The Bridge Ladies

a memoir

Betsy Lerner

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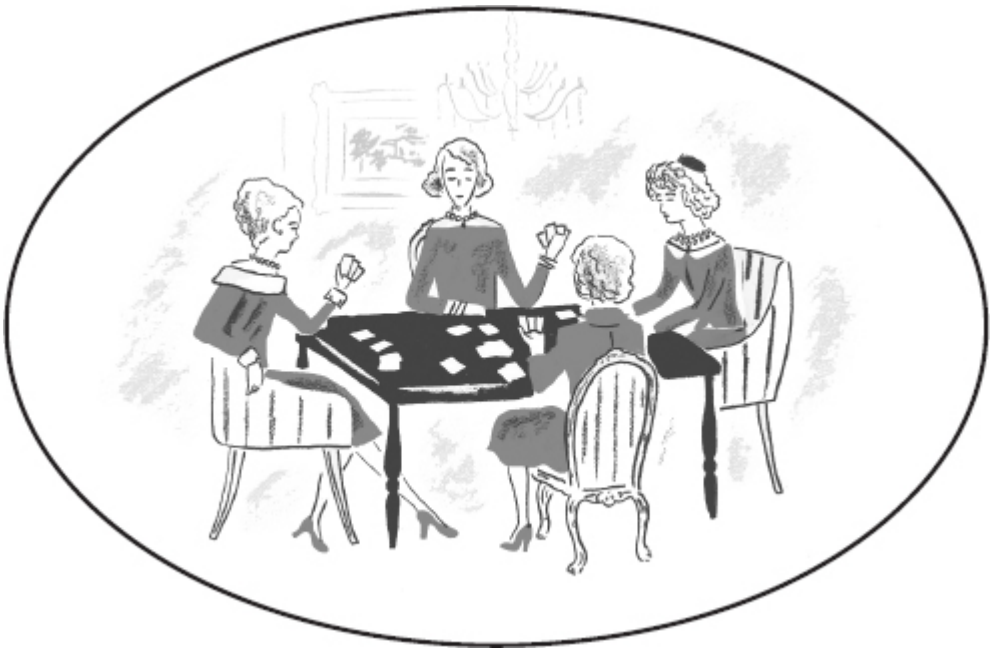

DEDICATION

For Roslyn and Raffaella,
my mother and daughter

EPIGRAPH

You get one mother in this world. Only one.

—Harvey Fierstein, *Torch Song Trilogy*

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PROLOGUE

As a child, I was fascinated with the Bridge Ladies. They showed up regularly at our house, their hair frosted, their nylons shimmery, carrying patent leather pocketbooks with clasps as round as marbles. I loved greeting them at the door, hanging up their coats in our front hall closet, where I often played inside the folds of my mother's mink. I watched as they gathered around the card table, crowded with a twinset of cards, ashtrays, cellophane-wrapped cigarette packs, a scoring pad, and crystal dishes of candy. Eye level to the Bridge table, I greedily surveyed the candy and would plan high-speed kamikaze raids to nab some from below my mother's radar. Where my father would let me sit on his lap while he played Gin Rummy for a hand or two, the Bridge Ladies erected a square fortress with their backs as they played, communing in their strange language of bids and tricks.

As a teenager, I'd make myself scarce when the Bridge Ladies came over. As far as I was concerned, they were square. They didn't work, didn't seem to get that feminism was taking over the world. Billie Jean King had defeated Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes Tennis Match, Gloria Steinem had started *Ms.* magazine, and Helen Reddy roared. To me, the Bridge Ladies were conventional, their sphere limited to family, synagogue, and community. Their identities restricted to daughter, mother, and wife. On top of which their idea of fun was an afternoon of playing Bridge. *Seriously?*

I was after bigger game. I was already reading Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller. In other words, I was determined to lose my virginity as soon as possible and have many lovers. I hated our New Haven suburb and my high school for its devotion to conformity. As far as I could tell, the most creative endeavor for the girls was growing their hair as long as possible in order to qualify for the national "Long & Silky" contest. All I wanted to do was get out and stay out. I spent my time dreaming of escape to New York, specifically

Greenwich Village, where I hoped to find like-minded people, poets, and writers. I moved there for college and stayed for graduate school. Though I didn't become a fixture at Studio 54 or Warhol's Factory, I'd made a life there: worked in publishing, eventually married, and had a daughter.

Then something happened. After twenty years of living and working in New York, my husband was offered a job at Yale University Press. You didn't need a Google map to see where this was going: New Haven, my childhood home and the crucible of my pain. I was supportive when he accepted the job; the reality of moving home took a little longer to fathom.

For me, the biggest challenge was having my mother become a regular part of our lives. When I lived in New York, we spoke once a week, perfunctorily on Sundays. Now I would be living 5.1 miles away from her. I told myself I could handle it. After all, I was well into my forties when we moved home, I was a mother in my own right, yet my conflicts with my mother still flared brightly. Why was everything so loaded? Why was I reduced to my teenage self almost every time we got together? Was everything she said a criticism, or did it only sound that way? We circled each other like wary boxers. Once, she asked why I bought low-fat cottage cheese instead of fat-free and nearly set off a world war between us. It was cottage cheese, for god's sake! Translated through the mother-daughter lexicon: Was I ever going to be good enough?

When my mother was recovering from some surgery in January of 2013, I stayed with her to help out. We had been living in New Haven for more than a decade by then, my dad gone, my daughter a teenager in her own right, we had made new friends and were knitted in. I had become a partner in a literary agency and was commuting to New York twice a week, getting my city fix. On top of that, God shined down his light on our fair city and conferred an Apple Store upon us. Did I really have any reason to complain?

I wasn't exactly looking forward to staying with my mother, but I also knew the job would be made less onerous by the fact that she, even at eighty-three, was more comfortable refusing help than demanding it, best summed

up in the well-known joke: How many Jewish grandmothers does it take to screw in a lightbulb? *You shouldn't worry . . . I'll sit in the dark.*

Every day, one of her Bridge Ladies visited, as if in an unspoken rotation. They were smaller now, some a little unsteady, but still decked out in color-coordinated outfits, accessories, heels, and bags. When they said I looked good, I wondered if they really thought I was fat, if my unruly hair was an offense. When they asked after my husband and daughter, it struck me that they had been there for all of the rites of passage in my life: they had attended my bat mitzvah, danced at my wedding, and sent gifts when my daughter was born. I had never really taken stock of their generosity; they likely had no idea how much adolescent rancor and disrespect I harbored. Or how I had clumped them all together like the presidents carved into Mount Rushmore, indistinguishable one from another.

As demographics go, the Bridge Ladies couldn't be more alike. They are all in their eighties, all Jewish, and they all attended college. They married young, married Jewish men, and stayed married to them. They had 2.5 children. None worked outside the home during the years they raised their children, except Rhoda, who shattered the stained-glass ceiling when she became the executive director at the synagogue. They did the shopping and cooked the meals; *The Joy of Cooking*, published in 1936, was their bible. They picked up the dry cleaning and cleaned their homes. (Eventually, each would be able to afford cleaning ladies, as they would all become upwardly mobile.) They decorated and planned vacations, from the Catskills to Puerto Rico to Rome.

They lived through the Depression and World War II. Some of their husbands joined the war effort. They witnessed the civil rights era, The Vietnam War, and the feminist movement, though they didn't shed their girdles or burn their bras. They were just a little too old or insulated to embrace *The Feminine Mystique* or articulate the problem that had no name. They saw interfaith marriage among their children and interracial marriage among their grandchildren. When they grew up, gay people were completely closeted, like movie star heroes Montgomery Clift and Rock

Hudson. Today, they are witness to the legalization of gay marriage in every state in the nation.

Though they were not all born in New Haven, they have lived in the greater New Haven area for all of their adult lives, they raised their children here, four have buried husbands here, and one buried a daughter. They are all in relatively good health (knock on wood, poo poo poo). Their adult children are as great a source of pride as they are of aggravation. They don't like to brag, but their grandchildren are brilliant. And on Mondays at noontime, for the past fifty-five years, they gather for lunch and Bridge, the card game whose golden age coincided with their generation's coming of age.

Bridge was the HBO of its day. In the 1930s and 1940s, 44 percent of American households had at least one Bridge player. Matches were broadcast on radios, and popular movies like *Sunset Boulevard* and *Shadow of the Thin Man* featured scenes with Bridge games. Robert Cohn, a character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, boasted about his winning streak at Bridge. The *New Yorker* published "My Lady Love, My Dove," a Roald Dahl story where a couple are caught swindling their hosts during an evening of Bridge. Charles Goren was a household name, the man who popularized the system of counting points still used today. His books have sold millions worldwide, clogged the best seller lists, and his Bridge column appeared in nearly two hundred newspapers. The guy was a rock star.

Enter television. By 1954, more than 80 percent of American households had TV. Evenings once spent listening to the radio and engaging in social activities like Bridge got crushed. Today, there are approximately three million active Bridge players, which puts the game on par with stamp collecting and fly-fishing. In 2015, after an eighty-year run, the *New York Times* cut its Bridge column. How long can the game exist? Not one of the Bridge daughters learned to play, not at our mothers' sides and not in college, where most of them learned in the parlor rooms of their all-girl dormitories.

When each one of the ladies braved that nasty winter to pay my mother a visit, I found myself inexplicably happy to see them, almost giddy as I took their coats, as I had as a child, hanging them up in our front hall closet. It was no longer stuffed like a dry cleaner's carousel with coats and slacks suffocated in plastic wrap. My mother's mink long retired, the closet now had a sad capacity. The wooden hangers clattered against each other like wind chimes before a storm. I held back an intense longing for my father, growing concern for my mother, and shame for how I used to feel about this small band of women. Each one brought a meal or brownies or cookies.

"I need those like a hole in the head," my mother would announce when they left, though we'd gobble them up after dinner while watching back-to-back reruns of *The Big Bang Theory*.

After my mother recovered, I couldn't stop thinking about her friends from the Bridge club and what seemed to me the vast distance between our generations. Even their names connoted a bygone era: Bette, Bea, Jackie, Rhoda, and my mother, Roz. (Though Bridge is a game for four, there are five women in the club. In case one can't play, they still have a game; this way the show goes on.) I had known these women my whole life and hardly knew them at all. I was deeply touched by their support and loyalty to my mother. According to her, the Bridge Ladies have grown apart over the years, their affection for each other is sometimes blunted, their lives diminished by the effects of aging. Despite differences and silences built up over the years, there exists a devotion to one another; these are dutiful women, their love flinty, but made to last. I knew that if I were to get sick, there wouldn't be such a steady stream of friends visiting. I'd be lucky to get a few texts with smiley face emojis and some messages on my wall. Facebook may connect us across the world and throughout eternity, but it won't deliver a pot roast.

I wondered what their lives would have been like had they been given our opportunities. Did they dream of having other partners? Were their marriages based on love, their husbands' potential as providers, or a combination of the two? Whenever I asked my mother if she loved my father,

her answer was always the same: he is a good father and a good provider. I got the feeling her ability to choose was as important as his ability to earn. And, of course, it was. For my mother and for all of the ladies, their fate largely rested on one choice: the man they married. Their financial well-being depended on it. Without a doubt, the men set the stages on which they lived their lives.

"I deferred to your father," my mother explains, though I remain incredulous. "I wanted to."

"Mom," I reply, "no one *wants* to defer."

"I did, I truly did." She means it. Or she thinks she means it. I remember many days growing up when deferring didn't look all that great.

I wanted Hepburn and Tracy, Bogey and Bacall; I wanted big love for them, not something prudent, economical. But the ladies come from a different stock. In the first place, they accept their lot. They are grateful for it! The concept of loving yourself first is unheard of to them. Who had time, with a husband and family to take care of? They didn't dwell on their inner lives. They didn't stretch their spines on yoga mats, and they certainly didn't spend hours in therapy sessions complaining about their parents. Oh, the billable hours my friends and I have logged both condemning our parents and seeking their love. If anything, the ladies don't understand our self-obsession, our selfishness.

When I asked the ladies if I could sit in on the game, they invited me to join them for lunch and Bridge on Mondays, and eventually into their homes for one-on-one conversations about their lives. At the outset, I was interested in the mundane moments: carpooling, packing lunch boxes, or mixing up a batch of sour cream dip with Lipton's Onion Soup Mix. I wanted to know about Dr. Spock and Dr. Seuss, and what it was really like raising a generation of children more entitled and indulged than any other that had come before, my generation: the baby boomers. I was also curious how they felt about all they missed out on: the Pill, pot, and Jimi Hendrix. What was it like finding a joint in a teenager's jeans, or birth control pills in her purse? In

the end, I wanted to know how the ladies felt about everything that mattered to me and to my generation. I wanted to see where we connected, if we connected.

I thought I'd go to the Bridge club for a few weeks but stayed for nearly three years. When they opened up to me, I found their stories moving and poignant. I once deemed the ladies not worth knowing; now I wanted to know all I could. This was especially true with my mother. I had no idea that by entering her world, I would begin to bridge both the generational gap and personal gulf that had defined our relationship.

A year or so in, I started taking Bridge lessons, a game that well acquaints you with your deficits. With little natural affinity for the game, I persisted, often at the encouragement of the ladies. My older sister, stupefied by my project, once asked, her voice thick with disbelief: Do you actually *like* Bridge? Do you like *them*?

These days, much of the conversation at the Bridge table revolves around accidents and illness, death and dying, which happen at an alarming rate. There was one Monday when the ladies talked about a two-funeral day earlier in the week. "You must think we're pretty morbid." Bette laughs. "But it's our life."

I get it. Death hovers over the Bridge table. How could they not fear taking that wrong step, that inaugural fall that leads to a broken hip, incapacity, or worse? Once, when I asked how a friend of theirs died, Bea looked me in the eye. "Old age, Betsy, have you heard of it?"

In part, this is a group portrait of the ladies, what they share with each other, but also what they keep to themselves. Like my mother, these women don't openly reveal their feelings. Pain is a private matter. Sometimes, watching the ladies play Bridge, I can see the girls they once were and the cards they were dealt; it's all there in their faces as they open a new hand of cards, each ripe with possibility, rife with disappointment.

In discovering the unsung lives of the Bridge Ladies, I also came to better understand the ragged path that connects me to my mother. This is our story, too.

CHAPTER 1

A Private Language

It was the Monday after the 2013 Academy Awards when I first sat down with the Bridge Ladies. It was Rhoda's turn to host. She lives in a tidy waterfront condo. You can tell that it's decorated with the furniture from her previous home in Orange, a residential suburb of New Haven, where she lived and raised her family for twenty-seven years. The dining room table is a little too big and formal for the space, and the two lamps flanking the couch in the living room are as big as third graders. But she loves it here; it was the perfect downsizing, the best thing she ever did, she says, turning around in her compact kitchen as if she were modeling a new dress. Best of all is the deck overlooking the water, where terns and osprey regularly visit, where the water reflects the light like foil.

Her table is set with linen and china. Napkins are gathered in silver rings, serving pieces are lined up like soldiers, and precut butter pats rest like a row of collapsed dominoes on a pretty dish. A noodle kugel fills the house with a smell I have long associated with love. On the table, a wooden trough-shaped dish holds a salad. It is hand-painted, and along the rim I notice Rhoda's name and her late husband's in a pretty script. *Peter and Rhoda*. There are reminders of their life as a couple all throughout the house, but I become fixated on this serving dish with the folksy script yoking their names. I wonder if Rhoda sees the inscription, if it makes her sad, or if it is part of the scenery now: his absence nowhere and everywhere.

I don't know what I was expecting, but when the Bridge Ladies arrive at Rhoda's, they don't seem all that happy to see each other, greeting one another with a bit of forced friendliness. Over time, I will witness all manner

of lightly veiled forbearance and exasperation among them in the form of eye rolling, sniffing, and dismissive body language. They never kiss or air-kiss hello. No hugging, no body contact whatsoever. I wonder if it has always been thus. As young women were they affectionate, demonstrative? Or were there rivalries and hidden alliances among them? Did they have fun? It's true that I can't stand some of my closest friends; why did I imagine anything different from the ladies?

When my mother sees me she does that thing she always does. If you blink you would miss it: the maternal once-over. Calculated in a few seconds, she inspects my clothes, my waistline, the sheen or lack of sheen in my hair. She will know if I've been getting enough rest, biting my nails, or picking at my face. Doubtless there are some mothers who gaze proudly on their daughters' figures and outfits, but for Roz and me what I wear and how I look have been a battleground from the time I began to dress myself.

Though none openly admit it, the Bridge Ladies, like most women of their day, groomed their daughters for potential mates. Yes, they sent us to college for an education but also hoping we would meet our husbands there. As recently as this past spring, 2015, my mother voiced her wish that my daughter choose a college with a good ratio, and she wasn't talking about teacher to student. Marriage was essential for our mothers. They feared for us going forward in life without the same protection they believed came with marrying a Jewish man.

One of the Bridge daughters put it this way: "They're from that whole generation of women whose prime focus was not career, but getting a man. So that's your capital."

I resented this pressure when I was in my twenties. I knew how badly my mother wanted me to marry, and it made me feel defective and unlovable even as I rejected her outdated values. I was pursuing a career; I wanted a soul mate, not a meal ticket. I once asked my mother what she would prefer: if I got married or won a Nobel Prize. "Don't be ridiculous" was all she said in response.

I posed the same questions to each of the ladies:

Did you always know you would get married?
Absolutely.
Did you ever consider marrying a non-Jewish man?
Never.
Did you know you would have children?
Absolutely.
Did you ever want anything else?
No (except for Bette).
Why not?
It never occurred to us.
Was it the cultural expectation or was it what you wanted?
Both.

In just one generation, the world they knew would radically change. Bridge daughters, collectively: some married Jewish men, some intermarried, some divorced, and some, god-forbid, did not marry. We would not return their serve. We got birth control and advanced degrees, slept with men we never intended to procreate with, moved to big cities, and lived on our own. If anything, I defined myself in fierce opposition to my mother, putting career and personal fulfillment over marriage and children.

I am well aware that for my mother how I appear before her Bridge club is as much a reflection of her as it is of me, and because I want to make a good impression with the women, I don't mind making an effort, though it's never quite enough for her. My mother wishes I would wear some makeup and accessorize with a bracelet, earrings, anything. She has been known to say, with just a hint of desperation in her voice, "Not even a little lipstick?"

I don't have to look at her to know what she is wearing. She could be a senior model for Eileen Fisher, with her wardrobe full of mix-and-match slacks, tops, and jackets. Her ensemble is rounded out with black Mary Jane shoes with fat Velcro straps, earrings, and a matching strand of beads, in all likelihood purchased at a quaint New England crafts fair or from one of the "funky" shops in downtown New Haven where all the jewelry vaguely

resembles a model of the solar system. But I give my mother credit for putting on her beads and bracelets, her Bakelite earrings that look like miniature mahjong tiles, or the gold ones that resemble tiny wine casks.

I marvel at how much care all the women put into looking nice for Bridge, especially as they only have each other to impress. But it's not about that: these women do not leave the house unless they are pulled together. Going out without lipstick on was like walking outside naked. When I ask each Bridge daughter what she remembers from the Monday club, the first thing they mention is how the ladies dressed. They were elegant, grown-up, always wearing hose, heels, skirts, and pearls, their hair teased, curled, straightened, or frosted.

I can tell my mother is relieved when I show up at Rhoda's looking "nice." In this case: black jeans that aren't too shabby, a loose-fitting cream blouse ("anything but black!"), shoes instead of sneakers, and the only necklace I wear: a gold pocket watch with roman numerals finely etched like scrimshaw on its elegant ivory face. I had admired it since childhood, often hunting for it among my mother's many jewelry boxes. Once, when I was home after graduating from college, which in my case is a euphemism for barely graduating, having been felled by a major depression, my mother happened upon me in her dressing room admiring the watch.

"Take it," she said.

I was astonished. She couldn't possibly mean it? I felt I had been caught red-handed and declined her offer.

"I'd rather you enjoy it while I'm still alive," she insisted.

I always thought the gift, given in haste, was my mother's way of telling me something she could never say, something that would always remain unsaid.

"Take it," she urged. "I want you to have it."

♠

When the house was quiet on a Monday afternoon, it meant our mothers were out playing Bridge. For all we knew they could have been having an affair with the tennis pro or embezzling the Sisterhood's Scholarship Fund. If someone was murdered in New Haven on a Monday, the ladies had an airtight alibi. What the ladies actually did at the Bridge table was a mystery. Even the score pad divided into two columns was like a riddle out of *Alice in Wonderland*: We and They. *Who were they? Who were we?*

It wasn't a game you could learn in an afternoon, like Scrabble or Monopoly. It wasn't even like other card games. No, Bridge was complex and certainly not for children. Still, I loved everything about playing cards: the suits and their symbols, the red Hearts and Diamonds, the black Spades and Clubs one petal short of a lucky clover. I loved the backs of the cards: some with elaborate Spirograph designs, others with animals, flowers, or covered bridges. My favorite had a pair of winged cherubs on bicycles in the center of the card and bare-breasted mermaids in each corner. I was mightily impressed with a deck of cards my dad brought home from a trip. They had the Pan Am logo and he said they were complimentary. How could such treasure be free?

I loved playing War, then Spit, then Gin Rummy with my dad. I loved Spades and Hearts and was the mastermind of an after-hours game of Hearts at sleepaway camp where a small group of us played by flashlight on our counselor's bed behind a partition at the back of the bunk.

Before I was old enough to understand any card games, I invented my own called Card Mountain where I'd throw a blanket in the air and let it fall into whatever shape it would take. I would then set up the cards, by suit, in the folds and nooks of the blanket, creating my happy fiefdom of cold-eyed kings, scornful queens. Jack was the dashing prince, and the number cards their loyal subjects. Sometimes I would have to throw the blanket a few times to achieve maximum ramparts and parapets, and when I was finished I would collect all the cards and tuck them back into their box, the blanket left in a pile like the pale outline of a ruined fortress.

♠

As the ladies head over to Rhoda's dining room table for lunch, Bea makes a straight line to the far end of the table. "We're not rigid," she says, "but this is my seat." Today, decked out all in purple, her metallic tennies and crystal bracelets that throw rainbows when the light hits them just right, Bea could be a poster child for Jenny Joseph's famous poem, "When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple," which celebrates old age as liberation from traditional conventions and expectations. The poem always grated on me, since the sad fact is that when you are old you are more likely to wear Depends and a Life Alert necklace. But not Bea, she is spry, sharp, funny, and the only lady outrageous enough to occasionally drop the *F* bomb. Bea isn't an old hippie or part of the counterculture, she just does her own thing and in this way stands slightly apart from the others.

Rhoda serves her kugel, and the ladies pass around a salad. She is the only one who has a "gentleman friend," her generation's term for boyfriend. There are framed pictures of them on the kitchen counters and scattered around the condo: at a benefit, on a cruise, with friends. It was unexpected this late in life, but I'm convinced it's responsible for the spring in her step.

I feel like an interloper. Do I participate or observe? Am I trying to impress them or they me? I am sitting next to my mother and it's as awkward as if we were strangers on a train. We are careful not to accidentally touch or make eye contact. Conversation starts with The Oscars. They all watched at least a part of the ceremony. The ladies are avid moviegoers, even though most movies today are "dreck" by their standards. Those who saw the foreign film *Amour* loved it; others avoided the all-too-real depiction of dementia. In a flush of civic pride, they were annoyed with screenwriter Tony Kushner, who portrayed Connecticut, their state, as voting against the Thirteenth Amendment in his movie *Lincoln*. They hated host Seth MacFarlane. *Feh!* He didn't hold a candle to Bob Hope. Forget about the dresses!