longest strands, draping herself in ropes of luxury. Her favorites were pearls.

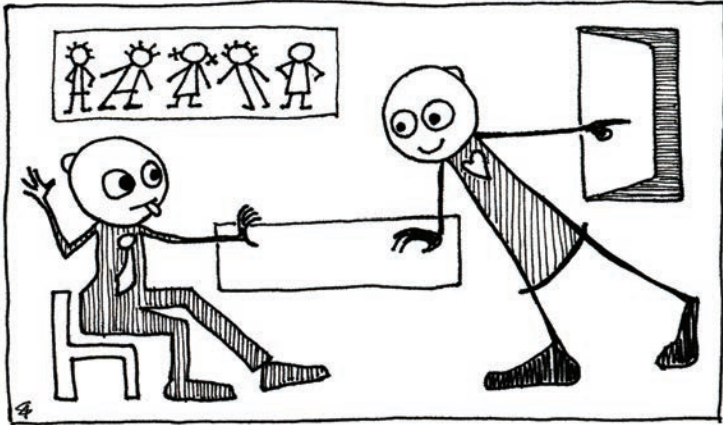
Then one day a tiny flaw at the hole of one of the pearls led her to pick at it. A strip of pearl-toned paint peeled away. It revealed a bead no more lustrous than skim milk. She was stunned. This was *crap*.

At the age of eight, Mary pondered authenticity. She was already a student of quality. When her mother made Mary's dresses, she pointed out how all the seams were finished on the inside and all the loose threads clipped, even though no one would see them. Craftsmanship meant quality and quality meant you didn't fool children into thinking painted plastic was a pearl. Mary was outraged for little girls everywhere.

Alienated, she abandoned her stupid collection of beads. Exposed for phonies, their magic was gone.

03 :: Enough is Enough

Canaltown, 2003



MARY SNAGGED BIG-BOSS ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON AS HE was leaving for vacation. “I’m turning 55,” she announced, “so I’ve decided it’s time to leave Pandora.” She had only made her decision the night before, but couldn’t wait to tell, couldn’t wait to start seeing the world through new eyes.

She rambled on about her twenty-four years on the job at Pandora Youth Services—her growing disillusionment with the work and her plan to become a writer and maker of short movies. She was resolute and ecstatic. Still, she would have enjoyed some *Oh no, what will we do without you!?* but in fact Big-Boss seemed a little giddy about her decision.

“Do you mind if I tell George?” he asked. “I like to keep him informed of any crises brewing while I’m away.”

Mary blinked. George was the new Jupiter in Big-Boss’ solar system and this was a juicy nugget of gossip. She could hear them, chuckling like bullies who’d finally made the brainy kid cry. But she wasn’t crying.

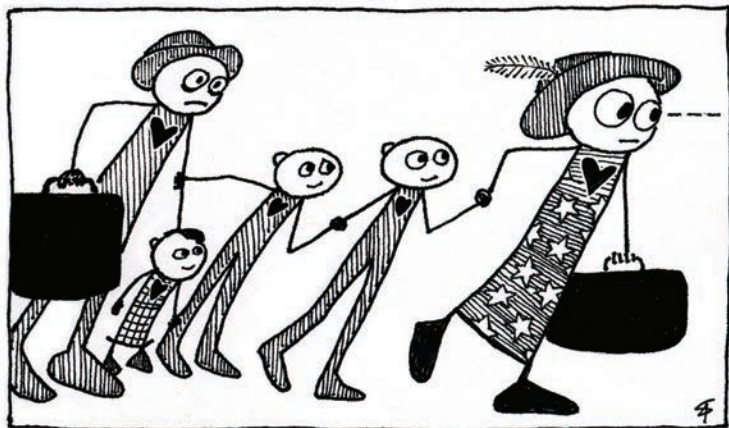
“Yes, I mind. This is no crisis,” Mary said. “It’s my life, my decision, my story to tell.”

As she left his office and headed for her car, Mary looked at the row of Pandora’s residential treatment buildings—monu-

ments to twentieth-century thinking, symbols of institutional resistance to reform—*her reforms, her leadership*. But then, she couldn't help smiling. *To hell with it—I'm outta here!*

04 :: Ellen Gibbons

Ireland, 1871 – Missouri, 1896



AFTER HER EXIT FROM PANDORA, LIVING HER QUIET WRITER'S life, Mary finally began to research facts and timelines pertinent to the oak-into-acorn women in her family's history—her foremothers. It didn't take long for her to realize that their influence was the air she breathed.

Take Ellen Gibbons, her great-grandmother.

In 1870s Ireland, the Great Hunger was over. But for young women like Ellen, there were no jobs and no men worth marrying, so at the age of twenty, she got up and went. Sailed to New York. Caught the train to Chicago. Arrived on September 27, 1871. She was there a week when O'Leary's barn caught fire and her new city burned down around her. Chicago burned for three days. 100,000 people became homeless.

Did Ellen stick around in the rubble of despair? Not on your life. She hit the road for the next stop on the immigrant trail—St. Louis.

It took Ellen Gibbons ten years to find a good husband—ten years in which she probably worked as a domestic for a rich family. It was a typical job for an Irish woman on her own, a safe harbor where she could learn about the elegant tastes and refined manners of the American upper crust—the colleens' college for upward mobility.

At the end of her immigrant finishing school, she married Frank Barrett, second son of Irish homesteaders, who lived out on the rolling uplands of Missouri, a distant forty miles from St. Louis.

Fifteen years and three children later, she'd had enough of that—enough of sharing a log cabin with her in-laws, enough of miscarriages, enough of Sundays riding a horse side-saddle to church. She did not want her tombstone planted on the prairie. That was not her idea of the good life in America. That was not her idea of Ellen Gibbons.

So she put her foot down. *Enough is enough.* And her darling Frank Barrett gave in. They packed up the children and moved back to St. Louis.

She lived a long life and repeated her story so many times that even her youngest grandchild—Mary's mother—could pass it on. Her message was clear: *Sure, you can tough it out—that's what gutsy women know how to do—but every so often you just have to throw up your hands and say, I'm outta here."*