

“CONTEMPLATIONS ON CALICO”
AN EXCERPT FROM THE MEMOIR
LISTENING TO VOICES

Mary Grabar

“Yes, this is the way we used to do it. I remember my grandmother and mother. We were not afraid of work. *Everyone* worked together. Not lazy like these *Amerikanci*, here.”

She says “lazy” in English, drawing it out in a spit, making the sound convey the sin it is, Idleness, a contemptible character sprawled out, strewing Chips Ahoy crumbs on her green and gold velvet-flecked couch. It is a sin, one to be punished by eternal hell, the hell after death that in your imagination is filled with fire. But then there is also the hell here on earth where there is no order, where all unhappiness arises out of laziness, the laziness around her, that torments her, of others who sit and relax—American housewives who sip coffee, watching their children play—while she works and suffers, cleaning their houses, sewing seams against the factory clock.

She is next to you, at the other utility basin of the sink in the basement, where you can smell your father’s shaving cream. She is closer than she has been in years, since grammar school. Your arms almost touch. The last time you were this close was maybe when she showed you how to wash the lettuce from the garden. You were in the yard and the leaf lettuce covered with dirt was rinsed and re-rinsed in the plastic bucket at the outside spigot (substituting for the pump in the old country). This was dirt you had dug up with a shovel at your father’s side, turned in with manure and rotted leaves, one neat row behind the other as you worked your way backward, not caring if the sister your mother called *nora opica* (crazy monkey) in motherly exasperation to her skinned-knee hijinks was off in the distance sending her shouts of “come find me if you can” as a derisive jeer to the diligence, hard work, and perfection your parents hold up before others as witness to your legitimacy. Your digging was in perfect lines, and your father expressed his approval:

—Yes, this is the way we did it in the old country. This is the way it should be done. These Americans don't know the first thing about gardening. They can't make wine. Everything bought in a store.

He spits.

During the summer you hoed out the weeds and when the lettuce was ready she showed you how to cut it off at the base. You filled the basin up with water (do not put the lettuce under the running water: you will damage the leaves and waste water) and carefully lifted the lettuce through it, shaking it gently until there was no more dirt at the bottom.

Now you plunge the clothes into the detergent water and slam them against the scrub board. You hold in your wrinkled hands the 100% cotton yellow and red calico dress you had sewn yourself on her peddle sewing machine. You have already gone through her dresses, the ones you sewed her, in size 20, the ones that had won the approval of her and her friends and of your home economics teacher. Your clothes can wait for the dirtier water.

The wringer washer sits round and squat and silent, bereft of the diapers you had run through it in years past. Your arms and the arms of your mother replace the unnecessary output of electricity. She had come upon the scrub board on one of her shopping excursions at the thrift store in that part of downtown, away from Sibley's, and now she is doing the lazy Americans with their automatic washers and dryers one better. It is a Saturday, a day when she cannot be earning cash, so the next best thing is to save it at home: to leave all electricity sucking appliances idle, to reuse water to wash and rinse and then that used for rinsing for washing, the least dirty to the most, to grimy work clothes of your father and his socks that had been absorbing sweat for days.

You have nowhere else to go. Your best friend, Luba, has moved and drifted away in more ways than one. She has called you from her new suburban home, in Irondequoit, and has regaled you about the boy in tight, tight jeans whom she balled at a party—not the first by far. She has become popular. She is a year older and was always the more confident one. She would pedal the bike while you sat on the handlebars during your rare excursions. She wheedled quarters from her “pop,” a perpetually exhausted man, whose only contact with his daughter seemed to be to expend the last bit of energy by drawing a quarter from the pocket of

his work pants so she could buy a coke and a candy bar. Yet, she always remained thin. It helps to be thin in the contest for friends and boys, and you by your diligence in following diet tips (carrots and celery to stave off hunger, cups of coffee, only a spoonful of ice cream to fill the urge) have watched your poundage drop from a hearty 138 to 115. You could not stave off the increase in height (5' 4" in seventh grade! Now 5' 7"), but there is no shame in height as long as one is not fat. You had been heartened to hear that Susan Dey of the Partridge Family is 5' 7"; you have only three pounds to go to match her weight.

The calico dress was made from one of the Simplicity patterns you bought with money you had earned cleaning Mrs. Reuben's house on Saturday mornings for one dollar. Your abilities at cleaning and surrogate mothering had become the legend passed on in front porches in the evenings. The dress has darts and a flounce that rests just above the knee along the bottom that you marked and pinned and sewed meticulously. 5/8" is five-eighths of an inch, the words of your mother resounding like constant noise of a sea shell that you have never gone to the sea shore to get that says, if you're going to do something, do it right. It speaks in the *Prekmurje* dialect. Yes, anything worth doing should be done right.

You scrub a spot on the dress that you cut, marked, pinned, and sewed. Outside it is spring. Always long in coming, always with false starts. A breezy day when the sun would shine through the clouds on the exhaust-encrusted, freeze-burned snow. This usually happened around your birthday, March 24th, or Easter shortly after that, or your sister's birthday, April 10th. These false promising winds would set the robins to twittering, and cars to slinging along roads, slush dispersed in a happy sound that announced the impending temporary defeat of winter. It is May and soon, soon, summer will be here. The buds are out on the trees. Traces of blackened snow are gone, gone down gutters, into the murky Genesee River, away and out of sight, cleaned off even overshoes.

The bright red on yellow under suds cheers you. Like spring flowers. This work is virtuous, the scrubbing up and down, stooped over the large basement wash tubs, the front of your dress wet. Each push must burn at least five calories. Calico is something you've read about and you were glad to see it back in style and on bolts. Prairie women wore it, the

Wilder women, while sweeping out their dirt houses. A woman whose days were filled with the satisfaction that her family was well fed, her clothes strung out clean on the line as a testament to her virtues. You had determined you would be one of these women (the cute boy in your French class crowding out your fantasy of being a nun). What author was that who wrote those words that struck home with you? They appeared in a volume pulled off the shelves of the Avenue D library, a place offering quiet and stillness, and dust motes in the high windows. You would wander in front of the shelves, touch the bindings, so many to choose from. One section was in pink and you had gravitated toward them. These were novels about virtuous girls revered by their parents, pampered, decorated with hair ribbons and long dresses. You have the calico. Calico you bought yourself, that is now in fashion, given the swing to granny glasses, boots, and peasant blouses.

Your mother talks about how they used washboards just like these, except they had to draw water out of a well. We have it easy here she tells you. Here you just turn the faucet. We used to bake our bread. My mother. My grandmother. My aunts. It was very good bread and you cannot bake bread of that kind in this country because you do not have the same outdoor ovens and the flour is not the same (and we grew our wheat too, you know).

You scrub and scrub, your eyes mesmerized by the calico that takes you to a different world, a simpler world where cars and buses do not spew fumes when you try to walk in contemplation, where classrooms are quiet and the hallways outside are not alive like a hot wire with hostility and black pride and taunts and contests of bodies squeezed into tight clothes for the nonchalance of the stoned cute guys and teachers who try only to maintain order and desperately aim for a cool to match their students'. Where in the world is such a place? A place of greenness, open skies, quiet, bird song, cooperative work, gratitude for food and clothes and cleanliness, an open book, a man who will love you for the way you take care of him, his children, who will put his arms around you at the end of the day, job well done. Not here. In this country? In this city? No, this place is not like home. It is not home. She continues the conversation she began since you can remember her talking to you, confiding about how much friendlier everyone is back there, trying to keep the place alive for you, about the grandmother you cannot

remember, about how her job was to feed the chickens when she was barely able to walk, everyone had work to do, not like the lazy Americans who drive around in their cars, don't know how to use a tool, waste, eat at restaurants, hire women like her to clean their houses (when they don't even work themselves!). No one talks to you here. They make fun of you, even their children do. They mock your language. Pluck the unripe grapes—You will go back, she is not staying here. First they will make their money, then leave.

Calico is the type of cat you had, until she sinned and had kittens, kittens in the linen closet of the bathroom you were scrubbing at the time, and you heard her mews of pain but dared not look for fear of witnessing her sin. Those kittens got to be too much, five of them scampering around the same basement being scattered by the baby sister that came when She said two daughters are enough and it's been seven years since the last one. The mother cat and kittens had already ruined some of her towels and sheets. One does not spend money on such foolishness as surgery for cats so she had to go. You knew she would not be wanted sitting in that little cage in a place euphemistically called Lollipop Farm.

You scrub and scrub while you ask questions politely and hope she notices. Maybe after you are done you will go work in the garden. Emerge from the wet and darkness. You scrub. She says you are doing it well. See hardly anything to it at all. Why waste the electricity on a washing machine? She approves of you as you turn the cloth over to scrub now, turn it and scrub that side. And on your Simplicity calico dress you notice a grease stain and take the brown bar of soap, rub it in. Scrub. You listen to her paean about the virtues of scrub boards. No need. More money to save (unsaid). You feel you are approaching sanctity. You have whittled yourself down to 115 pounds. You have scrubbed the frying pan to a stainless sheen even to her surprise (the one that had since perpetuity been encrusted). You have cleaned out cupboards, the refrigerator, the oven, shined windows to a streak-less glaze. Folded her nylon slippers in her drawers. Arranged them in order for her so when she prepares to go to work she will notice them all arranged for her convenience: slippers, half slippers, brassieres, night gowns—all in their own straight piles. This is the way to virtue. You feel it in your bones, your wrinkled hands. Scrub. Better. More. Cleanliness. And Work. You

rub more brown soap into the spot. And rub it. Bruise it on the scrub board. And when you are done and turn it over in the rinse tub you notice that in the place of the stain, all the red and yellow are gone. In that place is a pure, barren spot, uncontaminated by petals or stamens or color.

This is what happens when you come upon the word “calico” in *Huckleberry Finn*, an amusing incident to most, when Huck Finn dresses up as a girl. You will teach it that afternoon but will not pause on that word. Most of them would have no idea of what you are talking about. They would not understand that you have moved a thousand miles away from that basement where you washed a calico dress. You moved to a place of newness, a sprawling city in a part of the country that does stay green most of the year. You have rejected the superstitions and ignorance of those who trudge in with sighs to punch time clocks. You have also had your fill of latter-day small house agents clerks and through a stubbornness that matches your mother’s in an equal and opposite direction have earned that degree that made your aunt assume that you would be working in a laboratory.

Your work involves those objects that you coveted in the quiet mote-filled stillness of an old solid building in the years before it and the buildings surrounding it would be relegated to the category of urban blight—a result of the rioting hordes of barbarians who could see no beauty in the word-filled pages. It had been a place of refuge and worship when you had been allowed out of that basement where it had fallen to you to spend your summers washing diapers and sooty men’s work clothes in the wringer washer—and her slips and brassieres gently by hand.

You own an automatic washing machine and a Ph.D.

You turn back to your work at hand.

You will discuss the river, what it represents and how it unifies this sprawling tale of a boy yearning for simple freedom and justice and love.

I too once crossed a river to escape. It was with my father and as he told it he put me then barely out of infancy on his shoulders and stepped into the river Mura. It was the dead of night. His wife was beside

him. They had one suitcase. There was no way he would leave me behind. He wouldn't think of it.

Eleven years later, 1969, the house paid for, and there is money to go back for a proper visit. For six weeks they will come bearing suitcases of mass-produced gifts and pockets full of dollar bills.

She suggests it:

—The money would be saved.

—No.

—We did not leave her back then. We will not leave her now. I wouldn't think of it. These are our children. What would they say? We will all go together.

He repeats it for the benefit of his brother now shooting dubious eye beams across his table. They ping silently over the wine glasses.

My father is in a jovial mood. He asks his brother:

—And when are *you* going back? You have more money than we do.

The look is shot back across the table; it bounces off the aromatic red wine in the glasses, in the carafe emblazoned with oranges and green leaves, like the California grapes that were mixed in with his own from the arbor over the driveway in the crusher and in the barrel.

—See, *we* do not leave our children behind. How do you like this new wine?

—What do you know? Who brought you over here? You brag now, but you forget.

He is the only uncle I have in this country, despite the eight siblings my father has. He and my aunt had left their own child behind to stay with a sunny grandmother (on the mother's side) until he my cousin, their older son, six years my senior, now a man really, draft age, was old enough to walk across a bridge with a suitcase in his hand, old enough to have forgotten them, who they were, the father that by rights and priestly injunction should have been honored, but instead was looked at blankly by his own son and with fear, a stranger. Their own son's looks were the first betrayal of their efforts to give someone freedom, what the father, my uncle, had never had, until his and my aunt's journey that began with

a simple daring walk across a field, the scythes still in hand, when a guard was not looking. A step over. A surrender to fate, the unknown. Across the border to the land of the rulers, the Austrians (to the south were the Serbs of the army). Where was a place to turn? Not to the east to the Magyars (*Majyari*), nor to the west, past the great, big capital of Ljubljana and onto the Italians. The Italians did not want them, either, except maybe to slave for them, clean and cook. North was the only place to go. The route to freedom, via an Austrian refugee camp where one could work and wait. He took the daring first step with no one, not one of them, his own brother in Canada already, willing to sponsor him. He and his wife took a step into the unknown when they walked right foot first, nothing but the clothes on their backs. One daring step. His infant son had been well taken care of. He had made sure of that. It had been discussed. If we leave, take care of him. And his wife's mother had pulled him to her large bosoms and said of course, of course. He was with her all the days already, slept in her bed, his *babica*. Why then no gratitude? The little man, my cousin, dressed in his Sunday best, a tailored coat, shorts, suitcase in his hand, tentatively making his way over the bridge, the scarf-encased *babica* tearfully urging him on.

It was my uncle's curse. He did most of the work and received no credit. No gratitude. For the midnight raids on his assaulters at home in Krog his brother would not even sign a paper to sponsor him. There was no reward, justice. And here another brother and wife and children had lived in his house, sleeping in his bedroom, had their little one with them, plus the newest one. He had signed for them.

The look of the panelist on the tribunal on international family crimes and grievances in 1969, with advance degrees in the hard knocks of life and the Way Things Should Be, challenged the brother to debate on this point. How can you logically take credit for what you have with your stories that I have to hear over and over?

The five dollars in his pocket, a suitcase, a wife and two kids. How many times would he hear the story? And who drove him to his own house from the airport in his own red Chevy? Put the wife and kids and suitcase in, offered him his bed? No mention. Who helped his wife get a job? The only word he had known was "okay." Yet, never tried to advance himself by reading the newspaper. Still a blubbering fool who couldn't handle his liquor.

My first days in the vineyard were of wandering up and down the shale slopes of Austria, in the little rubber boots and the red cotton dress my mother would bring out to show company, as she maybe did that Sunday in 1969. Someone was supposed to watch me. The witch, the one who locked the pantry after she found her eating an apple, had promised that I would be watched, but she cared only about her own Lise. Do you remember Lise? No. *Nemci* (Germans). Theirs was a privileged life. Yes, we all had to suffer. We all had hard years. Take some more streudel!

And twenty-some years later, I am again in a vineyard in the Southern Tier of New York State, with other women, the ex-hippie, Andrea, black-eyed from the demons from Vietnam that haunt her husband, the others working for microwaves and Cabbage Patch Kid dolls. I am in insulated coveralls, snowmobile boots, deerskin mittens, above a lake, looking over God's country, wishing the women around me knew poetry rather than the loss of interest in their husbands, worries about paying the bills, desires for appliances that I know will not make their lives any better. Look here, I want to say, witness God's beauty around you, no pavement within sight, air clean with cold, snow white, clouds hugging these hills surrounded by a silence of wind that I would rather listen to than your jabbering your petty concerns as your hips expand while you descend into further unhappiness, drowning due to lack of imaginative oxygen.

Andrea comes back from the car where she had been warming up and listening to the radio.

John Lennon is dead.

There is silence.

Beryl takes a longer pull on her cigarette. She is pretty and blonde and British. She wears pink lipstick in the fields. How did she end up in these hills where only women and men addled by age or alcohol work?

Something has passed.

Coffee steam rises from thermos cups.

Someone shot him outside his apartment. He is dead.

Imagine.

Not all the people...

Some are tormented by demons that you cannot imagine.

Something has passed.

Imagine all the people living for today.

Imagine a world created where no one will grow old. Where naked entanglement with one's wife will come across as innocence. Where a man attaches his skinny naked body fetus-like around his wife's naked body, a photograph technically passing censor's standards but devoid of lasciviousness. Come to our honeymoon bed. That was a time when such things were proposed and believers trooped to the Eden in a hotel room with cameras and tape recorders.

Imagine.

Imagine that you are back there in a country of grandmothers and aunts, where you have a town. Where you can say I am from this village. Krog. Bakovci. Can you say that this is your village? Naples, New York? The most beautiful part of the country you have seen in your two decades on earth? They ask you from the other side of the bar, their looks suspicious, taking you in as you expertly draw the Jenny cream ale into mugs. Who is

your Daddy? And what kind of a name is that? Grabar. Altered in pronunciation, but never enough. Why are you here?

—I am here because I fell in love with these hills and because the man who had invited me to his brass bed said it was okay to live in his house nestled next to a stream running beside the house down the ten acres of hillside he owns. He periodically told me he loved me, and I believe that I may convince him yet through my example and deeds of a better way to demonstrate his love. I try to show him by baking bread and cookies that such a wholesome lifestyle is better than his idea of Friday night fun which is to go to the hotel and there match drink for drink his Hemingway-protégé buddy who lived in Texas for a while and therefore deserves admiration. There are others in these hills who attempt to recapture that simpler way, to the bewilderment of Gert and Calvin, sister and brother who have inherited the vineyard I worked in today, who seek comfort for their gnarled fingers that have held clippers and saws through many falls and winters. The younger ones, the immigrants from the cities, attempt. They raise chickens, organic vegetables, heat with wood, and bring pottery and weavings down to town to sell. I am hoping that I can turn this man into someone who will be a good husband. Then I will be a good wife. He promises. But often his eyes are dead to reason. His eyes scare me sometimes. Then I turn and tell him I will leave and that's when he takes me in his arms. Don't leave. He tells me he loves me. He does not like me to seek love from anywhere else though. Those friends I have, he doesn't like. Where else will I turn? North is the city I escaped from. Over the ocean to the east is a country no one has heard of and does not care about. I am here. And everyone pretends I am from here. His parents pretend. On the few occasions they have needed to mention my country it is as if it is an impediment I have carried and have to overcome. All evil in my life, all dysfunction, is attributed to the incompleteness of that process by which we will become American, when all vestiges of our backward Old World ways will be gone. They have hope for my children. Mine and his. They would rather we were married, but are suspicious of my erratic employment habits. So you want to be a writer? His grandfather asks. He thinks it's calligraphy. His uncle tells about being in “that part of the world” during the war. I do not express my thanks. His mother reads bestsellers in hardcover, settling her wide hips on her dainty upholstered chair, the picture of her son with his ex-wife in a granny dress in that exotic land called New Mexico beside her on the table. When they drink my father's wine they remark on

its strength. Not for the women. Powerful stuff the men say. My hoped for husband on the way back in the passenger's seat of the pick-up tells me to pull over and he collapses in a neighbor's front yard, expelling the wine and food hoisted upon him by parents in the hours preceding. We are in front of a lawn ornament, a staring deer. "Sweet pea, get the shotgun."

The *Amerikanci* can't drink. I hear my father laughing as our neighbor hurtles his dentures into the rose bushes. *Amerikanci*.

In 1980-something I manage to get this man back into his truck before the owners of this house come out. I make the escape; fortunately this is not a mean drunk and he comes willingly. I shove the truck into gear. There will be only embers in the stove when we get home and I am glad I left a stash of kindling.

The next day he will laugh about it, describe the old man and his winecellar and his still to his fake Texas buddy. I will dare to ask myself how I ever got into this situation, no longer even enrolled in college.

I will try to talk sense to him.

He will respond—

He will play his album for the benefit of all as he pops open another one:

"She's a good-hearted woman...."

I will think about getting an RV, heading west, to Montana.

I will let this play itself out because I believe these shaley vineyard- and wood-covered hills can offer something as I pursue my girlhood dream of being Heidi, or the girl who rode wild ponies on the shore of Chincoteague.

But I am with a man who tells me my dreams are folly, that books don't have the answers. That he has gone through and graduated with honors from the School of Life and that other school which he slid through with c's was good only for avoiding the draft, the military-industrial complex that he is not beholden to. He needs no weatherman to tell him which way the wind blows.

I allow this to play itself out: the leavings, the implorings, the pleadings, the promises. He relents and gets me a ring and at the First Congregational Church we are married by the minister who leads the

church that his ancestors attended. I don't know what a Congregationalist is.

I let it play itself out.

He claims that it is dangerous for him to wear his ring. He spends more time with Tex on the boat and at the bar. I let it play itself out until he is once again in the passenger seat next to me in the middle of these hills in God's country. He is angry because I left early that morning to pursue my dream of being a cowgirl and the closest I have been able to come is to work at the racetrack. His eyes are glazed from the sun and drink and the frustration of no catches in spite of the new sonar equipment. When his hands go around my throat forcing me to pull off on the shoulder and I know that a vehicle could have come around the curve and I could have gone left and it could have gone differently I decide it's time to leave. I have seen my life splattered on the blacktop that ribbons along the valleys here. I will take this road to escape once more to a better country.

Clayton State University

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country.

2. In the second part, we shall discuss the economic development of the country.

3. The third part of the report is devoted to the social conditions of the country.

4. In the fourth part, we shall analyze the political situation of the country.

5. The fifth part of the report discusses the cultural and educational aspects of the country.

6. Finally, we shall summarize the main findings of the report.

7. The following table shows the main data of the report.

8. The data in the table are based on the following sources.

9. The report is based on the following assumptions.

10. The following conclusions can be drawn from the report.

11. The report is a preliminary study and requires further research.

12. The report is intended for the following purposes.