

[Home](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

# CONVERSATIONS

BY CLARE GOLDFARB

COPYRIGHT 2009

"Charles, come look at this Matisse cutout."

Where was her, her, what should she call him---boyfriend? But at sixty-six, wasn't that kind of silly? Where was he? She wanted to share this favorite work with him.

Mae looked around the crowded gallery, a mixed crowd, she was happy to note. If only "gray heads" came to museums and theatres, she reasoned, the future of the arts was in jeopardy. Listening to the undercurrent of comments, she searched the room, and when she saw Charles, he was sitting on a bench, reading the introductory brochure to the exhibit. As soon as he saw her, he stood and turned towards her with a smile.

Mae looked up at him; he was tall and slim with a full head of white hair.

"I want you to see my favorite. Come on over." She took his hand, and they walked to the blue cutout.

Charles glanced at the Matisse, shook his head and said, "I don't get it; a grown man playing paper dolls."

Mae wanted to tell him that Matisse's cutouts were major accomplishments, done when he was in the last years of his life and unable to stand at an easel. Using colored papers, he cut the "papiers coupes" freehand and had assistants pin them to his studio walls; he would recombine the pieces until he was ready to attach them to white paper backgrounds. She loved that he called it, "painting with scissors."

Charles was looking at his watch and not at the cutout. In her docent mode, she wanted to tell him there was a world of difference between paper dolls and papier coupes. She was pretty sure he would listen to her because the construction of things fascinated the retired engineer part of him.

Right now, though, she knew he was anxious to move on to lunch. She was hoping he would suggest the Grand Central Oyster bar—it was only a quick taxi ride away—and she would have a dozen oysters on the half shell with a glass of wine.

"I need to hit the john, Mae."

---

"Me too. Meet you in the lobby."

As she washed her hands and put on fresh lipstick, Mae thought about oysters, glistening in their shells on a plate of ice chips. She could see the golden tones of a chilled glass of Pinot Grigio. But she guessed that Charles, who preferred red meat to anything that called the ocean "home", would choose another venue for their lunch.

Sighing, she buttoned up her coat and walked to the lobby. There was Charles who said, "I am hungry for a burger, so let's go to the Bar Americain. We can even walk there and get some fresh air. Don't you think it's kind of stuffy in here?"

\* \* \*

Watching Charles eat every bit of the burger that she thought was outrageously overpriced, Mae found herself feeling his pleasure. She had ordered one too, but without the bun and any of the extras. Charles had told the waiter, "Just pile on everything you have!" She would suggest the Oyster Bar some other time.

As the waiter cleared their plates, Charles asked Mae, "How about some coffee?"

She was surprised. Usually Charles was ready to leave when he had finished his meal, so although she wasn't sure she really wanted caffeine at this hour, she said, "I'll have a cappuccino."

He placed their orders, and over coffee, Mae said, "Charles, let me tell you how Matisse created his paper dolls."

Charles smiled and looked down at his already empty cup. "Mae, you know that anything painted after Van Gogh looks like splatters to me. Let's go home. I could use a nap."

In the taxi back to the apartment, both were quiet, but Mae thought, not for the first time during the year they'd been living together, "Am I better off with him or without him?" She decided not to decide, at least, not today.

\* \* \*

Harry died when Mae was fifty-one, and what she missed most, after twenty-five years of marriage to him, was having someone there when she entered the apartment, hair and nails just done, arms loaded with packages. She liked calling out, "Honey, I'm home." And until he became too ill to answer back, Harry would come to the door to kiss her and help her get settled.

After his death and the year settling his estate, Mae found that her lifestyle remained relatively unchanged; after all, Harry had been gravely ill and gone nowhere the last two years of his life. She still had many friends willing to go out for lunch, a drink, a visit to the theatre or symphony, but it wasn't the same. The apartment waited for her, empty and silent.

---

---

"Mae, you should join a gym and get into some sort of exercise routine. Besides meeting people, the exercise would be good for you." Dorothy, her friend since high school, was the advice-giver in her group.

So she joined a gym and mingled with the jocks and jockettes, as she called them. She met a few men her age who called for a date. At dinner or intermission, the conversation invariably turned to their health, their dead or divorced wives. Once there, Gene, Joe, Max, or Steve went on and on.

"Dorothy, at our age, there's so much baggage. I don't want to hear about the stroke they survived, or the estranged kids, or the vindictive 'ex.'"

"At our age, who doesn't have baggage?" Dorothy smiled.

Mae looked thoughtful as she sipped her ice cold Cosmopolitan that day. She and her best friend would frequently have a drink at the end of their docent Tuesday at the museum. Both art-lovers, they looked forward to the activity and being surrounded by the works they revered. Mae enjoyed expanding her love of art, and as time went on, she took to the installations by Christo as well as the video installations by William Kentridge and Bill Viola.

This particular Tuesday she and Dorothy had gone to a lecture on Viola whom they had discussed until Mae started talking about her latest date. She twirled her drink before she continued, "Well, I don't have much baggage. No kids. I'm pretty healthy. I had a husband who died but left me in good financial shape." Frowning, she looked into the mirror behind the bar, "those guys are so old, and I've already nursed and buried one old husband."

Dorothy nodded, "You're a bargain, sweetie, but as they say, a good man is hard to find these days. The really good ones are married, and those that aren't want trophy wives." She looked at Mae and said, softly, "I love you, Mae, but you are a 'leetle' too old to be a trophy. Fifty-two is a tad 'over the hill.'"

"I would not let anyone but you say that to me, Dorothy." It was Mae's turn to smile.

The next week at the gym Mae saw her latest reject, Steve, with one of the jockettes. They left the gym together, Steve chattering away.

"Dorothy is right," she thought. "Those old boys want someone who'll adore them, listen to them as if they are the source of all knowledge. And I'm done with that stage of my life."

Mae tried to keep an open mind in her search for a "boyfriend," as she jokingly called her not yet discovered companion. In the meantime, there were a few male friends who were delighted to go out with her to the opera, theatre, ballet, and dinner. If one knew wines well, as did her late husband, she found dinner especially enjoyable. Mae "made do" with her life for a few years, but there was still that empty apartment.

When one of her friends half-seriously said, "Get a dog," she thought it was a great idea, and she got Maisie, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. The dog got her outside and to the Park for walks, and when the weather was too bad or she was out late at night, the doorman was delighted to take Maisie for a necessary airing. Before she knew it, Mae was in love with an 18-pound creature that came to the door and leapt on her with licks and barks every time Mae came home from the salon, the museums, or the shops. Mae soon found herself saying, "Honey, I'm home!" as she opened the door to the apartment. That made Maisie absolutely ecstatic. The love affair lasted for nine years until Maisie succumbed to the heart problem that was affecting more and more of her breed.

Despite the prognosis, Mae flew with her to the vet school at Michigan State for special

---

---

treatments and surgery. There were a few more months of seeming recovery, but soon, Maisie got very tired and preferred to lie on her pillow by Mae's bed. Mae would lift her and carry her outside for a pee or a poop. The dog was too fastidious to "go" in the litter box that Mae bought for her. When she stopped eating with gusto, Mae cooked chicken, beef, or lamb, things she thought would whet Maisie's rapidly diminishing appetite more than the organic dog food she no longer bolted down in ten seconds.

Finally, the time came when Mae knew it was cruel to keep the dog alive, but in pain, and while Mae held her, the vet administered a shot. Maisie licked her hand as if to say, "thank you."

"I cried more than I did for my parents or for Harry," she sobbed as Dorothy sat with her at dinner that night. For weeks coming back to the empty apartment or listening for the click-click of Maisie's nails on the hardwood floors brought on another wave of tears. Six months later when she found an old tennis ball belonging to Maisie in the back of her closet, her eyes welled up.

"Get another dog, for heaven's sake."

"No, I won't go through that again."

Mae's dog days were in the past, and it was time for her to move on.

\* \* \*

She had continued to date during the Maisie years. There was a period when she dated younger men.

"Dorothy, can you believe he doesn't know all the words to 'Not For Me?' The only Cole Porter he knows is that awful movie with Kevin Kline! He said that his current favorite song is by 'The Black Eyed Peas.'"

"What did you say back to him?"

"What did I say? What did I say? I said, black-eyed pea salad is pretty good, but why does the group name itself after a Southern vegetable?"

After another failed date, she told Dorothy, "He thinks we should have stayed in Viet Nam until we won!"

"What did you do when he said that?"

"I started to explain the marches, the rallies. I told him about Kent State."

"And his reaction?"

"He never heard of Kent State."

Another fixer-upper, as Mae called them was a forty-eight year old, never married before lawyer. They went out twice to dinner.

"Dorothy, we walked past 56<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and I talked about Moondog, and he literally,

---

---

literally, said, "huh?"

And that was the end of the dating younger men phase.

"I will not go out with someone who prefers Black Sabbath to Cole Porter."

\* \* \*

About a year and a half ago, Mae met Charles in the most ordinary of ways. Mutual friends set them up—after assuring Mae that he was in her peer group. On the first date, Charles took her to the Philharmonic; as they said, "good-night," he asked her to go with him to a Mets game the next night. Although she was never a sports fan, she decided to say, "yes," and at the game, she kept her mouth shut and surreptitiously glanced at her watch as the minutes crept by. She was relieved when he said that he enjoyed watching a game on the wide screen HD television she kept in the den. Sports nights, she would cook dinner at home, and they both liked these "stay in" date nights.

Over the first month they knew each other, they had over a dozen dates. Toasting their second month anniversary with a dinner at Daniel's. Charles said, "You know, Mae, why don't we stop looking around?"

She knew what he meant. He and his wife split fifteen years ago, and it was now twelve years since Harry had died. Two more years, and she'd be on Medicare.

"How about moving up to my house in Bedford?" He asked her that night at Daniel's.

Mae looked at him as if he were crazy. "Leave New York?"

"Well, you could easily hop on the train any time you wanted to come down for a concert or . . . whatever."

She didn't respond right away, but she was thinking, "Leave New York? Leave New York? Train? Here, I walk out my door, hop in a cab or take the bus. Most places, I can walk anywhere I want to go."

"Well, what do you say, Mae?"

Deciding to plunge right in, she said, "Charles, why don't you move in with me? Let me think about the Bedford house. After all, you're renting in the City now, so it wouldn't be that big a stretch for you to move into my place. I don't think we should make too hasty a decision. We could go up to Bedford for weekends?"

Later when she told Dorothy about it, Mae said, "Surely, he sees that I am a true blue New Yorker, and I am not moving out to the boonies."

"Darling, Bedford is not exactly the boonies. And you say the house is charming."

"Well, it could be, if he gives me a chance to do some decorating."

Charles agreed to Mae's plan, provided that they spend weekends in Bedford. When the weather was too snowy or icy, they stayed in New York, and after a few months, there were

---

---

weekends when Charles went alone. Mae would excuse herself by saying she had to see a play or concert that she knew he wouldn't enjoy, or else, she had to meet an old friend.

"I love that house," Charles would say, and although he always tried to coax her to join him, off he would go early on Friday, returning late Sunday night.

For her part, she would try to persuade him into staying, and sometimes he would agree, if there were a special gathering or event. He never would stay for some of the contemporary exhibits she enjoyed.

"Charles, there is a William Kentridge exhibit in a small gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> street. Come with me."

"William Kentridge? Who is he?"

She would coax him. "Charles, come with me and find out. I went to a workshop/lecture series on him that was terrific. I can be your personal docent for a morning!"

He shrugged and smiled, "Honey, I'm an old screw head who likes the three B's in music, the Impressionists, and plays with three acts and a happy ending."

Mae did not dismiss Charles' taste, but as she told Dorothy, "I wish he'd try something new."

"Well, maybe, he's educable."

Mae leaned back and laughed at her, "Sweetie, you do realize that is a word one uses for mentally challenged individuals, and Charles is not mentally challenged. After all, he likes pears with warm Brie."

\* \* \*

When they got home from the Matisse exhibit, Charles went into the bedroom for a nap, and Mae sat down by her kitchen bay window with a book. The sky had clouded over, and she knew in her bones, that rain or sleet was on its way. The weekend weather report for Westchester County was gloomy, one reason she had little trouble in convincing Charles to stay in New York. Besides, the friends who had introduced them had invited them for cocktails and dinner tonight.

Mae stared out the window, watching the Saturday crowd scurrying to wherever they were going. She had lived in this apartment for almost thirty years first with her husband, then with Maisie, and now with Charles.

Suddenly, she realized that two of her loved ones had died here, and she found herself wondering if she would wind up nursing Charles in his old age as she had both Harry and Maisie. After all, Charles was two years older than she, and his blood pressure was nothing to write home about.

Except for the usual traffic sounds filtered through her double thick windows, there was a pleasant silence in the apartment. She thought of the first line of a Wallace Stevens poem she loved, "The house was quiet, and the world was calm."

"Is the world calm?" She wondered. "Is my world calm?" Her husband used to tell her almost

---

---

daily that he loved her; only after he died, did she realize how lucky she was to have had such an affectionate husband. And then there was Maisie who showered her with the kind of adoration that only a dog can show. Charles, on the other hand, was not a demonstrative person.

"Dorothy, he's never told me he loves me." She sighed over lunch soon after he had moved into her place. "And," she started slowly, "he is really not physically affectionate."

"Have you ever said anything to him?"

"He tells me, 'I'm what I am, Mae, reserved, and you are not going to change me.' 'Reserved', that's his word."

Dorothy had looked at her. "Darling friend, don't ask for the world. You've got a guy who's presentable and enjoys many of the things you do. Don't look for more."

As she sat by the window, Mae thought of other conversations she'd had with Dorothy over the last year. She realized she had done a lot of complaining, especially about the Bedford house.

"There's nothing to do there but read and watch TV. We have no friends up there. You'd think Charles would have developed some sort of social circle, but he hasn't."

"In any relationship, we all make compromises, Mae. You made compromises with Harry for twenty-five years, didn't you? And sweetie, don't you think Charles is making compromises too? No one is perfect, and both of you decided to stop looking around for someone 'perfect.' Obviously, there's something there. For heaven's sake, decide. Are the compromises worth the effort?"

"OK. OK. Dr. Dorothy. I get the point. And I know he doesn't think I'm perfect; every time I suggest an exhibit or a museum, he calls me an "art groupie" and I don't think he means it as a compliment. I know I talk too much about what I love, and he as much as told me that contemporary art bores him."

\* \* \*

When Dorothy wasn't around to hear her vent, Mae spoke to her inner voice, which often talked back. This afternoon, while Charles was napping, her inner voice hadn't said much. After repeating Ann Landers' favorite question to herself: "Are you better off with him or without him?" her inner voice was still not talking, and Mae went back to her novel. The next time she looked at the clock, it was time to start getting ready for the evening. Thinking she'd better check on Charles, she heard his footsteps on the parquet floor. He was holding a book.

"I got you a present, Mae."

She took it from him. The title was, "Henri Matisse: Cut-outs Album." She had thumbed through it this morning in the gallery gift shop.

For one of the first times in her life, Mae found herself without words, but she quickly recovered. "Oh, Charles, this is lovely. But when did you get it?"

---

---

"You always take longer in the john than I do, so I wandered into the store, and voila!"

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek and then smiled, "Well, maybe some day, you'll sit with me—over a glass of champagne—and we can talk a little bit about Matisse?"

"Let's do it next weekend up in Bedford. I'll spring for a good champagne."

\* \* \*

Their friends' apartment was only a few blocks away, and the weather had cleared, so Charles and Mae decided to walk there and back. On the way home, after nodding and agreeing about the fine food and wine, the good laughs and equally good conversation, Mae looked up at Charles and said, "You know, we're passing Moondog's corner again."

"Did you know he died in Germany?"

"No."

"He went there in the 70's I think. Some woman helped him with his music."

"Who would have 'thunk' it?" Mae paused and then added, "Would you like a CD or whatever of his music—for your birthday?"

Charles didn't believe in celebrating the holidays, and that included his birthday, but the words had slipped out of Mae's mouth.

"I'll get it myself. Next week, when I visit the doctor, I'll go into that store in the neighborhood."

"Sounds good. And maybe you can see if they have that Cole Porter songbook we've been looking for."

They strolled slowly home without speaking more. The air was chilly, and Mae pulled a pair of gloves out of her pocket at the same time that her inner voice was humming, "I get a kick out of you."

---

**Copyright 2009, Clare Goldfarb.** © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

---

Although **Clare Goldfarb** was born in New York and spent most of her life in Kalamazoo, Michigan, she now lives in Atlanta. She has degrees in English from Smith College (B.A.), New York University (M.A), and Indiana University (PhD), taught literature and writing at Western Michigan University for 32 years, chaired the English department and served as Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. She is co-author, with Russell Goldfarb of *Spiritualism and Nineteenth Century Letters* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press). Her essays



---

and stories have appeared in academic, commercial, and literary journals including *American Literature*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Parents' Magazine*, and *The Rambler*. A non-fiction piece will appear in the Spring, 2009, issue of *New Works Review*.