



Rejection

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For quite a while my husband and I lived on an obscure road in Maine with only one near-by house, glimpsed through our kitchen window. In summer that house was not visible, the thick canopy of oak and maple a living wall; by November, however, stark winter branches formed an empty frame around it. It was owned by a couple in their early forties who had an eleven-year-old son, Paul. Bob, an affable, graying man with a cherubic smile, welcomed us warmly the day we moved in, said he traveled a lot for work, something Kevin did as well, but to call on him when he was there if we needed anything. Lois, his wife, a slender attractive woman wearing a thick cardigan she pulled tightly around her body, walked across their lawn and directed a bright smile at Kevin, reaching for his hand and seconding Bob's offer of help. The warmth of her smile implied a possible friend or at least a casual acquaintance to share a walk or cup of coffee. When she turned to me, however, her eyes narrowed, she nodded briefly, then walked away.

Startled, I watched her retreating back, thanked Bob who didn't mention his wife's behavior, and retreated to my own house. Once inside, I looked at Kevin in confusion and asked, "What did I do?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You couldn't have missed it. She was friendly to you, but didn't even smile at me."

He shrugged. "She was probably just in a hurry. Don't be sensitive."

But I am sensitive, and always have been, to the subtle clues people put out. I grew up in an anti-Semitic, violent ghetto neighborhood, and reading the clues accurately were essential.

"I don't think I'm wrong," I mumbled. "But I'll give her the benefit of the doubt."

Over the next few months it seemed clear to me that I'd been right. If Lois and I chanced to be in our back yards at the same time she'd swiftly move to the most distant corner to avoid any contact. Paul, a lanky, intelligent youngster with his dad's gentle smile, had on more than one occasion forgotten his house key and done homework over milk and cookies at my kitchen table. Once his mother's car appeared in their driveway he'd dash out the door with a quick thank-you as though warned not to linger once she returned. She never waved through her car window.

"She hates me," I'd tell Kevin. "And I don't know why."

"She doesn't hate you," he'd say. "She's probably just shy."

I didn't point out that she never seemed shy with him. Whenever I vacated the back yard, leaving Kevin alone to tend the garden or move snow depending upon season, Lois emerged from what seemed a sequestered avoidance of my presence, to stride briskly across the property line. I couldn't hear their conversation, but her face was

animated, her body language lively, her head tossed back in laughter at something Kevin said. She'd furtively glance at our house as though watching for my appearance in order to make her escape. Three years after we'd moved in, she'd nodded hello to me perhaps five times while Kevin was full of information about her job, her childhood in Canada, her frequent visits both home and to Bob's family in Florida.

"You just haven't caught her in the right mood," he offered, when I pointed this out.

"After this many years there should have been at least one right mood, and anyway it's not my responsibility to gauge her moods in order to have a neighborly conversation, or at least a few words, with her."

My voice was sharp, reflecting the frustration I felt after three winters of living there. There were days when I had no face-to-face conversation with anyone, the roads too hemmed in by snow for me to drive anywhere, days when the richness of life felt shallow and I feared that I'd forgotten how to converse. In warm weather our six acres of granite, wildlife and forest was wonderful. Friends visited to explore, eat, talk, and in the long, sunlight-lit days of summer, I visited them, driving to upstate Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, but after the first snow a muffled silence surrounded me. My loneliness was intensified by Kevin's frequent trips, sometimes a week long, power outages and icy roads. I'd glance at our neighbor's house through the trees when I took a break from writing or reading to make a cup of tea in the kitchen and would remind myself, as resentment tightened my throat, not everyone had to like me. Still, I reasoned, she didn't even give me an opportunity to present a reason for her not to. I wasn't asking for much, a few moments of human interaction to dispel the feelings of isolation.

"I wish she'd at least give me a chance to prove I'm unlikable," I told Kevin one evening, after Lois had seen me emerging to collect my mail and scooted back to her house with her own, not even glancing in my direction.

"Maybe you're misjudging her; I still think she's shy," Kevin said, but with less conviction than previously shown.

I felt confirmation of her puzzling dislike of me came toward the end of that third year. My son, Carl, a singer-songwriter, had a concert in a nearby town and I threw a pre-concert potluck. I invited friends, but also my elusive neighbor, her husband and son, believing that the crowd would present an opportunity for her to avoid me in my own home while I observed her, trying to ascertain the reason for what I viewed as her almost pathological dislike of me; it didn't work. Although Bob and Paul came, Lois didn't. The food was good, the conversation lively, and Carl and his musician friends made an appearance and sang a few songs as prelude to what would come later in the concert hall. Bob and Paul spoke with nearly everyone, Paul enjoying his conversation with my close friend who was head of the English Department in the school he attended, Bob exchanging ideas with another salesman at the party.

"We had a great time, but won't be able to go to the concert," Bob said on the way out. "Lois isn't feeling well and asked us to come home after the potluck."

Paul blushed and didn't meet my eyes as he repeated his father's thanks for the evening.

"Well, I hope she feels better and I'm sorry she couldn't make it," I said,

although I wanted to say, she missed a great time but she wasn't missed. I wanted Bob and Paul to go home and tell her how great our friends are, how delicious the food was, how enjoyable they found the music. I wanted them to tell her what a great hostess I was, making her question the wisdom of her avoidance of me. I wanted her to deeply regret not coming.

I was also disgusted with myself for feeling it important and for experiencing such resentment, a quality familiar from a childhood with few friends, and that I struggled against as an adult as something useless and self-destructive. I saw the childishness of my feelings, yet couldn't move past them.

In bed that night, Kevin no longer suggested it was all in my imagination. "Yeah," he said. "It seems as though she just doesn't like you."

"But why," I said. "What did I do?"

"You're a therapist," Kevin said. "How many times have you explained to me emotions aren't always rational. Besides, what do you care, you have friends who love you."

"I know I have friends," I said irritably. "The problem is that this house is far from them and anything else. It's not just her total rejection of me, but rather that there is nobody on the road to accept me. I don't want her to be my best friend; I'd just like her to say hello."

"So why are you angry with me?" he said, responding to my tone.

"I'm not angry with you," I snapped. "I'm not even angry with her. I'm angry with myself for letting it matter."

I tossed restlessly long after Kevin's breathing had quieted into a gentle confirmation of sleep. Why did it bother me so much? Why was her rejection so important? Why couldn't I shrug and just let it go? I thought of a close friend with a well-received first novel who quoted the oft-repeated cliché, that the review she remembered most was a highly critical one. In the same vein a friend, now happily engaged, couldn't let of her desire to know why a man she'd dated a few times, and who she thought liked her, stopped calling.

Rejection, something both universal and utterly personal, was all too familiar. As one of the few Jews in our neighborhood I was made fun of, called names at best, and beaten up at worse. My teen-age years of kinky hair and sharp features came ten years before the culture grew to consider them exotically attractive and I was dateless during adolescence, acquiring just a few friends in high school and feeling like a failure. It was the women's movement and college that raised my self-esteem. Lois' dislike of me, seemingly devoid of actual reasons, woke all those feelings of inadequacy never far below the surface. I thought ruefully about how the wounds we experience as children remain scabs, easily picked open. Kevin had often remarked that Lois and I had nothing in common, nothing we might build a friendship on. I was certain that he was right yet wanted her to offer friendship. I thought of something I'd once heard; "I always wanted to be invited to the party that I didn't want to go to."

Except, this was a party that I did want to go to; it almost felt as though my psychic survival depended on it. Each winter, the loneliness grew more and more acute till it often seemed the only emotion I had. The

absence of others was a giant presence, silence the loudest sound in my world, my friendships reduced to an abstraction with contact only through emails or telephone calls and those subject to the vagaries of weather and the electric company. Some mornings when I walked or snowshoed past Lois' house I thought that the occasional cup of coffee, or even a smile, could make all the difference in my life.

You carry your solitude within, I reminded myself; we all do. But solitude was an iffy thing. Growing up in New York one could be friendless, but didn't have to be isolated. The twenty-five cents my mother gave me provided a devil dog and hot chocolate at the local Five and Dime where the woman behind the counter got used to seeing me and would ask about school, my mother, my brother. I could wander the corridors of the many museums or the big public library. Even walking the streets, jostled by crowds, listening to the tail ends of conversations, provided company. Unlike this little rural road in Maine, you could step outside your door and there would be people.

The therapy books I'd read when I was a practicing psychotherapist indicated that loneliness and isolation often led to a deep depression. I felt myself the proof; despite writing, a profession I love, reading wonderful books, and living in a place of great beauty, by mid-winter I struggled to get out of bed each morning.

The last winter we lived there was one of the worst; blizzards narrowed the roads, power outages were frequent, Kevin was often stranded in another state. Paul, who'd been good for a smile, was away in college and Bob, who I'd seen rarely anyway, traveled constantly. While friends invited me to stay overnight at their homes, the storms were so frequent it seemed futile to go and then come home to yet another white-out. I felt myself the only person in a vast expanse of pines, boulders and ten foot snow mountains. I began to lose my sense of self: was I intelligent? Interesting? Humorous? Good company? If a friend laughs with you, nods when you say something, engages in a discussion or even an argument, it reinforces a sense of your importance to somebody else. I realized, as I often did, how much our concept of self depends upon what others reflect back to us. Lois, the only available mirror, assumed ridiculous importance and the fact that she mirrored dismissive dislike made me doubt my likeability or relevance. I waited for weekends when Kevin was home or when friends, who worked in more traditional jobs, braved the roads and visited; still, I was such a long distance from anything that by mid-winter I had almost no visitors. These times with friends couldn't fill the growing hole I experienced. I began to imagine that Lois had discovered something foul and unacceptable about me that nobody else saw. I began to revisit everything I'd ever done that I regretted, everything that had ever brought me shame: irritability with my children, the friend whose secret I'd shared with another, the woman whose husband I'd flirted with, hateful retorts toward my first husband during the disintegration of our marriage, lying to my mother as a teenager, all reinforced my unacceptability and discounted anything good about me. I woke each morning with a sense of dread and shame at all the things I'd done, including those I couldn't remember. As that winter slowly passed, each day somehow longer than twenty-four hours, it became an almost moral imperative, an act of redemption for any past transgressions, for Lois to acknowledge me; to say hello, to engage at least superficially. It almost resembled the single-minded desperation of a captive striving to have his jailor acknowledge his humanity; I recognized something obsessive about it, but somehow every slight, every dismissive glance, every anti-Semitic joke made at my expense, every boy who'd ever poked fun at me, had coalesced into the massive burden of Lois' rejection.

Achieving her acknowledgment became one of my daily goals, along with the amount of words written, and the meals prepared. I devised my strategy and followed through on it. If I saw her, I would quickly step outside, wave hello, ask how she was, shouting my greeting if she was at the furthest end of her property. She had only two choices, to totally ignore me or to at least return my hello; she chose to answer with the fewest words possible, never inquiring how I was. I felt victorious in some small regard that this was the first step; I never got an opportunity to take it one step further.

One Sunday afternoon Paul knocked on our door. We greeted him with a smile, a question about college, invited him in, but he stood outside our door awkwardly then blurted out, "My dad died yesterday."

His eyes filled with tears and he continued, "My mom wanted you to know that she's alone now. She's over at the funeral home."

We were silent with sad surprise. Paul explained in a choked voice that his dad had been sick with a degenerative disease for a long time, but that they'd imagined he'd have a few more years.

"Paul, we're so very, very sorry. Your dad was a great guy; always warm and joking with a friendly smile for everyone," I said.

"Yeah," he answered. "He was terrific."

After Paul left we sat quietly together holding hands. Kevin had had cancer and I thought of how lucky we were. I found myself flooded with sympathy for Lois, all resentment gone.

"I'll make a pot of soup and bring it over," I told Kevin.

He nodded.

I prepared a pot of lentil soup and, for the first time, crossed the boundary between Lois' property and ours once I saw her car in the driveway. I knocked on her door. She opened it a crack and looked out at me.

"Lois, I'm so very, very sorry to hear about Bob. He was a wonderful man and we both enjoyed talking with him. I held out the pot. "I've made you some lentil soup. Paul said you wanted us to know that you were alone here and I just want you to know that you can ask us for any help you need and that you and Paul are always welcome for dinner."

She stood behind the door, her face, impassive as stone, surveying me with such a clear hostility I felt physically assaulted. She finally opened the door just enough to take the soup and pull it inside, then once again closed the door until it was only open a crack.

"Paul and I will do fine. We won't be coming to your house for dinner or anything else," she said then slammed the door in my face.

I stood there stunned at her response and Lord help me for just one moment, but one I'll always be ashamed of, I thought, serves you right to lose your husband, you bitch. Then I thought of Paul, the friendly warmth of Bob's voice and his welcoming smile and knew that I needed to move; the isolation of this road was destroying the person I'd believed I'd grown into until that moment. I was shaken by this side of me that was so without charity. I tried to justify it by her cold rejection of my attempt at sympathy, but in the end my personal behavior could not be

based on her; it had to be based on my internal code of what was right.

The next morning the emptied pot was on my doorstep with no note of thanks. Something shut tight inside me as I put it back in the cabinet. I knew that I would never again say a casual hello to Lois; her reluctantly returned hello could never provide any satisfaction. Kevin looked at the pot silently as I set it in the cabinet. "You did the right thing," he said. "No matter what she does."

"Yes. I'm not sorry I brought the soup, if only for Paul."

That evening we went to Bob's wake. We struggled to find a space in the parking lot and walked inside to a room humming with people.

I looked at Kevin in surprise, and also relief that we would not be among only a few.

"Bob was a salesman," Kevin said. "He knew a lot of people. Let's find Lois and Paul and pay our respects and then we can leave."

Paul hugged us and greeted us warmly, thanking us for coming. "My mother is over there," he said pointing to a small group of people, nearly all men.

"Let's get this over with," I told Kevin as we walked toward the group.

We walked over and Lois turned as a man in front of her pointed to us. I was stunned yet again; Lois looked beautiful. She wore make-up and a flattering blue dress, silver earrings, the faint scent of expensive perfume drifting toward us. Her eyes shone, narrowed at the sight of me, then brightened as she looked at Kevin. He didn't miss her response and put his arm around me. We repeated all the things you say at this type of event, Kevin offering any type of assistance she might need.

She smiled warmly, staring directly at him as though I wasn't by his side.

"I'll be fine," she said. "Paul is going to transfer to a nearby community college."

He nodded, turned, and we made our way to the door.

"You know," I said thoughtfully. "I worked with a number of female clients who said they had no women friends, that they only trusted men; perhaps Lois is like that also."

I'd resolved, after my cruel thought, that the answer to my isolation was to move, to recreate the bustling streets and easily accessible activities of my childhood.

"I can't live here anymore. It's too isolated," I told Kevin a few days later.

"Summer will be here soon," he said.

"Yes. But then winter will arrive again."

It was a difficult discussion because I proposed moving to Portland, a city where I had many connections, but which left Kevin farther away from work.

"A geographic cure isn't the answer," he said. "You have to tackle your

internal loneliness."

"You travel all the time," I said. "You never have a chance to be lonely."

With the first spring thaw I set out to determinedly house-hunt and after six months found one that worked for us. It was near the university, a few houses down from the library, had a gallery, three restaurants, bakery, a convenience store within walking distance and was just one mile from the train that would take Kevin to work. I loved the neighborhood and after a week Kevin loved not driving to work, the extra half-hour of travel consumed by the work he did as the train chugged along.

One December afternoon Kevin and I removed the last of our belongings, did a final cleaning of the house before the new owners moved in, and walked around the land for a tearful good-bye to this property we loved. Lois, watching through her window, came out, strode with her usual briskness over the property line, and hugged Kevin, wishing him the best of luck in his new house, then, as if I wasn't there, went back into her house with a good-bye wave at him.

Why she disliked me, and her refusal to acknowledge my presence, didn't matter anymore and, as we got into our cars to leave this road behind forever, I wished her peace in whatever journey she was on.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete lives in Portland, Maine. Three of her essays have been selected as Most Notable of the year. Michelle's essay, *Stealing*, was selected as the best of the net, 2011, and *In The Lion's Den* won the Hope Award. She is on the staff of the online magazine, *Solstice*. Michelle has been published in a number of literary journals, and is especially happy to appear in *SNReview* again.

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