Cluck Cluck

by Carol Novack

CLUCK CLUCK

Being my mini-memoir for readings at which everyone but my two friends is younger than 32.
(*for Raymond Federman*)

On the road

She's pushing 50 plus, don't ask. No more Southern Comfort orgies, existential funhouse trips, Kundalini embraces in grottos, poetry benders, and slightly protected sex, she's busy trying to be the heroine of the story, a third person.

But I wasn't sold on third person, so I asked you, Mickey, *should I speak in the first person, tell the story as if I had lived it?* You'd just finished an MFA program in creative writing. You knew everything. The glass over your displayed stamped degree was fresh. Already, you were teaching Oates and Boyle wannabes about arcs and resolutions. I asked you, *novel or something vaguely biographical?* You said: *Write a memoir. Put your life in the first person. Make it up if you can't remember it make it shocking or pathetic but don't tell anyone and above all, make people laugh hard and weep easily. Look in the display windows at Barnes and Nobles. It's all about memoir, displays of courage amidst adversity. It's about people overcoming, surviving all sorts of shit. I know you can do it*, you said, *I know an agent*. You were licking your lips when you said that. You and your 20 and 30 something MFA friends were drinking Michelob. You're still drinking. I see you in the audience, little bro. I should learn from you, selling your first novel to Random House.

She was pulling more than 50 years after her. Distillization, even on a modest scale, seemed daunting. Heaps of shit to recount and re-invent. *Yes it's overwhelming*, I said to you, *but one must try, I understand, I am told*. Your wan, bulimic girlfriend with the belly

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button ring was in the kitchen fixing something like Vegan tofutti with soy cheese; her skin was blinking like strobe lights. Must've been glitter. My skin is dry with furrows like clay from the Paleolithic Age. I was trying a new skin cream from Aveda at the time, I think. Now it's "facial sculpting" cream by some company owned by a dermatologist in New York. Your girlfriend Zappa drinks bottled water, 12 Evians per day. She'll never run dry until the mother of all tsunamis comes along to get all of us who are still alive. The Greenland icebergs are sagging, falling flat into the ocean up there, like dead breasts. Time to leave coastal areas.

So as I was saying to all of you dear young things, she the older woman was somewhere I forget. Already I've misplaced her, losing my memory and hers in tandem. At least, I should give her a name. I was considerate enough to give you and your girlfriend names. How about Melanoma? Okay okay, I'm kidding, nothing to joke about, stop jumping up and down and screaming. You've been trying to make me see this or that ever since you could formulate sentences. You with the cherub cheeks, Kirk Douglas dent in your chin, from the maternal grandfather, always wearing your hair so short nobody like me would ever want to run her fingers through it. Good idea. Keep me at a distance.

This is getting complicated psychologically and I only have so much time, she thought. I can't possibly go everywhere in one story. I'll look for somewhere to start. Which reminds me of a chicken.

Why did the chicken refuse to cross the road? Take those i-pods off, please please, birdbrains. Focus your eyes and take something to clear your sinuses. The traffic is belching like a behemoth with botulism, choking on fumes from a caravan of SUV's, slouching toward Orlando and Miami, palm trees and parking lots under a navel orange smiley face. Would you cross a road under these circumstances? Look at the drivers with their cellular pacifiers. They are everywhere but here, you know. The solipsists would run you down and scamper off with their lawyers. *Mommy,*

mommy ---- I want to see Poopoo the Penguin! Didn't you cry when Mickey Mouse died? Oh, you didn't know?

So Melanoma okay Melody sat on the curb of a road that winds like a tapeworm from west to east or east to west, depending on who's telling the story. So maybe she's in Missouri, where I've never been. I need to consult my friend Alla in St. Louis. Hang on. Okay, I can dance the Google too! Seems the road starts down there somewhere, but it's hard to follow and I can't get in touch with Alla who's in Orlando with the boys I just recalled.

Melody was bereft, tuneless. *Bereft of what? And what's her song?* you ask. Too many facocta questions for nothing, no reason. Why questions? *Knock it off*, I say, I've always been bereft of my senses, according to many. *Stop being hyperbolic*, you said dramatically. I think it's a love song by that Hebrew hater Wagner…. Liebe strom-unt-drung something whatever. Au secours! Courage, mes enfants! *Awesome! Wunderbar! Chocolat!* She also likes that Nancy Sinatra song about walking boots.

So where was I? On the curb, the stingy, gritty curb of existence, hard on the ass, as usual on the rim of it all, the ledge of success, well to tell the truth far from the ledge but about to fall off, floating on the circumference of meaning, riding a cycle around my self, skirting it in my pink pantaloons with white satin ribbons. *Huh? pantaloons? Where did you get them?* You asked. You said: *too many images confuse me and when you add abstractions, you totally lose it, you know you lose us. You're like a planet in another solar system called Chaos. You don't follow the rules and you're much too self-indulgent to get anywhere*, you said. You were emulating the minimalists, as you'd been taught to do. You accused me of swimming unconsciously in streams of consciousness, told me I'm passé with an accent. May a tsunami weep over you, I didn't say, being somewhat mature. I realized you were upset with me. You usually never simile! But I digress of necessity, as necessity invents digression and digression is the mother of invention.

There were very essential pantaloons in my past, in Melanoma's history, they suddenly bloom large enough to see

hanging on a clothesline in the backyard of a vine-choked stone house in Funafuti, the capitol of the isles of Tuvalu, in which I'll dwell circa 2019, pantaloons hanging as symbols of the teenage girl's coming of age in the early 60's, past the hoola hoop stage, at one of those times (during the last century) when girls who'd teetered over the edge of puberty twittered about wedding nights, wondering what they'd wear to bed and oh wow, what would *he* feel like, Before i-pods and all that techno stuff kids think they can't live without. Do girls still do that? Melody wondered, particularly girls with pins in their tongues and tattoos of stars on their breasts?

So pantaloons are important in my mini-memoir I think, Melanoma insisted. The heat was loud that Sunday. Flat, hopeful voices singing dour hymns wafted futilely across the landscape of corn and wheat. No, not both, you boob. Choose. And don't use all of those adjectives and adverbs! Okay, corn, though this wasn't Iowa. It was (as understood) uncomfortable on the curb and the donkey was panting. Yes, the donkey, she always shows up (footnote: *e.g.,* see Novack's "A WITHOUT Q WITH/OUT SELF"), the ass drops by. She had an ass, always did, came by it naturally, naturally. It was drooping from the burdens of years of sitting on itself. Asses don't last. You will learn. Okay, you and Raymond Federman mistrust metaphors. I can't help it they drop by without even ringing bells. Should I call the cops?

Melody lusted suddenly for King Kong the supermarket of all supermarkets. Henry had insisted she acquire a cell phone so she could consult him while she shopped. *Okay, Henry,* she would say into the phone. *I'm by the carrots. Do you want any? No? Oh please, not okra. You know I loathe okra! . . . . So now I'm by the fish and there are some elegant yet tragic baby octopuses, fresh from Santorini, glistening with Greek salt shine, even.* And Henry would reply with incredulity: *What the fuck, are you kidding? Yuck!*

I was nearing a coma from the heat. I'd left the Bombay gin behind, of necessity, having fled with startling alacrity. The cops. They would find all of us under the beds with our leaflets. I'd had it with Henry anyway. Had IT, if you know what I mean or even if you

don't, this is gritty realism. This memoir is authentic and exciting, full of tragedies. But talking about failed relationships is boring, at my age, at least. Being 20 something, maybe you think I can teach you something. Forget it. You couldn't take my life, take it and make something of it, like a lesson in perseverance. You wouldn't know what to do with it. It's much too messy, you'd say. Knowing you, you'd reduce it drastically, deleting the most succulent bits, like those references to crème brulee, fatty pastrami, pistachio nuts, and long boned loin lamb chops. Now Melody forgets even what Henry looked like though he was everything to her, the sun, the moon, the stars, the big screen television and especially the waterbed, particularly when it leaked, threatening instant death by electric shock. Once they flowed together, bounced in harmony to the beat of some band or other. He was meaningful.

Sitting on the curb with my fat ass. We were both thirsty and there was no grass left. So you want I should suddenly have a realization that will change my life or something dramatic should happen. Well it did. A big white SUV with LALA plates rear-ends my ass and takes off, tires squealing, gas fuming. Dang dang, no fuckin transportation now. *That's silly*, you say*. But where was Melody going?*

Melody was seeking her next song, the one after Henry, who was always the same chords, the same beat outside the bedrooms. She was delirious from the sun, a mass of discordant notes and hair, aimless. Nobody ever listened to her. She would often say: You're not LISTENING. And she would frequently get no response, frequently because she'd forgotten to open her mouth to utter her questions. *I want to make a difference*, I would often say. And you would ask suspiciously, *a difference in what? To what? How different?* Jeez, you gave me headaches, always did, as if you were listening, which you weren't. You were always too busy. Always. Hang on. That's someone else's American father I'm remembering.

But that's no matter. I see this guy up the road, let's say a latish 40'ish dish full of sinews, trying to hitch a ride. Nobody picks up hikers you should know, no longer, after Ted Bundy. Nobody

refers to a guy as a dish. This guy is waving four signs at the passing vehicles. One of them says: IS ANYONE GOING TO TENNESSEE? Another states: FORMER LINGUISTICS PROFESSOR NEEDS RIDE TO TALLAHASSEE. The third sign reads: ANYWHERE WILL DO. And the fourth sign asks: HOW ABOUT SASKATEWAN?

On this road, everyone's going east. The former professor imagines that he has a choice. Melody finds that endearing.

You will go anywhere, anywhere but here. Understood. I know that. In that, we are alike. Melody will go anywhere. She wants to overcome everything by walking away, riding donkeys, getting ON with her life, getting unstuck from the same rhythms and notes.

So why a former linguistics professor? You ask.

He'd had enough of the language of uttered and written words. He wanted to carve mountains out of molehills, I reply. *That's the answer, I can't help it*, I add, walking into the closet.

In the truck

I make miracles. The professor and I are finding ourselves in a truck going west. The sun is mellowing and we're drinking tequila and we're so friggin happy we're not going to Florida. *It's all about love you know*, mother said forgetting all the shit all about love and songs, *All you need is love,* so it's inevitable he and I are in the truck together, sitting so close in the front seat our thighs are touching, I can feel his warmth and that old familiar ache and ripple in my nether regions. That's where she's at that woman, 19 years old in a long hippy dress, remembering her mother in one of mother's irrational wistful moods. Here's Melody with crazy red-headed jazzman Don riding in a banged up VW all the way to New York City from Rochester, New York, Don being nothing but a brilliant sloppy trippy boozer without his piano, drinking Southern Comfort and popping LSD all the way. It's a wonder she survived. In her last

year of college she's persistently overcoming an urge to drop out and off the ledge. So in love with older what's his name who never calls. Lived in The Village and looked like Trevor Howard, that guy. I was overcome and his name was David. I think he's still in Alaska. Ah.

Where were we? Oh now, Don, he's real, overcame booze and runs an auto repair shop somewhere in the southwest, I know where, but I'm not telling. He was always good with cars he didn't wreck.

I digress.

You want to know what happens next and before next. You want some deaths, rapes and divorces. Okay, so you were wild during your college years, to be expected. *Get on with it*, you urge. You want to know what happens with the linguistics professor and what he has to do with overcoming adversities and also adversaries when Melody was a lawyer championing underdogs usually shit poor and fucked up on drugs, other times on art. But this is a mere soupcon of a life in progression and regression I am offering you, take it or leave it. You forget, you young things. Don and Henry and David and that professor are all parts of it. Two of them are real perhaps. Melody gets them mixed up now, fatally ill after a suicide attempt.

What? Wait just a minute! you say. *You're jumping the gun, aren't you? And this doesn't sound like a memoir. I don't believe any of this*, you say, starting to walk away. *You're having me on, mocking me. I'm off to Barnes & Noble.*

Then I will narrate my mini-memoir without you. See if I care! My memory moves selectively without me, offering images of pain and pleasure, no more no less. You can put them together and make a quilt. That's not my job. I will pick out what interests me, on a fluke, on the lamb, what occurs to me as I think about Melody's life. There is Melody with Don, Melody with Henry, Melody with David and Melody with the former linguistics professor. At one point there is Melody with Jeffrey and at another, Melody with Norman,

but I'm not getting into Norman in particular, no never. Nobody ever did and he disappeared in Cairo years ago anyway.

I already told you about the pantaloons. Melody is a self-deluding woman who's imagined loving many men. If she were a man, perhaps she'd describe cars she has loved. Unconditionally. Don't ask me. Once in a while, she thinks of her Buffet clarinet and the sounds the Atlantic Ocean makes when nobody's listening. Also the old people on the boardwalk. Did I mention she grew up within kissing distance of the ocean and played a clarinet? Is that important?

Okay, okay, teach us something about love, you ask. *Please continue*.

Melody is in the truck with the professor and they're having a terrific time of it; she's never met such a man, vibrant, wise, warm, melancholy and whimsical. And then he gets out, at some exit I forget which, somewhere in Oklahoma I think. That's the most I can remember about the affair. Oh, wait a sec: once the driver got out to pee and the professor bit me on my right tit. Well of course, that was the one closest to him, you boobs!

You're not happy. *Oh come on,* you say. *You made that up. You keep leaving us stranded, without a story --- there's nothing satisfying about any of this!*

I apologize. Sometimes life has a way of running out of steam. Sometimes you think big things like proms and graduations and earth-shattering insights are happening and then when you're not looking the big things evaporate. Even to remember them would take effort. Sometimes we remember things like finding bees in our pockets. Okay. I admit that I remember that, I *own* it, as the social workers would say. I own that a bee stung me when I put my hand in my pocket, sacrificing its life to teach me a lesson in morality. The bee flew into my pocket to punish me for being mean to a poor girl named Gail I think, though I can't be sure and I don't remember what she looked like. No, you're right. Her name wasn't Gail. That was someone else I knew at another time.

And did you overcome your guilt? You ask.

Melody says *never*. *Every time I'm mean to someone, a bee flies into my heart and stings it. When I die under mysterious circumstances, the coroner will find a mass of dead bees where my heart should've been.*

Sometimes there's simply a story that moves cyclically from progression to digression to regression to progression to digression and so on, stopping along the way to eat grass. It could start with a question about a chicken and you could put an ass in it, but people would expect the ass to push the story forward. Every detail must push the story forward to its denouement and there is no story without a denouement. That's what they say. *Asses pull. They don't push,* you insist, audibly annoyed.

Melody's ass has always done things ass backwards, I respond. *That's educational!*

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<u>In the kitchen</u>

Why are we now in a kitchen? You ask. You want to know what happened to the chicken. That's why. You complain about the unfinished and underdone story of the chicken, but don't you realize that one comes across so many chickens during the course of one's life? For all you know that chicken is the one in the pot with the carrots and celery and dill and onions and of course garlic. *Don't be ridiculous,* you say. *The chicken in the pot can't be the same chicken that refused to cross the road. That was in another place at another time,* you say with certainty. *There you go being positive,* I respond.

Raymond Federman thinks that chicken on the curb of the road should've met its demise at the wheels of an SUV trying to get to the other side. That would be logical because chickens are notorious birdbrains, but I didn't have the heart to push the chicken into the road. How would you like to see a living creature mangled? You think I should contribute to road kill, even in a story, even worse in a mini-memoir? Should I sacrifice a chicken to an SUV as a

political statement? Should I reduce a chicken to a metaphor? That was one smart chicken, a rare chicken who knew that the other side of the road held no promises. You want displays of courage in memoirs, so I gave you one: a chicken that acted out of character. Melody won't quibble. She stopped paying attention to the chicken when she noticed the former linguistics professor. Between the chicken and the professor, the focal point was the ass.

Melody won't talk about her father's death. She can't do it and she can't overcome it. But I digress. As if I were progressing. Where were we?

Focus, kiddies. Turn off those technological attachments. We are all in the kitchen and you want to know what happened to Melody after we left the professor somewhere in Oklahoma, maybe. *We?* You ask. You pout. Well okay, to be precise, I left him somewhere or he left me somewhere. He was a fragment of story, no more, no less. Sorry to be blunt, but some people are Buddhists, so they'll understand it's silly to hang onto either a man or a chicken. I've passed Oklahoma, if that was where he went off on his own. Melody ended up in this kitchen at some point. From Oklahoma to the kitchen or the kitchen to Oklahoma or maybe Missouri to New York and back to Saskatewan and then to the kitchen, no matter. The smells of the chicken cooking overcome such concerns. *Cut the chicken,* you say.

You persist. *We want to know how Melody continued without the linguistics professor, what affects his departure had on her, whether he left a wound that hasn't healed, whether she lost hope forever, after that did she meet another man or found a school for women without linguistic professors?*

Every man that leaves a woman leaves a vacancy in her life, I answered. And it is the same for men when women leave them. So he left a vacancy of which I was unaware, a vacancy another man couldn't possibly fill. The same goes for close relatives. We are so full of vacancies, all of us. Know that. It's important. *Are you crying yet? Am I moving you yet, you silly putty? You want to know about my father's death? Forget it.*

Melody is in the kitchen feeling vacant, chewing on tender chicken bones, and persistently overcoming adversity whether she knows it or not. She thinks that a long time ago many of her ancestors in Ukrainian villages were murdered by Cossacks. She thinks how lucky she is that she wasn't in Germany during the Nazi years or in Russia when Jews in villages were routinely murdered. So she thinks there's little to overcome when you haven't been victimized severely by historical circumstances (including hurricanes and tsunamis), mistreated horrifically as a child or stricken by severe diseases.

Melody thinks that sometimes one must overcome adversity by refusing to do what people expect you to do. So when doctors say you have an incurable disease but you'll live for six more months if you die quietly in a hospice and eat porridge, kale, and bananas, you say no way, go on a trip to Madagascar, and eat fried meat with fried rice and hot peppers. Instead of marrying a suave, handsome linguistics professor (no, not necessarily *that* one) who makes you swoon in bed, you marry his gauche, impecunious cousin because he's brilliant and makes you laugh and then you divorce him because he's neurotic as hell and really hates his mother whom he never overcame so he's passive-aggressive and does all sorts of things to pain you.

Melody's former best friend Francine says one must overcome adversity by finding a feminist therapist and learning how to kill one's father and all those abusive men who resembled him and one can only do this by writing one's memoirs and getting them published by Random House. On the other hand, Annette says she overcame early childhood and adolescent abuse by entering an ashram in India with a guru originally from the Bronx, who was great at oral sex. Marc says that Annette must've been reading Updike's "S."

So okay, I'm at the end of my mini-memoir. You are tired of Melody because she has set no example. There are so many words I can waste on a life that holds no vision of a best seller type of overcoming, a life that merely climbs, reclines, and declines in

turns, stumbles on and on, like that ass. We all end up in a kitchen, more or less, because obviously we all have to eat and really those of us who have kitchens are very lucky, so keep sucking on those Michelob nipples and pass the Sweet-and-Low.

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