

Abstract

Bishop, Stephanie A. "A Southern Daughter's Search for Selfhood: Finding Identity Through Writing Memoir As Seen in Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* & Patricia Foster's *all the lost girls*." (Under the direction of Dr. Barbara Bennett)

The genre of memoir serves as an avenue for self-discovery. Particularly, Southern women have used this literary form as a mode for realization about the true nature of a daughter's relationship to her mother and her own selfhood.

Mary Karr in her memoir *The Liars' Club* and Patricia Foster in her memoir *all the lost girls* explore their intense bond with their mothers as a way to recognize their need to protect their mothers. After the recognition of the desire to keep their mothers safe, these women then understand that in order to find their own identities, they must separate from their mothers and differentiate themselves. In their third and final step on the road to true selfhood, Karr and Foster work through the guilt they feel for not affirming and validating the roles their mothers have chosen to play in their own lives. By doing so, these daughters are able to live lives free of guilt and to nurture their own beings outside of their roles as daughter.

A SOUTHERN DAUGHTER'S SEARCH FOR SELFHOOD:
FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH WRITING MEMOIR AS SEEN IN
MARY KARR'S *THE LIARS' CLUB* & PATRICIA FOSTER'S *ALL THE LOST GIRLS*

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved family members, each of whom have always supported my endeavors and lent their unconditional love. And also, to the faculty of Saint Mary's School and my dear friends for all of their help and encouragement every step of the way.

Biography

Stephanie A. Bishop was born in Richmond, Virginia, May 3, 1972. Growing up in Rawlings, Virginia, she attended Brunswick Academy until she left for Raleigh, North Carolina where she attended Saint Mary's College for her junior and senior year of high school. She then went on to receive a BA in English and Communications from the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. In May of 2004, she received her MA in Literature from North Carolina State University.

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Introduction

Mary Karr and Patricia Foster are two Southern daughters who have ultimately found themselves through the writing of their memoirs. In 1995, Karr published her memoir *The Liars' Club* that recounts three important years of her life. Foster's memoir *all the lost girls* published in 2000 relates a number of years throughout her life. These women are both daughters who, for very different reasons, grew up feeling that they had to protect their mothers; they felt as though they needed to keep them safe from the world and from their own selves. Unfortunately, in taking on that large role as children, both of these women lost their own identities. Their time was so filled with worrying about and trying to shield their mothers that they never developed their own characters, never really figured out who they were and what they wanted out of life. It is only as adults that Karr and Foster, struggling in the world, realize what they must do: reconcile their past relationships with their mothers and separate from them once and for all.

In order to do this, Karr and Foster first recognize their need to protect their mothers so desperately. Secondly, understanding their necessity and desire to separate themselves from their mothers is the next important step to selfhood. Finally, overcoming great feelings of guilt in leaving the mother, the one with whom they are connected most closely to in the whole world, is the third and final stage in finding and owning their own identities. It is through this process of reliving their pasts and recording their memoirs that Karr and Foster are able to finally break free from the ties that bound them and now live for themselves. They transform from being solely their mothers' daughters to women

making their own way in the world.

For Mary Karr it is perhaps understandable that she needs to distinguish herself from her mother so that she does not emulate her. Mrs. Charlie Marie Karr was at once wild and exotic yet dangerous and fearsome. Karr loved the mystery of her mother's scent and style and passion; at times she was frightened by her mother's volatile nature as well. However, this feeling was always overpowered by her overwhelming desire to be near her mother and to protect her. Because Karr was always more focused on her mother's comfort and safety than her own, she now feels no comfort and safety in her own life, in her own skin. Karr knows she is incomplete, knows that to find her future, her past must be explored. This is just what she does in her memoir *The Liars' Club*. In this book, Mary Karr details three key years in her childhood and early adult life in order to survey her past and ultimately see the realities about her relationship with her mother. Through the writing of this memoir, Karr is able to understand her mother, her relationship with her, and finally let her go.

Patricia Foster had a very different childhood experience; however, she too wrestles with the same difficulty: letting go of the desire to keep her mother safe in order to separate from her and identify who she is outside of her role as daughter. Mrs. Foster was in many ways, unlike Charlie Karr, the stereotypical "Southern Mother." She was gentle, subservient, quiet, and supportive. If Charlie Karr was one extreme, Mrs. Foster was the other. Where Mrs. Foster was seen as the perfect mother, Mrs. Karr was seen as anything but. Even though Mrs. Foster was so different, Patricia Foster still has the same

need to “differentiate” herself from her mother. Through Patricia Foster’s memoir *all the lost girls*, she, like Karr, is able to separate and find her identity.

Mary Karr and Patricia Foster choose to discover and reconcile their identities through the medium of the memoir. William Zinsser defines this form as “some portion of a life” (11). It recalls “unusually vivid” moments in a life as it “narrow[s] the lens” and allows one to look into “a window of a life” (11). The memoir is a mode of realization for the writer. It is a form that retells history but uses literary devices to do so as it employs a more personal and intimate voice to feel and recall the past in the present moment of reconciling one’s self. The voice of the memoir finds some peace through this recalling of the past. The goal of the memoirist is to work through and actively discover a self through the written word.

Truth is sometimes defined by fiction. Truth is also the truth if that is how one remembers it and perceives it in her own mind. Judith Barrington, in her book *Writing the Memoir*, calls this the “emotional truth” (65). The memoir is not about fact; it is about memory. Now this is not to say that a memoir should ever contain lies. That is not so. What it does say is that we all bring our own selves to our shared experiences. The memoirist can move back and forth between past and present as she expresses an “emotional truth” which becomes more valued than a factual one. Until recently, it has not been fully recognized that the memoirist is not just writing a true-life history but an interesting and thought-provoking story using literary techniques to do it. The same thought and care a fictional writer uses to make a story its best is employed by the

memoirist. Unfortunately, the memoir has not yet been given a great amount of credibility as a literary genre. Helen Buss states, “I liked that it was a marginal form, even a marginal form of a marginal discourse, *Life Writing*. I felt marginalized myself, so the marginal nature of the discourse suited me” (xv). Women in this way in particular can use the genre of the memoir to break this cycle of marginalization just as Karr and Foster have done. It is paradoxical that women who are themselves marginalized would choose a marginalized form in order to break their silence. However, the memoir is a literary form that is a more private and intimate voice where women can find comfort and can successfully put to use their inherent ability to express emotion fully and articulately.

The memoir is a particularly effective form for women and their quest for separateness, according to Suzanne Juhasz in her article “Towards Recognition: Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship”:

the daughter-writer will remember/create the story, in her own way. This establishes a distance between them, by both allowing her to recognize her mother as a separate subjectivity she knows herself to be, in the form in which she would like her mother to see her. The daughter will write the mother into subjectivity, and she will write herself into subjectivity. The result of this distance will be a new kind of intimacy, intimacy that results from mutual recognition. It is possible now when it was not possible before because it is she who sets the terms—literally by means of language. (174)

So what the daughter found as her greatest struggle before, reconciling her relationship with her mother and ultimately finding herself, she can now do through written language in the form of the memoir because the daughter is in full control of what happens. “It is with words that the daughter-writer creates this place or space so difficult to find in real life” (180). Karr and Foster use the form of the memoir in just this way.

Even the most seemingly simple life is an important clue in helping to understand women’s lives and struggles throughout history. Since the caveman carved on stonewalls, humans have been recording, in some fashion or another, their lives and how they fit into the world around them. Women specifically have had much to record throughout the ages. Although they have not always been heard with a clear voice, women have been influential and significant in helping to chronicle the past both historically and personally. Writing is one important way that women express and discover themselves.

This idea of expression is particularly important not just for women in general but specifically for Southern women. As Diane Roberts discusses in her critical work *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, the universal representation for all women began with the Virgin Mary; she was “the model for representing the white mother of the antebellum South” (186). Therefore, the white Southern woman began as a figure of almost unattainable perfection and gentility. She was not supposed to be troubled or confused about her identity. She was “singular, the source of moral instruction, grace, goodness, represented by the classical body on the pedestal” (187). The irony, however, is that she was still “powerless” (187). But women writers such as Kate Chopin began to

challenge what she called the traditional, silenced role of the woman, the “mother-woman.” Roberts goes on to say that “in later fiction, the white southern mother ceases to embody feminine perfection, becoming conversely the scapegoat for its transgressions and excesses, linked like the Belle, with the South’s decline in the morally reduced twentieth-century” (191). She cites Scarlet O’Hara as being the “entrepreneurial, selfish, antimaternal....unwilling to define herself either through a husband or through children” who “represents the future” (191). However, there was resistance to this new, more independent and freethinking woman: “Southern culture wants to ‘solve’ the female body by declaring it dangerous or anomalous unless defined by a man or a child; women who resist this confinement are destroyed” (193). Therefore, it has proved difficult for the independent-minded southern woman to find her voice. Roberts states that this oppressive mentality was just as prevalent in the 1950’s with the emergence of the “Mrs. Cleaver” stereotype and even the fashion of time as it was still typical for girls and women to wear corseted waists and crinoline and hoops in their dress.

However, females began openly to challenge their repressive roles: “women such as Virginia Foster Durr and Lillian Smith were speaking out on political issues, putting themselves at odds not only with the dominant politics of white suprematism in the South but also with the convention that women be silent and apolitical” (214). So the previous models for southern womanhood, the Virgin and June Cleaver, were slowly being diminished. As Hester Eisenstein states in the introduction of *The Future of Difference*: “one of the goals of the Women’s Movement was to remove the obstacles for the full

participation of women in all aspects of social life” (xvi). Thanks to this movement, women began to see that they could be more than simply domestic creatures, wives, and mothers. This is not to say that the independent woman did not desire motherhood or deem it as important or rewarding because it certainly could be: “the feminist revolution would liberate women, not from motherhood, but into a truly nurturing motherhood” (xviii). Women just did not want mothering to be the only thing in their lives. The hope and desire was that there would be a balance, the ability to know another part of herself in addition to that part of her that was the caregiver. The logic is that in order to “truly nurture” someone else, one’s own self must be nurtured as well. The memoir is one way that allows women to break free of the silence and explore and determine who she is. Mary Karr and Patricia Foster have taken advantage of this freedom.

Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* explores the subject of motherhood and how it affects not only daughter and son but also the entire family structure. In particular, Chodorow sees the dilemma of the daughter’s separation from the mother as being the child’s necessity of giving up “its incestuous love objects (parents, siblings, parent substitutes) in favor of other primary objects in order to be able to go out into the nonfamilial relational world;....before she can fully develop extrafamilial commitments....a girl must confront her entanglement in familial relationships themselves” (134-135). She goes on to explain that “mothers feel ambivalent toward their daughters, and react to their daughters’ ambivalence toward them. They desire both to keep daughters close and to push them into adulthood. This ambivalence in turn creates

more anxiety in their daughters and provokes attempts by these daughters to break away” (135). This ambivalence “leaves mother and daughter convinced that any separation between them will bring disaster to both” (135). A daughter feels such a strong connection with her mother that she “acts as if she is and feels herself unconsciously one with her mother” (136). A claim the daughter desperately wants to make is that she is not her mother, but these feelings of individuation and independence conflict with her imbedded “feelings of dependence on and primary identification with this mother” (137) because the mother is the primary caretaker. These feelings not only traverse from daughter to mother but also from mother to daughter which only compounds the dilemma: “Mothers, especially in isolated nuclear family settings without other major occupations, are also invested in their daughters, feel ambivalence toward them, and have difficulty in separating from them” (140).

Chodorow also discusses the daughter’s search for identity in terms of “differentiation” in her essay “Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective.” She defines “differentiation” as “coming to perceive a demarcation between the self and the object world, coming to perceive the subject/self distinct, or separate from, the object/other” (5). For the daughter, “developing separateness thus involves, in particular, perceiving the mother or primary caretaker as separate and ‘not me,’ where once these were an undifferentiated symbiotic unity” (6). But, according to Chodorow, this must be taken a step further in order to be complete: “adequate separation, or differentiation, involves not merely perceiving the separateness,

or otherness of the other. It involves perceiving the person's subjectivity and selfhood as well" (6). So not only must the daughter see that the mother is an individual self but she must also understand her as well. This is what Karr and Foster ultimately do through the process of writing their memoirs.

Jane Flax concurs with Chodorow in her essay "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy" that differentiation is the key to a daughter finding her identity: "differentiation is at the core of women's psychological problems. There seems to be an endless chain of women tied ambivalently to their mothers, who replicate this relation with their daughters. This process occurs because only women take care of infants and do so under certain social conditions, namely, the rule of the father, whose power, while often hidden in the family, is ultimately determinant" (37). Flax's statement explains why mothers and daughters are so tied to one another. These two females are primary in one another's lives from the stage of conception and so have an understandably difficult time living as separate individuals later. Chodorow also helps to explain this bond: "A daughter does not have something different and desirable with which to oppose maternal omnipotence, as does a son" (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 122).

Nancy Friday's book *My Mother / My Self* describes and analyzes her relationship with her own mother while interviewing other daughters, mothers, and professionals on the mother-daughter relationship. Friday also asserts the necessity of exploring the mother-daughter bond: "if I live with an illusion as to what is between us, I will have no

firm resting place on which to build myself” (Friday 3). So it is paramount to understand fully the mother-daughter relationship before being able to reconcile one’s own self.

The mother-daughter relationship is also analyzed in Nagueyalti Warren’s and Sally Wolff’s *Southern Mothers*. While this collection of writings focuses mainly on the relationship as portrayed in fiction, the foreword by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese does offer some interesting insight into the relationship in general in everyday life. In her essay entitled “Mothers and Daughters: The Tie That Binds,” she too acknowledges the negative feelings that arise when daughter does not seek to live as her mother has but to define her own self: “Daughters look to mothers for love, acceptance, approval, and a model of how to live as a woman; mothers look to daughters for love, acceptance, approval, and the confirmation that they have fulfilled their responsibilities. But when daughters no longer admire and seek to imitate their mothers, or when mothers chafe against the constraints of mothering, the bonds of intimacy fray” (xvi). So because Karr and Foster do not seek to emulate their mothers, they feel as though they will be the sole cause of that disconnect, that “fray”ing in their relationship. This seems to be more of a contemporary problem for females due to the Women’s Movement of the 1970’s as women more and more were loosening that bond to search farther and wider for their identities outside of the home.

Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* also explores the mother/daughter dynamic. In her chapter “Motherhood and Daughterhood,” she draws on her relationship with her own mother in order to theorize about the connection. She asserts that “mothers and daughters

have always exchanged with each other...a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other” (220). So there is a physical connection that transmutes into a psychological one. Rich goes on to use the term “matrophobia” (coined by poet Lynn Sukenick) to describe the relationship further. “Matrophobia” is defined as “the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of becoming one’s mother” (235). She says that “matrophobia” can be seen as “a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery” (236). This is just what Karr and Foster accomplish with their memoirs, a removal of themselves from their mothers. They ultimately learn that their fear does not have to come true: that they are not in fact fated to be the same kind of mother that their mother was to them. Karr and Foster are finally more likely than their mothers were to “truly nurture” because through the process of writing their memoirs, they have nurtured and loved themselves.

In analyzing these two memoirs, *The Liar’s Club* and *all the lost girls*, three distinct stages emerge for both women in their search for identity. The first is that both women recognize and recall their intense need to protect their mothers. Because of this, both women find it particularly difficult to separate themselves from their mothers. Karr

and Foster worry about their mothers' ability to survive without them by their sides and in their everyday lives: "The unspoken fear is that if one partner leaves, if either questions the perfection of mother-daughter love by being 'different,' we are both destroyed" (Friday 14). This is what both Karr and Foster fear: that by becoming themselves, they are rejecting their mothers and therefore destroying them.

The second stage that arises with these two women is then recognizing the need to separate themselves from their mothers. They want to do this finally because they do not want to become their mothers and live the lives that they have lived and that there is another world outside of the familial one, outside of their mother's realm. They then desire to "differentiate" themselves and own their own existence. Therefore, Karr and Foster must separate from them. Karr does not want to become the "bona fide maniac" (152) that her mother was at times; Foster does not want to be the submissive housewife who has little identity of her own outside of the stereotype. However, to use Friday's theory, the daughters feel guilty about not affirming who their mothers are: "If I repeated her path and pattern of motherhood, it would show I did not blame her for her choice. It would justify and place the final stamp of value on what she had done" (Friday 25). Karr and Foster obviously both dearly love their mothers and also do not want the mother to feel any sense of failure in who she has become. Part of protecting the mother is affirming and modeling oneself after her. Karr and Foster can no longer do this because they realize that there are other ways to live a life.

Thirdly, after separating, Karr and Foster must work through the final stage of

their separation: the guilt of leaving. In order to do this, these daughters must believe that their mothers are safe; this knowledge is a prerequisite to obtaining their own feelings of safety and, ultimately, of self. A mother's safety to Karr and Foster is understanding that their mothers can deal with their own pain and struggles. They must understand that as separate individuals, they cannot take on the feelings of another, even their precious mothers. After acknowledging this separateness, Karr's and Foster's peace and sense of self is found in knowing that they are not their mothers, that their mothers' fate does not have to be their fate, and that they have talents that can make possible a successful life. These daughters then can and will break free from the restraints of the mother-daughter bond and flourish.

In the following chapters, this process of finding one's self will be outlined and analyzed. Chapter 1 will discuss Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and her journey to unearth her identity. Chapter 2 will do the same with Patricia Foster's *all the lost girls*.

Chapter 1

Mary Karr's 1995 memoir *The Liars' Club* narrates her volatile childhood in a small town in Texas with her older sister Lecia, her father, her mother Charlie, and, for some of the time, her overbearing maternal grandmother, Grandma Moore. She begins her memoir by placing the reader in the middle of just one of her traumatic childhood experiences. This episode exemplifies the first stage of the separation process for Karr which is the basic acknowledgement of her overwhelming desire to protect her mother, to make sure that she is safe. What we come to find out towards the end of the first part of her memoir is that Charlie has just gone on one of her rampages and has thrown most of her and Lecia's toys and other things in their room, including their bed, into a large pile in the backyard and has set the heap on fire. Karr tells us that her mother then had been taken "Away." What is seen in Karr's first comments is that she, even at an early age, feels a sense of responsibility for her mother's dangerous actions: "I done something wrong and here's the sheriff. If I had, that night, possessed a voice, or if anyone nearby felt like listening, that's what I might have said" (4). Karr takes the burden of responsibility on herself in order to keep her mother safe. Notice that she also immediately references her lack of voice, a voice she had not found until the writing of this memoir.

Another burden Karr takes on is ensuring that her mother's talents as an artist are admired. Because Karr acknowledges her mother's gift, she wants others to as well. Karr

describes one drawing that her mother rendered and how beautiful it was. She wants others to see her mother's talents: "It bothered me that nobody else asked to look at it" (32). Karr sees herself as responsible for her mother and how she feels and wants her to be appreciated, worthy, and special. She wants her mother, the "primary object" in her life, to be praised for her talents, to feel good about herself.

Grandma Moore, who will be discussed momentarily, at one point during her stay at the Karr home is hospitalized. Karr tells of the first time they go to visit her there. This incident is significant in looking at this mother-daughter relationship because it is the first time that Karr mentions her mother's smell, something she will mention many times throughout the memoir. Her remembrance shows that focus on the mother's physical presence. She seems to first notice her mother's smell because of the stark contrast for the first time in the way that her mother smells and her surroundings: "I turned from the sick man and entered the invisible cloud of odors that floated around Mother at that time: Shalimar and tobacco and peppermint Life Savers. For some reason, I recall it drifting just above my head, which moved at the level of her hipbone, so I could crane my head up and breathe deeply and draw some of her down into my lungs" (50-51). Karr so much wants to be as close to her mother as possible that she even wants to take in her scent and have it become a part of her own being to achieve that "symbiotic unity" she so desires. This sensation of oneness allows Karr to protect her mother.

Another instance exemplifying this theme of protection that Karr wants to exert over her mother with little or no regard to her own self or well-being comes after their

visit to the hospital on a mother-daughter trip one stifling day to the zoo. Karr remembers looking at the caged animals and states:

I can also see Mother trapped in some way, stranded in her own silence....Sometimes seeing her that way in memory, I want to offer her a glass of water, or suggest that she lie down in the shade of the willow behind her. Other times, I want to pull the glasses from her face, put my large capable hands on her square shoulders, and shake her till she begins to weep or scream or do whatever would break her loose from that island of quiet. (55)

She wished as a child for her mother to be free just as she now wishes that for herself, because until her mother is free and safe and secure, Karr is not.

Karr also feels that she has to protect her mother from Grandma Moore, Charlie's own mother. Karr's grandmother appears early on in the memoir when she comes to stay with the Karr family in Leechfield, Texas, because she is ill. Karr senses at even her young age that this Grandma Moore is a source of anxiety and discomfort for Charlie. Karr even goes so far as to say that her grandmother is the root of the majority of their problems: "Maybe it's wrong to blame the arrival of Grandma Moore for much of the worse hurt in my family, but she was such a ring-tailed bitch that I do" (41). Karr knows that her mother has enough difficulty in her life (she obviously knew her mother was what they described as "Nervous") without Grandma Moore coming in and offering up a mound of criticism. Karr is aware of the strain on her mother as Grandma Moore "doled

out criticisms” so consistently, creating so much stress that her mother’s face was “set so tight her mouth was a hyphen” (42). Charlie Karr is a wild woman, but her mother has the ability to swoop in and take hold of her and her family like no one else can. The family begins to eat not on the bed, which was their unusual custom, but at the table adorned with freshly cleaned and pressed linens in addition to Karr and her sister having to bathe every day and even attend church. It would seem that these types of occurrences would be some positive additions to the children’s lifestyle: “I had always thought that what I lacked in my family was some attentive, brownie-baking female to keep my hair curled and generally Donna-Reed over me” (45). However, it is not how Charlie wants to live, and Karr knows that “so her behavior got worse with Grandma’s new order” (45). It is a paradox that the only civility and order that Charlie desires, and therefore Karr desires, is that of constant disruption and confusion. But Grandma Moore is disrupting this chaotic order that Karr knows because she overpowers Charlie in every sense: “The worst part wasn’t all the change she brought, but the silence that came with it” (46). Karr greatly and bitterly resents her grandmother overtaking her mother in such a dominant and obtrusive and self-stripping way. Again, that need to protect her mother kicks in and causes Karr to hold a deep resentment towards Grandma Moore for the rest of her life.

Grandma Moore stays with the Karrs in Leechfield for what is in Karr’s words an “eighteen-month horror show” that “lasted too long and made my mother cry too much” (48). Karr hates how terribly her Grandma Moore made her mother feel in her own home, giving Charlie the impression that everything she did was wrong. Consequently, Karr

hates that she could not protect her mother from this mental and emotional anguish.

Karr continues to be able to detect her mother's unhappiness and forced submissiveness because of Grandma. Charlie, the longer Grandma stays with them, becomes more and more beaten down and forced into a restrictive and suffocating shell. Although Grandma has the ability to restrain Charlie and make her more predictable and less harmful to herself, Karr, and Lecia, Karr knows that this is not who her mother is and that she is unhappy. This knowledge torments Karr. She would rather her mother be crazy and unpredictable if it meant that she was happier: "Anyway, her whippings, when they did come, were almost a relief given the spooky alternative of her silence" (71). Karr does not mind getting the spankings because she knows that they are allowing Charlie to release "some kind of serious fury [that] must have been roiling around inside of her" (71). Karr even goes so far as to writhe around and struggle during the spankings just to prolong them for her mother's sake and even her own. Karr feels as though she has some kind of "weird power" (72) over her mother during these spankings, a power to keep her close as she "had a hold of me, at least" (72). These spankings become rituals and a mode of therapy for Karr. It is a bitter irony that in this way Karr could feel as though she is helping and protecting her mother, but in essence, it is not at all a protection of herself from her mother's volatility. Even though the spankings hurt Karr physically, they help and protect Charlie emotionally as they "at least brought some motion and force to the surface of the household....instead of just walking through the day quiet and fretting" (72) under Grandma's control. Karr is able to see now that Grandma's hold was so strong

over Charlie that she “bossed our mother’s soul” (73).

It seems that Grandma is all of the time trying to ripple the waters in Karr’s world and take away any feelings of safety. One tactic she employs is telling Karr about Charlie’s previous marriage and children. Hearing about these “lost kids” (80) hacked away at Karr’s feelings of importance to her mother. If those two children could lose their mother’s physical presence, so could Karr; this is a frightening realization for her: “And if they could be lost—two whole children; born of Mother’s body just like us—so might we be. To believe that she’d lost those kids was to believe that on any day our mother could vanish from our lives, back into the void she came from, that we could become another secret she kept” (80). What Karr will learn later and explain at the very end of her memoir is that Charlie did not want to “lose” those children.

One can see the reasons behind the bitterness, anger, and disgust Karr has for her Grandma. She promotes a feeling of distance between Karr and the mother she loves and wants so much to protect. Grandma Moore break Karr’s “symbiotic unity” with her mother. So because Karr now truly fears being separated physically from her mother, because now it is a real possibility in her mind, she “started to watch Mother even more closely” (80). Karr is in tune enough with her mother’s nature that she can sense the necessity of her being watched. While at Aunt Iris’s house during the hurricane episode, Karr states that her mother “looked spring-loaded on serious trouble” (94). Therefore, Karr resolves to constantly keep watch on her mother which “entangles” herself even more in her mother’s life. Shortly after, she tells us that Grandma has died and that

Charlie went by herself to the funeral; Karr worries that her mother is traveling alone with Grandma's dead body and that she "sometimes wants to beam [her]self back to the old Impala so Mother won't have to make that drive alone....Maybe I would roll down all the windows just to shoo the mean ghost of my grandmother out" (102-103).

As Charlie voluntarily leaves and removes herself both physically and mentally because of her own mother's death, Karr recognizes what she must do—separate herself from her mother. Chodorow confirms this necessity: "Turning from mother represents independence and individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world" (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 82). Her separation is the second stage of the quest for identity: she must perform that "radical surgery". These remembrances of her mother driving away voluntarily alone force the beginning of what Karr must realize in order to live her own life and have her own identity. She tells us: "Mother had left us at home because she was hurt. For her, being hurt meant drawing into herself....And that's where I have to leave her, alone on the dark highway with the cacti rearing up and falling back down as she passes" (103). Karr finally here begins to understand that she cannot always be there for her mother to protect her; Charlie Karr will not let her. Just like the cacti, Karr can rear up and be there in her mother's presence when she allows her to, but when Charlie is ready to leave, Karr must fall back down just like the cacti and let her go. She realizes that it is just that easy for her mother to leave her and go out into the world. This recognition of a world without her mother, another world other than the one they occupy together, helps to precipitate Karr's desire to separate and discover that other world for

herself. Karr goes on to say that “Something in me had died when Grandma had, and while I didn’t miss her one iota, I keenly felt the loss of my own trust in the world’s order” (106). This “something” is the belief that she can always protect and comfort her mother. Karr’s world is in “order” when she is near Charlie; she knows now that this physical presence will not and should not always be her reality.

Karr again recognizes her inability, no matter how hard she tries, to protect her mother when their family goes to the beach, and Charlie voluntarily leaves them again: “I studied Mother while she walked up the steps of the Breeze Inn in her black bathing suit....I knew with a cold certainty while I stood ankle-deep in that lukewarm water that she was climbing up there to get drunk” (109). Karr is again realizing that she cannot always be with her mother to watch over her. Charlie will not allow it.

In another instance at the beach, Charlie tells Karr and her sister that “the light breaking in the waves is caused by phosphorus” and that there are “microscopic sea animals that get excited by the turmoil of water and so give off light when waves break” (117). At the time, Mr. Karr is tending to Lecia, who has been poisoned in the leg by a man-of-war. What is telling about this seemingly unimportant and random event is that Karr takes even this magical story told by Charlie about sea animals and relates it to the relationship she still craves with her mother. Karr imagines poetically: “Mother and I are flying underwater like light green phantoms. It reminds me of the Matisse painting....we are like those huge women, fluid and pale, Mother and I” (117). Now that she is beginning to understand that she cannot always be in her mother’s presence in reality, she

creates visions of companionship with her out of reality, somewhere in another realm. Karr thinks of them together in another world, alone. This vision helps to cushion the blow of her newfound sense of separation.

Unfortunately, at times, these visions are not enough to keep her forging ahead towards a successful separation from Charlie. It is when her mother is in real danger, has a full-blown attack of “Nervous” and is taken away, that Karr regresses back to her need to protect. Before Charlie is taken, Karr again tries to protect and save her mother from this impending fate. She is unable to separate from her mother when she fears that Charlie is in serious danger of physically harming herself:

The big game for me once she'd started drinking was to gauge which way her mood was running that I might steer her away from the related type of trouble. Hiding her car keys would keep her off the roads and, ergo, out of a wreck, for instance. Or I'd tie up the phone by having a running chat with the busy signal, so she couldn't dial up any teachers or neighbors she was liable to badmouth. If I could thwart her first urges to call So-and-So or head down the highway to Yonder-a-Place, eventually she'd get onto something else or just give up and pass out. Lecia didn't have the stomach for watching her that close.... (127)

But Karr certainly does. She is her mother's guardian and stomachs it all: “I myself zeroed in on the lines of Mother's face and the timbre of her voice in hopes of divining the degree of Nervous she might get to” (128). Again, not only does Karr want a physical

closeness to her mother but an emotional one as well. She tries hard to read her mother in order to predict and protect the unpredictable and unprotectable.

However, Karr does take forward steps when she realizes that she must leave her mother to find herself. It is one stride for Karr to understand that she cannot control and protect her as she is beginning to do, but it is now quite another to see that she should not just sit around and wait for her mother to leave her; Karr should leave first. After another fight between Charlie and her husband, Karr states, “I squinted by eyes as hard as I could and wished to go and live some other where forever, with a brand new family like on *Leave it to Beaver*” (137). Karr now wishes to be away from her mother and describes her house as being more tense than ever during this time. She imagines herself now escaping by riding away on her toy horse as Charlie sets fire to their belongings (the traumatic experience with which she began her memoir): “I ride it with springs screeching and close my eyes and picture myself galloping across a wide prairie” (150).

This desire to escape is another major breakthrough for Karr; she seems to not only realize now that she needs to leave her mother to her own devices but wants to leave for her own well-being. Chodorow explains the process:

Differentiation happens *in relation to* the mother....It develops through experiences of the mother’s departure and return, and through frustration, which emphasizes the child’s separateness and the fact that it doesn’t control all its own experiences and gratifications....If it were not for these frustrations, these disruptions of the experience of primary oneness, total

holding, and gratification, the child would not need to begin to perceive the other, the 'outer world,' as separate, rather than as an extension of itself." (*Gender, Relation, and Difference* 6)

Karr knows that her life will not be her own if she does not separate herself from her explosive mother. It is next that Karr goes into detail about the fire that she spoke of briefly at the very beginning of her memoir. It is during this fire that Charlie deliberately starts that Karr is at her weakest and most vulnerable: "I don't know when all the fight drains out of me, but it does. You could lead me by the hand straight into that fire, and I doubt a squawk would come out. I can't protect anymore...." (152). Karr wants to control and position her mother in safety but just the opposite is the case: Charlie is controlling Karr and positioning her in danger. Now, Karr feels as though she is "in the grip of some big machine" (152) as she and her sister watch the fire burn. Just like the fire, Charlie is raging out of control making Karr feel extremely vulnerable and helpless: "So I know with calm how cut off we are from any help. No fire truck will arrive. None of the neighbors will phone Daddy or the sheriff....I feel them all releasing us into the deep drop of whatever is about to happen" (153). At this point in her memoir, Karr seems the most hopeless and could easily begin to despise her mother for the danger and torment she has put her and her sister through.

However, that is not Karr, not who she is. Although she knows now on some level that she cannot and should not protect her mother, she still retreats once again back to needing and even wanting to help her saying she "wouldn't leave Mother alone in this

state” (154), not even for her own safety and sanity because “the daughter is responsible for her mother, in that her leaving destroys the very ground of her mother’s being” (Flax 33). Karr returns to being much less concerned about her own self than her mother. Because Karr struggles with her desire and what she knows is best, she begins to lose herself, lose what identity she may have unearthed at this point. Karr says, “I myself harden into a person that I hardly notice” (157). After her mother is taken away, Karr immediately misses her presence when, ironically, she is much safer when Charlie is not there: “After they took Mother Away, I sank into a fierce lonesomeness for her that I couldn’t paddle out of into other things” (158). Even with the obvious danger surrounding Charlie, Karr still wants to be near her, to have that physical proximity with her mother. Instead of now feeling safe with her mother gone, she feels lonely. Karr even begins to try to be what she thinks will make her mother come home, as if all of this was her fault. She says that she tried to be “completely good in the eyes of all authorities,” thinking that this would “urge Mother back” (158). Since Charlie was not there, not in Karr’s presence, she could only think of “worrisome scenarios about her” (159). Bad, that was all she could imagine for her mother without being with her to save her. Not only was their separation bad for Charlie but also for Karr herself. Without her mother there to occupy her time and energy, she “sank back into [her] lonesomeness for Mother” (162). Karr is still so lost in her mother’s identity because she has not yet “developed through learning that the mother is a separate being with separate interests and activities” (Chodorow, *Gender, Relation, and Difference* 7).

Her father finally agrees to take Karr and her sister to the hospital to visit their mother for the first time: “Mother put her hand on the chicken wire. It was very white, and I put my hand to match up with it, careful that I touched as much of hers as I could” (171). Again, Karr focuses on that need, that overwhelming desire to be physically as close to her mother as possible. This close proximity is what allows Karr to comfort and keep safe her mother. Being near Charlie means that she is able to be there to protect her as much as possible.

But again, as before, Karr picks herself back up and continues on her quest to do what she knows she must do in order to be free. She knows she does not like those less desirable characteristics in her mother, so “I finally told Daddy I didn’t want Mother to come home if she was gonna go crazy all over again” (171). So when she steps back a moment, pulls back from the drama of it all, she knows that they are all better off without Charlie Karr if she cannot control her own destructive nature.

After the year 1961 in Texas, Karr fast forwards her memoir to 1963, the year her family unexpectedly moves to Colorado. Here, Karr finds something that calms her, horseback riding. She describes it as “a fetal rhythm...the kind that sneaks under your heartbeat and makes your brainwaves go all slack and your eyelids seam themselves together” (191). Her horse, Big Enough, is just that. He is “big enough” to lull her away from reality to a place that sounds like a description of her mother’s womb, a place where she feels that most intimate connection with her mother, where she feels “unconsciously one” with Charlie. Karr revels in the rhythm of the horse as she feels her mother slipping

away from her again. She says, “She wasn’t really there...The enormous screwdriver had taken her Away, which was its purpose” (192). Karr sees here that a physical presence is not much good without an emotional one as well. Knowing now that she is in the process of severing herself from her mother, Karr sees that there are other ways to occupy her time, like taking up horseback riding, other than continuing to struggle to keep her mother safe.

But when she and Lecia are forced to decide whom they will live with, they, of course, choose their mother exemplifying that tension between separation and sacrifice: “If we left Mother, she’d get in capital-T Trouble. But Daddy would just go back to work at the Gulf, so we’d always know where he was” (193). Even though she knows she would be better off with her father, she again sacrifices herself for her mother’s safety. Karr could not live with herself, could not be allowed to continue her journey towards selfhood if something terrible happened to her mother after she left. So although she has made great strides in separating herself, she must still at times put her journey on hold. Charlie is the wild card; Karr knows that her mother’s leaving “was a constant, unspoken threat” (193) as opposed to her father; she would always know where to find him.

When Charlie moves them to yet another Colorado town, Karr takes a great leap in successfully cutting herself off from her mother when she begins to excel in school and prove to herself just how capable she really is. She is able to now understand what it feels like to be proud of something she has done for herself, not for her mother. She “felt that old surge of pride” (219) and realizes that she can feel accomplished by taking care of her

own being, not her mother's. Now that she sees what can come from accomplishing meaningful tasks that add positively to her own life and identity, she again begins to see the reality about her mother. Karr remembers looking over at Charlie one day while visiting her principal and says that she "couldn't bear to look at Mother. She'd become the picture of somebody nuts" (223). Karr is finally admitting that her mother is a person whom she cannot save, but she can save herself and be different.

Now that Karr sees that she has the smarts, the real ability to do something with her life that could be productive and worthwhile, she begins the final leg of her journey to finding her identity, becoming a self. The last big step Karr must make is to overcome the guilt she feels for separating herself, both physically and emotionally, from her mother leading to Karr recognizing her own innate abilities that could lead to a happy and successful life. Physically pulling away from her mother for the first time, she then immediately feels those pangs of guilt: "I distinctly recall ducking my head out from under her hand. (Something about the small betrayal of moving away from her still gives me a stab of guilt)" (224). Karr sees herself physically rejecting her mother finally but still not feeling positive that she should. But Karr knows that she does not want to become her mother. She knows now that she has the potential to be so much more, just as her mother has that potential but does not live up to it. Karr sees her mother regretting not having the career she could have had as an artist. She does not want to live that same life of regret.

The incident that finally makes Karr fear her mother and care more about her own

safety than her mother's occurs as Charlie almost shoots her latest boyfriend, Hector. It is after this close call that Karr "half-wondered whether Mother might shoot [them] while [they] slept" (257). Shortly after the incident is averted, Lecia and Karr call their father. He asks Karr if she is ready to go back home to which Karr quickly responds, "I'd been ready" (257). After this decision to break away, to finally leave her mother to her own devices, Karr can remember very little about their interaction in the days before she and Lecia left. She had emotionally detached from Charlie even before the physical detachment occurred. This is another major breakthrough for Karr in distancing herself from her mother and taking care of herself: "Any talk with Mother after Lecia's call was siphoned clean from my head. Mother herself was clipped from my memory...nor does even a ghost of her Shalimar hang in the car that ferried us to the airport" (258). Karr makes a clean break from her mother, a break which gives her confidence that she herself will be all right and that the physical separation is what is important now. As Flax states, "She must betray her mother if she is to exert her own autonomy" (33). Karr's life finally is worth owning and living for herself, not for her mother. As Karr looks out of the airplane window on her way back to Texas, she thinks: "Maybe there was hope for me yet, even from the vantage point of being a kid....This hope lacked detail. From it came neither idea nor impetus. I only felt there was something important I had to do, held by the clear light of that unlikely, low-slung moon" (260). Karr is ready, she realizes, to let her mother go so that she may nurture her own self. However, this does not mean that Karr is willing to write her mother off completely, not at all. She still wants her old

mother to come back, the one that she does not fear, the one she does not want to pull away from. Even in the car ride home from the airport, she thinks: “I wanted my very own mother” (263).

The third and final portion of Karr’s memoir begins 17 years later in 1980 in Texas. She tells us that her mother now is “walloped” (276) with depression. Charlie has stopped drinking but is now “drugged to the gills on Valium and related pharmaceuticals” (276) which keeps her lying in bed most of the time. At this point, Karr has left her home; she left when she was only 17. She says her mother’s main problem now stems from her father’s stroke. Because of this, Charlie now “saw no good reason to get up and put on clothes” (276). Charlie would threaten suicide again by saying on the phone to Karr: “I swear to God I’m going to blow my brains out” (276), so Karr would stay on the phone with her mother “from an old fear” (276), a fear that her mother would actually kill herself just as she threatened. Even hundreds of miles away in Boston, Karr still does what she can to protect her mother from herself. Karr even describes the physical connection she still longs for, again using the image of the mother’s womb: “that phone line was the only umbilical cord that joined me to Mother” (276). Karr continues to liken herself to a fetus in the womb of her mother showing that even though, at the age of 25, she has made great strides in detaching herself from her mother and living her own life, she is not yet trusting enough herself to live a separate life because of the guilt she has for leaving. Some of those same childhood desires still burn inside of her.

However, Karr has continued to develop her own identity separate from her

mother. While at college, she begins to read about the philosophy of art and discovers that she “loved the idea that looking at a painting or listening to a concerto could make you somehow ‘transcend’ the day-in, day-out bullshit that grinds you down; how in one instant of pure attention you could draw something inside that made you forever larger” (279). Like Charlie, art moves her and, for Karr, is an avenue for self-discovery. Art seems to give her the confidence in herself to explore and nurture her thoughts and feelings. These feelings serve as a weapon against the guilt.

But Karr quickly admits that much of the comfort she desires is the feeling of “going home” (280); as she “had no conscious idea of what was tugging [her] south” (280), she concludes that it is the “physical comforts” (280) she finds there, and the physical comfort she pinpoints is not being with her mother but with her father at the Liars’ Club: “Something about the Legion clarified who I was, made me solid inside, like when you twist the binocular lens to the perfect depth and the figure you’re looking at gets definite” (280). For so long she has focused on the relationship with her mother, casting aside the one with her father and even taking it for granted. Now, she is realizing that it is her father who has been an important factor in her life and that she is a part of him, too. She concludes these thoughts with: “Maybe I just like holding a place in such a male realm” (280). For her entire life she has mired herself in her mother’s world and now realizes that this is not where she has to stay; she does fit in somewhere else, somewhere very different. There is another world she can occupy.

However, it is her mother’s realm, her life, her past that is still a mystery to Karr

and that so intrigues her as a memoirist. All of her adult life, she has wondered about her mother, what is inside of her, what is in her past that made her the woman she has become. After her father becomes even more ill and suffers a severe stroke, Karr, visiting home, wanders up to the attic in search of something; this search would lead her finally to “truth’s door” (311), the truth that would ultimately free her of guilt. Karr finds wedding rings that belonged to her mother. Charlie tries to hold back the truth about her past, but Karr persists, and Charlie finally gives in. She tells Karr about her first husband and the two children she lost to him. Charlie had other marriages afterwards but finally settled down with Karr’s father, thinking that “Your daddy would have taken them, finally. Your daddy was the only one...” (317). But the children did not want to come and live with her. After this talk, Karr finally understands her mother and can let go of the guilt:

“Then it was like a big black hole just swallowed me up. Or like the hole was inside me, and had been swallowing me up all those years without my even noticing. I just collapsed into it...I imploded. I imploded.”

Those were my mother’s demons, then, two small children, whom she longed for and felt ashamed for having lost.

And the night she’d stood in our bedroom door with a knife? She’d drunk herself to the bottom of that despair. “All the time I’d wasted, marrying fellows. And still I lost those kids. And you and Lecia couldn’t change that. And I’d wound up just as miserable as I started at fifteen.”

Killing us had come to seem merciful...

As to why she hadn't told us all this before—about the marriages and the lost children—her exact sentence stays lodged in my head, for it's one of the more pathetic sentences a sixty-year-old woman can be caught uttering: "I thought you wouldn't like me anymore." (318)

Charlie finally confides in her daughter, explaining why she is the woman she is. Karr comes to realize that Charlie's "demons" are monsters that no one else can slay, not even a daughter. They come from a time before she was even born, a time over which she had no control. Karr, in writing her memoir, sees what a day of absolution this was for her and her mother; they "should have glowed, for what Mother told absolved us both....All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we cobbled together out of fear....It's only looking back that I believe the clear light of truth should have filled us" (320). But she does glow through the writing of this memoir and the understandings she gains from the process.

Karr ends her exploration by again evoking an image that brings her comfort and peace, the image of the mother's womb. She uses the image here to describe what is her own rebirth: "to slip from the body's tight container and into some luminous womb, gliding there without effort till the distant shapes grow brighter and more familiar, till all your beloveds hover before you, their lit arms held out in welcome" (320). Through letting go of the guilt, realizing it is not necessary to feel guilty, Karr is reborn into a new self, *herself*. This is a self that no longer has to wonder and worry about her mother. She

can now revel in newfound realizations and look to her mother not out of fear but out of love, compassion, and acceptance. In understanding her mother's demons, Karr has fought her own and won. Because Karr now understands Charlie's selfhood, Karr gains her own: "one can recognize another's subjectivity and humanity as one recognizes one's own, seeing the *commonality* of both as active subjects" (Chodorow, *Gender, Relation, and Difference* 8). Karr transcends the need to protect her mother and the feelings of guilt after her separation from her mother and is reborn into a different woman, a woman who has finally gained her own identity.

Chapter 2

Patricia Foster begins her memoir *all the lost girls*, published in 2000, with the same questions that Karr ultimately answers for herself: “I ask myself how a tiny patch of soil can hold such longing, and why the longing is so violent, like a terrible sore just beneath my skin” (preface). In beginning with this statement, Foster’s memoir starts very differently from Karr’s in that Foster actively and consciously asks these questions. She knows that they are the ones that must be answered. It is not until much later in Karr’s memoir that she shows herself consciously realizing the importance of understanding why she needs to keep returning to her mother.

These two different ways of framing the novel illuminate who is victimized; for Karr, she makes herself the victim by first retelling the events of the frightening fire set by her mother. Karr, who has her memoir culminate in an understanding of her mother after hearing her tell of her first husband and two lost children. Therefore, it is not until the end of the story that we understand and sympathize with Charlie, making the reader work through the difficulty of understanding the mother and empathize with Karr.

Foster, on the other hand, establishes her mother as the victim by immediately telling the story of her being raped as a child by her own brother and her mother not listening, not wanting to hear it. Having Mrs. Foster be the victim allows us to sympathize with her. After Foster retells her mother’s painful story, she acknowledges that “What she’s told me changes everything I know about her” (3). All of the preconceived notions she has had about her mother are now dissolved; Foster now

understands who she is and why she is. Again, giving this information up front adds to our sympathy for and understanding of the mother from the very beginning but in a very different way, the mother's victimization also allows the reader to feel sympathy for the daughter as well: "A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman....The mother's self hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter" (Rich 243). So using this tactic of victimizing the mother in turn victimizes Foster and allows us to sympathize with her as daughter.

After writing the first several pages about her mother and her mother's story, Foster stops her train of thought and states that "it wasn't my mother I intended to write about. It was me. Me who wanted to leave and never come back. Me who wanted to BE somebody" (5). She realizes that in trying to think about herself and focus on her own desires, she immediately reverts to thinking of her mother, just as Karr does. She begins to wonder "if children ever recover from failing at what they most want to do" (6). She feels as though she has failed her mother, failed to protect that primary love object in her life. Foster boldly says that her memoir comes from her need to "remake" herself and "to leave behind the miserable past" (6). Foster goes on to admit that "For a long time I felt so attached to my family I couldn't see where they left off and where I began, as if there were hidden strings holding us together. And this is a story about that too. About the long, hard struggle for autonomy" (6). Karr has the same feelings and reasons for writing; both women want separateness and their own identities, need

affirmation that they are different objects; they both desire absolution from the ties that bind them to their mothers so that they may feel free to weave their own lives and their own stories separate from their mothers.

Both became so connected to their mothers because of a need to protect them but to protect them from different forces. Karr needs to protect her mother from herself; Foster, however, needs to protect her mother from the world, from any externals that may harm her, including her own husband. Harm here in these terms does not mean physically, as was the case with Charlie Karr, but mentally and emotionally. Foster believes she can protect her mother through successfully becoming the daughter her mother hopes for: “Who am I? I’ve been asking all my life. And how did my ambition become so intertwined with my mother’s?” (6). Foster takes on not only a responsibility for her mother but what her mother wants for her. So in this way also, we can see that these two mothers are very different. Foster’s mother nurtured her and dreamed of a life for her while Charlie Karr was always much more selfish, rarely nurturing and often dreaming of what her own life should be, not her children’s.

Patricia Foster illustrates her intense connection with her mother: “we cling to one another as if each is an anchor for the other in the pitching sea...we stand, the two of us united before the dark night air” (49). Foster then speaks of the two of them as one as she uses the pronoun “we”: “we’ve both been awakened”; “we don’t see anything”; “we open the door”; “we never add a protecting screen” (49-50). It is as though Foster sees her and her mother as “unconsciously one,” in that state of “symbiotic unity.”

One of the first examples of Foster's need to protect her mother comes as she remembers one time out of many when there was a knock at the door, someone looking for a doctor. But she says what is important about this memory and all of the others like it is this: "I don't remember any more...only that I'm carried by my mother...Perhaps I make her feel more secure..." (50). Like Karr, the inherent desire to protect her mother emerges in the desire to always be near her. Karr needs to protect her mother in a physical way from her own volatile and erratic behavior; Foster needs to protect her mother from any emotional wounds, the emotional wound of her father not letting her mother be who she really is. Foster even goes so far as to say: "In my mind, I became the replacement for my father..." (50). Foster needs to keep her mother from feeling alone and unloved and not good enough. She says that in her imagination, "I was the owner of my mother's body, the one caressed, the one who had first place in her bed, mirroring her dreams, her anxieties, feeling the tension in her body..." (51). She cares for and nurtures her mother, and Foster sees the relationship as a reciprocal one: "Growing beside her, I'm like a root absorbing nutrients from her soil" (51). The "nutrients" she is absorbing, however, are those of a "southern lady's plight" (55). Foster knows that her mother had to choose between nurturing herself and nurturing her family, and she chose the latter. So, Foster would help her, be there to soothe her and make life better for her in any way possible. She would live for her mother, let her mother live a life through her in order to protect her mother, not herself.

The southern ideal has overtaken Mrs. Foster; she is "self-conscious about her

looks, the word 'pretty' hovering just beyond her reach" (85). Foster remembers that her mother always said that her "teeth aren't right" and that she does not "have a nice smile" (85). Because she feels as though people, especially her father, are constantly judging her, she becomes overly critical of herself. Foster thinks that even "Her pictures looked forced, self-conscious..." (85), as she is constantly forcing herself to be that picture of perfection Diane Roberts discusses. Foster feels at one with her mother in this way as opposed to Karr and her mother. Karr always feels that she has little in common with her mother, that there was little bonding them together except for family and Karr's own obsessive desire to save her. Foster now sees that she is hiding her real self just as her mother was forced to. Foster feels that each of them "carries another person inside" (86).

Unfortunately, Mrs. Foster, much to her dismay, does not always live up to the picture of perfection that the South and her husband have placed upon her, so Foster must protect her mother from her feelings of failure. Foster states earlier that her father has always wanted her mother "to be beautiful. To be a different kind of woman" (85). But when Mrs. Foster breaks, becomes human and lets her real self emerge, her image crumbles. When Mrs. Foster tries to get a check cashed to have a key made, the clerk tells her that he thought the new doctor's wife was blonde. This tears Mrs. Foster apart; she fears that her husband has found that "different kind of woman." Because of this fear, she "bursts into tears. Everything that's beautiful in her face became squashed, balled up, her lips quivering over her imperfect teeth" (89). Foster says that the clerk has "released that other woman in my mother's mind" (89). Mrs. Foster now thinks she has confirmation

that she has failed in pleasing her husband, in fulfilling her role as his beautiful, southern wife. Foster's need to protect her mother again kicks in: "I stay close to my mother, aware that she's the one I want to watch" (89). Foster sees that her mother, ironically, is now more beautiful than ever as she reaches inside herself to find that real self and so "seems unconcerned with meeting the world, with becoming a hostess, but caught inside herself like a honeybee attentive to a flower, sucking up its sweetness" (90). Foster wishes her mother could see the true beauty that she sees. To protect her, Foster must make her feel good enough and must make her see this beauty.

At times, however, Foster can see her mother trying to fight back, trying to fight for her life as she insists on continuing to teach "rather than playing bridge and going to lunches as many of the middle class wives in town prefer" (99). Foster knows that her mother is "far too complex for the constraints of a traditional southern lady in a small southern town" (99). Foster knows this about herself as well.

In this way, Mrs. Karr is much like Mrs. Foster. She, too, wants to escape and longs for a life outside of the traditional southern mold. The difference is, of course, that Charlie Karr acts boldly and irrationally on her impulses where Mrs. Foster rebels in much more subtle and accepted ways, as she "struggles to keep everything afloat" (100). Foster also sees that even though her mother quietly and subtly rebels, she "is quieter" now as she imagines "where the Golden One has gone" (100). So, like Karr, Foster begins to realize the obsession she has for looking out for her mother; she recognizes that she is becoming "too absorbed with the microcosm" (102) of herself and her mother. This

obsession stems from fear, a fear that she is separating somehow from her mother as she grows older, and because of this fear: “secretly I yearn for closeness, surrounding my mother like Jello, congealing to her form” (102). This desire for physical proximity mirrors that of Mary Karr, that same need to be literally close to their mothers in order to protect them.

Foster does not yet struggle with wanting to separate from her mother; she only struggles now to keep her mother’s attention. Foster thinks: “Now I must win Mother’s approval not by affection but by acts of performance, soaring like a banner in the air” (103). These feelings begin to make Foster push herself harder to gain the approval and affection and acknowledgement from her mother because if her mother is happy, then she is successfully protected.

As Mrs. Foster keeps herself busier both to do something to get closer to her real self and to block out reality, her activity only increases Foster’s fear of being distant from her mother. Foster feels as though her mother has “escaped, leaving me in a whirlwind of loneliness, and I must find a way to get back to her” (104). But Foster’s fears, in actuality, are more unfounded than she realizes because Mrs. Foster will focus her remaining attention on her daughters; she does not want them to grow up and have no talent, have nowhere to turn but to a man; she wants them “well-rounded and smart, to have a leg-up in the world” (108). So she drives them to neighboring towns for ballet and piano lessons. Charlie Karr never thought so much about how her children were going to better themselves. But Mrs. Foster was pushing Foster and her sister so much that their

mother's ambition becomes theirs. Chodorow discusses the danger in this:

the mother does not recognize or denies the existence of the daughter as a separate person, and the daughter herself then comes not to recognize, or to have difficulty recognizing, herself as a separate person. She experiences herself, rather, as a continuation or extension of her mother in particular, and later of the world in general." (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 103)

Foster decides to become her "mother's fantasy" (Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* 103) and uses her newfound ambition to her benefit. She decides she will be triumphant in whatever talent her mother pushes her in, and as she is successful making her mother proud, she will achieve her goal—to "see my mother coming closer to me until she's trapped like a spider in my web" (111). While Foster imagines her physical closeness to her mother in more of a manipulative way, Karr's image is more peaceful, that of being in her mother's womb. Because Karr is not seeking her mother's approval, she is not afraid her mother will lose interest in her; Karr has never been her mother's major concern. Foster, however, feels she must fight to keep her mother's attention because she is so used to having it; she is her mother's priority. For Foster, becoming that "well-rounded" and "smart" daughter will protect her mother from her own unfulfilling life.

But just as Foster is being overcome by her mother's ambition and becoming what Mrs. Foster wants her to be, she is also being exposed to a new world, a world that

seems much freer. This different experience with her piano teacher Mama Dot precipitates Foster's next step towards finding her own identity, the desire for separation from her mother. Driving home with Mama Dot and her twelve other students from a summer recital, Foster senses "that this odd crew of kids, artist kids with stringy hair and crooked teeth, will be the only world I'll ever need to know" (114). She sees a new world, a world where these girls are able to be themselves, not who someone else thinks they should be. But she quickly realizes that this world is in conflict with the world her mother is trying to prepare her for. This natural world of sleeping outdoors and wearing old, raggedy, dirty clothes is exactly the world Mrs. Foster has tried to get away from because that is how she grew up, so Mrs. Foster associates this "natural" world with her terrible secret. However, Foster is content here; sleeping outdoors, she feels "dazed and happy, needing nothing but the smell of the sea" (114). She realizes here that there is something much more fulfilling than a superficial and material beauty that she is used to in her mother's world; this something is a "Beauty in the mind" (115).

With this realization, "I sigh with pleasure and relief and fall effortlessly to sleep" (115). Foster now sees a new kind of beauty very different from the typical southern beauty her mother strove for. Foster knows that the idealized southern beauty does not bring her mother peace because it is a cover, a façade. A "beauty in the mind" means most importantly to Foster that there is the "pleasure of solitude" (115), a pleasure in being at peace with one's self. Foster waxes poetic all of a sudden about the freedom she feels "in the woods" (116); she proclaims that she is "like a leaf changing color,

something no one will ever know because it's all happening on the inside" (116). Mama Dot and Fairhope are the epitomes of her newfound feelings; therefore, it is now Mama Dot that she longs to be near, even more than her mother: "I long to be under the sway of her overflowing personality" (117). Foster now begins the struggle, the same struggle that Karr endured, of wanting to be separate from her mother, of needing to perform that "radical surgery".

Unfortunately, Foster quickly reverts back to her mother, as Karr does several times, and ends the first part of her memoir by asking herself the most important question now as she tries to deal with her new discovery: "This is my world, the place I love...but how can this be when it's the very world my mother avoids?" (118). Foster is sure that she wants a different life than what her mother wants for her. Her life now is restrained and proper, and she wants freedom, a more "natural" life. So this is her dilemma at the end of this first stage of her writing. She knows she cannot protect her mother in this new world. This new world to Foster is old to her mother. To her mother, she now knows, it is characterized by fear and intrusion.

Even though Foster knows that her true self lies in that "natural" world, she also still thinks that she needs to stay with her mother. Foster knows that she and her sister are "her [mother's] work, her future" and that they "must never disappoint her but fill the gap of experience and perfection which has somehow eluded her" (133). This is how Foster will protect her mother—by giving her what she so desires. But with this huge responsibility comes another fear—a fear that her life will not be "the least bit

miraculous, but ordinary, as commonplace as a penny” (133). And because she is so deeply connected to her mother and her mother’s ambition, she sees herself as physically connected to her as well: “I’m the third leg of an equilateral triangle” (134-135). Her mother and sister are the other two.

However, Foster shows herself forging ahead as the memoir develops as she continues to think of being only by herself, giving attention to herself, doing something for herself, being in the “Big Pond,” in a world “without boundaries or constraints” (163). Foster knows that her mother wants great things for her, but “I can’t help thinking that all my wishing and hoping to be smart is distracting me from something I need, something that’s much closer, right next to my bones” (168). So again, Foster is divided, just as Karr was some of the time, over her mother’s needs versus her own. But the more Foster tries to fit her mother’s mold to keep her happy and safe, the more she escapes in her mind and imagines herself as “no longer a girl going to music lessons, but a creature crawling out of water into air, pure and bright and whole” (171). Her desire to be free in the woods and to live a different life is in extreme contrast to the world of superficial beauty that her mother wants so badly for her.

Like Karr, Foster is pulled back to her mother, especially when she sees her hurting. Mrs. Foster and her husband were out one night, after which she comes to Foster’s room where she and her sister are sleeping. She tells them pitifully that Mr. Foster did not dance with her all night, only with other, more beautiful women. Foster, reverting back in order to be a successful protector, must make her mother feel better at

once. So she and her sister listen to her intently; they are “her audience, her sympathizers, her soothsayers, her confidantes” (174). Flax describes how this need for Foster to be her mother’s friend is another hindrance to finding selfhood: “Daughters serve as confidants, friends, and even lovers in a way that is often confusing and inappropriate to the daughter’s ability (and mother’s as well) to separate” (37). Foster immediately begins to assure her mother of her own beauty: “‘I bet you were the prettiest one there,’ I say, leaning towards her, smelling her white shoulders and Germaine Monteil beneath a thin layer of cigarette smoke” (174-175). Still longing to protect her, she must touch her as well, must feel her and smell her. This description of their relationship sounds much like Mary Karr’s description and memory of her mother. Like Karr, Foster distinctly remembers her mother’s scent, the smell of her body and the cigarette smoke that surrounds it, illustrating vividly their still deep and “symbiotic” connection.

In conscious defiance of that desire to protect that hinders Foster’s ability to successfully separate from her mother, she immediately speaks a dagger that must have ripped right through Mrs. Foster’s heart. She suddenly, with no forethought at all, tells her that she will no longer go to her piano lessons. Foster describes her heart-breaking statement as “some rebellion [that] bursts inside me” (175). Her “rebellion,” as she sees from a later perspective, was her decision to fail, to fail purposefully at what her mother wanted her to do so that she may then be free to separate, to do what and be who she wants, to be free to “roar” (187) like the ocean. The struggle growing stronger and more difficult each day within Foster is exemplified here. Just as she had protected her mother,

she immediately pulls away from her, harming her, in order to facilitate her separation illustrating, like Karr, that tension between sacrifice and separation.

Foster decides that she must figure out some way to please her mother and make her proud while doing the same for herself so that the tension can be relieved. Piano and dance lessons are not the answer. She does decide that landing a spot on the cheerleading squad would be the answer. Foster, however, does not make the squad and now not only lets down her mother but herself as well: “I begin to cry, huddling into myself, wanting more than anything to give her the fleshy excitement of my win” (193). To protect her mother is to please her and through her success, make her mother feel valuable. But even with the blow, Foster picks herself up to forge ahead for her mother’s sake; she says that she will continue to act “the silent, ambitious daughter, the girl who always does what she’s supposed to do” but adds quickly “while deep down another part of me will be watching, waiting for the moment when I can slip out into the world” (197). She must continue to try to comfort her mother but at the same time refuse to let go of her desire to separate, to be different.

Finally, soon after her fruitless efforts at cheerleading, Foster is chosen to be in the Key Club Sweetheart Court, and as Jean tells their mother the good news, Foster tells us: “I feel her energy pulled towards me, lured into the dark maze of my fragile life” (198). Mrs. Foster tells her daughter that she is proud of her, and Foster says: “suddenly I’m me again, the ghost self shattering like splintered glass” (199). Foster reverts back to feeling her “self” when she pleases her mother, thinking that this other part of her, the

part that wants to live for herself, is just a figment, an apparition. She is not yet strong enough in her sense of self to think that she can be real.

Finally, Foster has a real breakthrough, one that will allow her to move to that final stage of finding her true self: overcoming the guilt she feels from separating from, no longer protecting, her mother. She begins taking a writing class and realizes she has a talent. After several assignments, her professor praises her; she says about his eyes, “I can feel them pulling me in closer and closer to his vision” (212). So like Karr, realizing that she is capable of living a life on her own, that she can be successfully dependent on herself, is what allows Foster to move forward and be her own person. To move closer to her professor’s vision for her would mean to move away from her mother and her vision for Foster. His guidance for her is to “listen to yourself” (212). But to do that “I’d have to leave my home, my family, striding out into the world, waving a pink slip in my hand” (212). Foster knows she must leave her mother’s presence to find her own identity and nurture it unencumbered by her mother’s hand.

A few months later, Foster makes her way to college, Vanderbilt University. Because she is “determined as always to succeed” (214), she decides to rush a sorority. Because her ambitions and desires are still wrapped up in her mother’s, she thinks how disappointed her mother will be if she does not get in: “It’s not just me, but my parents’ efforts that are at stake” (218). This life she is building is not still just for herself, even when she is miles and miles away from Mrs. Foster.

She is not accepted into the sorority, and just after this rejection and failure, there

comes another major breakthrough in Foster's coming to terms with herself and the guilt of her separation. Instead of going to the cafeteria for dinner, Foster decides to go to the basement where the vending machines are located so that she will not have to face anyone. Just as she traverses the basement's "maze of tunnels" (220), she traverses her own deep, internal tunnels and reaches down to the depths of her own being. In dealing with the guilt she feels, she cries and falls to the floor:

I feel all the sadness drain away from me as if the girl I'm expected to become is dying right before my eyes. I'm witnessing her diminishment, her removal from my life, not with grief but with the quiet acceptance of her passing. She's dead and I'm alive. It's as simple as that. It occurs to me as if in a dream that I might let this person sitting on the concrete floor have her way. It's such a novel idea. I've been waiting to become myself all my life. And here I'm coming face to face with my limitations and not rejecting them. I feel oddly peaceful as if the mirror of my thoughts is showing not just relief but a direction of hope. Perhaps I seem to be failing again and again because I've been choosing the wrong goals. Maybe the girl I keep hoping to become—that popular, self-assured young woman—is a mirage dreamed out of archaic books, ones that no longer fit the realities of my world. (221)

As she breaks down and becomes honest with herself, she quickly must tell someone else, must release to another human being her true feelings about herself. As she goes to her

hall counselor and admits to her that she has “never been this sad before” (222), she feels as if “something solid inside me is disassembling, coming apart” (223). That “something solid” is what she literally feels is her mother’s being and presence within her. Foster begins to understand that it is “alright to be sad. It’s a revelation, like a puzzle piece that’s been missing for years” (223). No longer does she believe, as her mother does, that one must always keep up an appearance of contentment, a mask that all is always well. With this newfound knowledge that she trusts, Foster feels now “a sudden rush of happiness” (223). She understands that one does not always have to keep up the pretense of being happy or content, that it feels good to cry and let out emotion at times. In contrast, what Karr ultimately comes to realize is that it is okay to be happy and content in life; she does not always have to be afraid. However, Foster still fears “the pain of disappointing your parents” (246). Like Karr, she continues to struggle with the guilt of wanting her own independence.

Foster begins the third and final part of her memoir with a flash forward to the year 1997. She is spending a week at home with her mother in Foley. Foster tells us that by this point in her life, she has been divorced, had a breakdown, and has begun to test her writing abilities. In trying to uphold the expected strength of the Southern mother, Mrs. Foster tells her: “I’ll never break down....I won’t allow that” (249). Foster then imagines the two of them “standing before the many rivers and bays of Baldwin County” and says she feels “a familiar lightness, a happiness that knows no bounds” (249). The world of nature is pleasing to Foster as she realized when she was younger with Mama

Dot. She wishes here that her mother could join her in this natural world and feel the freedom that is inherent there because if her mother were to join her, she would not have to feel guilty about leaving her. Foster then says to her mother: “You’ll be all right, Mother” (249). She opens her eyes and speaks again: “And so will I” (249). Even in 1997, Foster is obviously still concerned about her mother and her happiness, but the distinct difference now is that she is also concerned about her own self and her own happiness; she is equal to her mother and just as important. She knows that: “I’ll have to kill a part of myself so that another part can live. But which part? Which part needs to die? It’s this question that obsesses me, confounds me, this act of surgery I must perform on myself” (265). She is realizing that she cannot continue to torture herself in this manner, by wanting to be herself but feeling guilty about that desire.

This transformation is so difficult for Foster because her image is still very much engrained in her mother’s. Even when she sits in silence trying to think of herself, to remember something in her childhood, she can only think of her mother. What she remembers is a story her mother told her once about a red dress she made for herself. She imagines how her mother must have felt in that dress, wearing it to the only place she had to wear it, church: “As she walks up the aisle, she imagines entering a larger world, having the confidence to stand straight and tall. She’s never known what it’s like not to be ashamed” (268). Her mother hears women behind her saying that the dress is ugly; Mrs. Foster herself then begins to see all of the flaws in the dress. A regression to protection again kicks in: “As I imagine my mother’s embarrassment, a dark fury surges

inside me. I want to protect her from ever feeling such shame again” (269). Just when she tries to look inward to save and protect herself, she ends up needing to protect and save her mother as well because she still feels an overwhelming amount of guilt for wanting to separate from her mother. Foster’s desire to have herself saved is sandwiched by her desire to save her mother as well.

Her next thought is another milestone on her way to identity, as Foster asks herself: “Have I been living a life based on my mother’s humiliation, trying to overcome and redeem us both?” (270). Yes, this is exactly what she has been doing, and she is finally piecing together the reality of her life. She has always thought that “sacrifice alone” (270) could save and protect her mother from sadness and humiliation. Foster elaborates on her realization: “My ambition is not even my own. I’m still merged with the ugliness of Praco, the skimpy red dress” (270). Foster then begins to wonder what she will live for if she does not live for her mother. She has no idea how to really live a life for herself; the prospect frightens her so much so that she can “barely hear the little voice that says, ‘Yourself’” (270). Foster feels as though her life is too small, too meaningless to live for on its own; there must be something more, “something bigger” (270). Her life is filled with guilt, not the joy or love or contentment that she longs for.

But “exhausted” (270), Foster ultimately knows that what her inner voice is whispering to her is true: “You have to let go” (270). However, Foster thinks she still is not strong enough to break away: “I’m not ready to breathe my own oxygen, to tear the slats of my crib. No, I’m still a bald-headed baby waiting for the next transfusion. My

mother once saved me and now I must save her, at least the part of me that is her. Or do I?" (270). Foster is experiencing such guilt from separating from her mother because she feels as though she owes her life to her mother for saving her life when she was a baby. Her mother went to great lengths to get the doctors to believe her when she said something was not right with her baby daughter; therefore, Foster now must go to great lengths as well to pay her back for that, make her efforts worthwhile. But Foster knows that the only way to live her own life is to just leave, just "walk out the door" (271); however, she does not have the confidence in herself to do it: "I see the girl afraid to splash through puddles, the girl who longs to keep her mother safe so that mother will eventually save her. This past is a second skin. Now I have to step out of it, cut it away as if freeing myself from the lining of a dress. But how can I do that when I'm ugly, when everything that's held me up has been lost?" (271).

Foster does get out, though, does just walk out of the door and bravely attempts to leave the guilt behind and forge her own existence. In describing "the self," Foster says that there is "some unflinching part of [it that] survives, wounded but hungry to define itself again and again and again. That's the part that got me out the door" (272). She moves to Atlanta and Birmingham ending up out West in Los Angeles. She describes herself at this point as "not saved, but like Lazarus, I've risen from my bed. I've chosen a direction" (272). She believes that way out there "in exile" she can "create herself" (274). She attends UCLA taking art classes and immersing herself in her studies. It is here, far away from her mother and the guilt, that Foster begins to transform:

Something is happening to me in Los Angeles, something I can't quite make sense of, something I've never felt before, or at least, haven't felt with such intensity. It's a sense of goodness, an inner radiance soaring through my body, moving from my toes up through my legs, my stomach, my chest, my throat, and spilling out of my pores. In certain moments I'm lighter than air. I can move in any direction, see any sight, think any thought and it will be the right one. When it happens, I'm often alone, walking towards the ocean, sending the sand spraying out from my feet, or just getting out of the shower, water still dripping from my body. I believe the goodness has come to me as a gift, and in these moments it wipes out all the badness I've believed to be there, all that wretched self-abasement, that insistent loneliness that makes me rush out of my apartment just so I won't have to be by myself. (278-279)

As before, nature, in this case the ocean, helps to bring about these feelings of exuberance and natural joy. Also, in being free to explore her art, she now feels a sense of freedom in exploring herself: "Art seems to me a world of promise where what has been lost can be reclaimed, the past no longer a noose, but a treasure chest of images and ideas. Or perhaps I've finally learned—as Father McCown suggested—to be still and listen" (281). The goodness that Foster now feels protects her and helps to override the guilt.

In the next year, another epiphany comes to Foster with the help of a therapist: "finally I admit I'm fighting something in me, the way I seek approval, the way I want to

be loved” (291), and consequently “I haven’t made myself independent at all, I’ve merely shifted the terrain” (293). She boldly decides that she has to “fight back” and “do battle” (294). To do this, she must strip herself of the guilt, of her mother and her mother’s ambitions, desires, and expectations for her. This means that she will also in this process “have to give up their protection” (295) as well. This understanding leads to more realizations about the mistakes she made in the way she thought about her life:

All my life I’ve seen myself as lost and broken, and though none of us ever spoke of this directly, it’s always been there, a secret truth hiding in the dark. But now I feel a deepening in my self, something understood: I’ve evaded responsibility because I didn’t believe my life could exist. Instead, I piggybacked my mother’s past, my soul wrapped up in that hard, flinty place with its seething rage, its shaming fear. And I did this for the oldest of reasons: the fear of being invisible, ignored. Not the child who marches in her underpants the three blocks downtown to have a coke float, but the child who pleads, ‘Mother, will you help me?’” (296)

Foster finally realizes and admits to herself that she has been living her life for and through her mother. She felt so much guilt because she never believed before that her life was worth living simply on its own merit; there must have been some other reason she is on this earth and worthy of a life.

Immediately, Foster is taken back to what is the defining memory of her past, the memory that will allow her to once and for all free herself of the chains that have fettered

her and to end her insecurity. She remembers the day of her 13th birthday, how as she is getting ready for her celebration, she begins to imagine everyone gathered around the dining room table that night where someone praises her father for being the one from whom his children must have gotten “their smarts” (301-301). She quickly imagines how upset her mother would be, how terrible she would feel about herself yet again. Foster rants that if anyone would just notice her mother and give her the credit she deserved “they’d stop all their rattling fury and see she was the Golden One after all” (301).

From this memory comes Foster’s final and ultimate discovery, the discovery that will rid her finally of the guilt, that will change her life or rather allow her life: “And for the first time I don’t want to save my mother. I want to save me” (301). It is now that Foster knows “which part of me has to die” (302). She must let go of the guilt she feels; she will no longer feel indebted to her mother for saving her life as a baby. Foster will not let herself any longer feel obligated to repay her. The logic no longer stands that because her mother saved her life, she must save her mother’s. This is a freeing sensation for Foster as she remembers herself again at her birthday party, walking into her room feeling as though finally she has awakened “from a long, confusing dream” (302). Foster is free now to nurture herself, her own life.

In Foster’s epilogue, she thinks of her mother and begins to assess her realistically seeing that there is more to her than she has a self and subjectivity of her own: “more and more I see that beneath this deference is a tough, resilient core” (305). Her mother has been and will be fine; she can protect herself and fight for herself and does not need her

daughter to do it for her. She remembers her mother opening up to her and telling her that she feels “like such a failure” and that she “just can’t stand it anymore” (306). Foster says once again her initial reaction is to comfort her mother, tell her to stop crying and that she is going to be all right. But instead, she can now say to her, “‘Cry. Keep crying’” (307). Foster knows that what she can do is be there for her mother, support her but not be responsible for her salvation. She says that her mother asks her to write a story called “I Love You, Mama, So Please Don’t Cry” (307). Foster knows what the story must be about; it must be about her mother, “a story of courage, of saving herself” (307). Foster now understands her mother and sees her mother as a separate self. Recognizing her mother’s subjectivity finally allows Foster to free herself, as Chodorow explains:

The ability to perceive the other as a self, finally, requires an emotional shift and a form of emotional growth. The adult self not only experiences the other as distinct and separate. It also does not experience the other solely in terms of its own needs for gratification and its own desires. This interpretation implies that true differentiation, true separateness, cannot be simply a perception and experience of self-other, of presence-absence. It must precisely involve two selves, two presences, two subjects...Such recognition permits appreciation and perception of many aspects of the other person, of her or his existence apart from the child’s/the self’s.”

(Gender, Relation, and Difference 7)

With this understanding, Foster completely lets go and saves herself. Like Karr, Foster

has successfully recognized her obsessive need to protect her mother, learned that she must separate herself, and ultimately worked through and let go of the guilt she felt for wanting to leave and be her own person. She is no longer a “lost” girl searching for her identity; she is found.

Conclusion

All of these women, daughters and mothers, were living lives of falsehood. Mrs. Karr's freed self is a woman rid of emotional constraints, of the knowledge that she failed as a mother to her first two children. Mrs. Foster's true self is a woman not hindered by her husband's expectations for her to be the "Mrs. Cleaver" wife and mother. Both Mary Karr and Patricia Foster found their identities to be daughters free to live their own lives, free of having to save their mothers. But none of these four women, outside of these memoirs and the absolution inherent in them, could have been their real selves because as Foster now puts it, to actually be that real person "would be to eradicate our very selves" (86).

And there is the rub—none of these women could be their true selves at the time because the consequences were too great. Others' lives around them would have been destroyed because too much depended on Foster being the smart, successful southern daughter, Mrs. Foster being the epitome of patience and southern gentility, and Karr being the loyal and brave daughter. Mrs. Karr, however, is a slight exception to this theory, because it is not others around her that forced her into a false life but she herself. She continued to blame herself for her children being ripped from her. So Mrs. Karr was her own worst enemy, not anyone else. She would not allow herself to live a life free of guilt. Instead, she came dangerously close to losing her last two children, Mary and Lecia, on purpose, on many different occasions. Charlie Karr continued to mire herself and the children she had in a life of danger and destruction as a form of self-punishment.

So while Karr, Foster, and Mrs. Foster understandably lived lives they felt at the time were forced upon them by others, Charlie Karr served as her own warden in a prison she had herself created.

Because of this state Charlie had put herself in, Karr felt as though her mother literally could not survive without her because of her volatile and dangerous nature. But in finally learning about Charlie Karr's past and understanding her, Mary Karr realizes that she is trying to control the uncontrollable. What Karr can control is herself, her own existence, and Karr sees now that Charlie has the strength to do that. Foster felt as though it was more of an emotional life that she was trying to protect in her mother. She also felt indebted to her mother, and to pay her back, she would give her life. Ultimately however, like Karr, Foster is able to see the inherent strength in her mother. She is also able to realize finally that her life is worth living solely for herself:

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children's book, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim: and then to go on from there." (Rich 246)

By the end of the memoirs, this is what all of the women have done: "refused to be victim"s any longer. For all of their lives, Karr and Foster had displaced their desires to nurture and protect a self onto their mothers. But through writing memoirs, they take

those desires back at the end of their journeys because their mothers will be all right: “The writing of adult daughters seeks to repair the relationship by creating a linguistic space for mutual recognition to transpire, a place where everybody is found and nobody is lost” (Juhasz 180).

Both Mary Karr and Patricia Foster come to understand that they are not rejecting their mothers by nurturing their own identities. Karr in no way wanted to live the erratic life that Charlie had lived. Foster in no way wanted to live the subservient life of the southern belle that her mother had lived. Ironically, these two lifestyles seem to be extremes. Karr wants a more consistent, rational life; Foster wants a more spontaneous, irrational life. Perhaps now they have both found a balance because of what they have learned about their mothers and themselves. “One cannot achieve self-identity without the active presence of another person. But to know where ‘I’ leave off and the other begins—to relate to the other as both subject and object, to be both subject and object, to be both subject and object to another—is the hardest, even as it is the most important, thing there is” (Juhasz 162). Both Karr and Foster have succeeded in this difficult task and can now fully appreciate and enjoy the lives ahead of them instead of dwelling on the lives behind them.

These women can do this because they no longer misunderstand their mothers nor themselves. The experience of the “self concerns who ‘I am’ and not simply that ‘I am’” (Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* 78). Because they have understood their mothers and themselves through writing these memoirs, Karr and Foster no longer have

to “live with an illusion” (Friday 3) as to what their relationships were with them.

Because these relationships and selves are now fully understood, both can move forward and live their lives separate from their mothers. The memoir has become a reconciliation, the fourth and final step that both Karr and Foster have taken successfully.

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