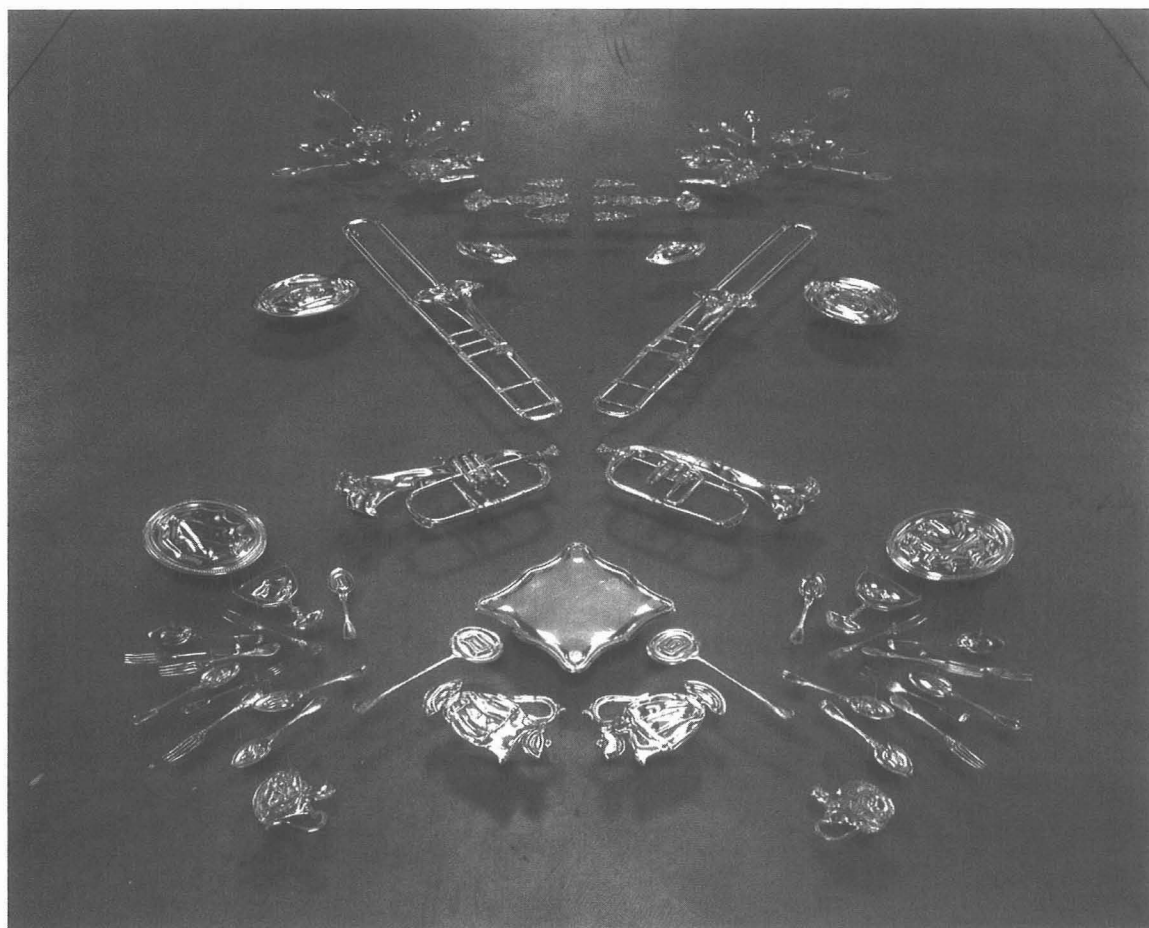


Floating Trial

ADAM GILDERS



When Ellen saw her sister Nonny stumble and fall as they walked from the boat-house to the beach she thought, this is how it has always been with me, stumbling and falling. She consoled her sister in the usual manner, sympathizing and offering comparisons. I too have stumbled and fallen, she whispered. I have had my share of injuries. My fair share. Nonny did not respond. “Nonny,” Ellen said, “Do you hear me Nonny?”

An ambulance arrived at the boat-house. Nonny gazed at the paramedics in their implausible blue jumpers. “Nonny, listen Nonny, we’re going to lift you now; first your right side, then your left side.” They lifted her into the ambulance, avoiding her eyes. “Did Ellen phone you, Ellen, was that you?” One paramedic sat in the back with Nonny, the other up front with Ellen. The rear paramedic, an abundantly bearded young man, watched Nonny suspiciously. His beard twitched mechanically, indicating some other twitch, beneath the beard surface. Her arms strapped to her side, Nonny fixed her eyes on the beard.

The hospital presented a new context. Herding their ghoulish assistants, medical experts smiled assuringly as they opened and closed the patient’s door. Later, the assistants returned unaccompanied. Two corpulent assistants raised Nonny from the bed while a third covered her with long strips of wet gauze. A fourth assistant stood in the far corner of the room and watched. The new assistant? The supervisor?

The medical experts gathered to present their report. Nonny’s future mobility was in doubt. For years I have walked from the boat-house to the beach and from the beach to the boat-house, she reflected. What had gone wrong?

As her sister’s condition worsened, Ellen increased her visits to the hospital. Immobilized by her enormous cast, Nonny waited for Ellen. “Why do fools fall in love?” she asked. “I’d like to know,” Ellen said.

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Nonny explained to Ellen that the cast which encased her body was meant to deceive them, that the doctors were prolonging her stay. “Beneath this cast I move freely,” she stated, defying medical opinion. “Phantom movement,” the doctors announced, “not physical.” “Phantom!” Nonny scoffed. Why are they trying to deceive me?

Sometimes the sisters joked with one another. “It could be you here,” Nonny said. Producing her knowing smile, Ellen said, “It could be you here.” In a postcard to the hospital Ellen reflected on the fickleness of fortune. Think of the dreadful falls I have taken, the dreadful tumbles! Fickle fortune, fickle, fickle! she wrote. The postcard displayed an autumn scene: a man and a woman, lost in thought, seated beneath a tree at sunset. Have you learned anything from this? Nonny wrote back, employing the nurse as scrivener. The postcard displayed a series of before and after scenes chronicling the renovation of the hospital lobby.

Ellen prepared roast beef, her sister's favourite dish, and brought it to the hospital wrapped in aluminum. "That's not my favorite dish," Nonny said. Is this the same old Nonny? Ellen wondered. My Nonny? "There is always my love for you," Ellen said. "They can't take that away from me." "They won't need to," Nonny offered; prophetic Nonny, opaque Nonny.

Concerning the roast, Ellen asked herself: is it my memory or is it my sister that is mistaken? Thus began the breach, separating sister from sister: private questions, private answers. The way you look at me, the way we used to look.

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Ellen embarked on a program of self-improvement. She enrolled in a night course menacingly titled "Probability." She delved into her past, returning to the start, the starting post, building a solid foundation. A glance at the starting gate: taking stock, taking possession. She wanted to find what the course instructor, a balding Portuguese man with pointy grey shoes, described as a first principle. One night she stayed after class. He explained to her that from a single elementary principle all other principles could be reconstructed. He also said you can understand why people turn to religion, why they call out at night, when no one can hear them, Give me something to believe in.

"Mother and Father first met in a supermarket," Ellen said. "Father approached and asked 'Have we met before?' yet both knew that this was their first meeting. Our mother was not averse to the deception. The little deception."

The instructor's grey shoes slide gracefully down fire escapes, glimmering in the moonlight. His smooth head and his shiny grey shoes are blinding, everything else is invisible, a sea of blackness. The light passes briefly over his head as he calls out to Ellen: "I feel your love." He says nothing of his own love, which troubles Ellen. Does the instructor think also of me? she wondered. Has he noticed me? She tried to picture his feet.

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Nonny felt that she had become bogged down with the details, that she had forgotten the big picture, the general idea. When she imagined the victims of drowning she saw her own failure to keep afloat: arms thrashing aimlessly in the darkening waters. Which are the important details? What is the basis for comparison? I have lost contact with the essential. At other times, buoyant and purposeful, she yearned to be released from her cast. "This is not life-affirming," she told the doctor.

In her dark no less than her light moments Nonny emphasized the importance of courage. "When asked what holds me up," Nonny confided, "I always say 'courage.' My old prop courage, props me up every time. Gets me out of bed, holds me up."

Ellen received a second postcard which read “Have you learned anything from this?” and wondered why her sister would repeat herself. For emphasis? Inadvertently? Considerations such as these distracted Ellen from the nub of the matter, from the question as such. She did not ask herself what she had learned, she asked: why two?

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Among the phrases that troubled Nonny, if only by their versatility, was the phrase *you turn me on*. New phrases, relevant to the new context, did not ring in Nonny’s ears. This phrase rang in her ears, finding new intonations, new voices: you turn me on. Many phrases outlive their usefulness, Nonny noted: take it or leave it, leave it to me, asking for it, watching my weight, taking it off.

Hoping to lift her sister’s spirits, Ellen stayed overnight at the hospital. When the breakfast tray arrived and the sisters were again alone, Ellen yelled: “Oh! Take me away from here!” Raising her eyes from the tray, Nonny said that she could not, under the circumstances, take her anywhere. “I know,” Ellen admitted. “I was pretending to be you.”

Sometimes Ellen offered advice. “You must believe in yourself before others can believe in you,” she said. This is not going to end well, Nonny thought. A no-win situation, a real binder.

At dusk the sisters watched from the window as the couples, some married, some unmarried, crossed from the restaurant to the park, headed towards the gazebo. “Do you know what holds them together?” Ellen asked. “What?” asked Nonny. “Probability,” Ellen stated, “the slender thread of probability.”

Nonny struggled to separate the vital from the incidental details. The details splintered, forging new grounds for comparison, none of them favorable. Floating trial: trial by water. “Do you know what is infuriating?” Nonny asked her sister. “It is infuriating to take off weight only to put it on again. It is infuriating to state ‘you turn me on’ and receive only blank stares. To be met, again and again, with the blank stare, the familiar puzzlement.”

For a moment Ellen’s resentment toward her sister, decades of silent sedimentation clouding the clear waters of their love, vanished. It evaporated before her eyes, disclosing a new, luminous Nonny. “Your beauty is incomparable,” Ellen declared. Nonny surveyed her cast. Its aspect had changed, unannounced, unaccountably. It did not say “chrysalis,” as it once had. It said “mummy”: mummy.