

STAGE TWO



Story of a Married Woman

“SHE CIRCUMVENTED ANY CONFLICT WITH COMPLACENT AGREEMENTS ...”

Part of Nina’s weekly routine was to spend one afternoon with her friend Sue. Sue wanted to spend the whole day with her, to have a “girl day,” but Nina resisted such an excessive demand on her time. Even the three hours they spent together challenged her sense of commitment to her family.

Sue gently pointed out to Nina, that she was making marriage the entire purpose of her life. Nina didn’t see her total dedication to her family as a failure and resented Sue’s interpretation. She admitted feeling overwhelmed at times, but believed that was the price of love.

They usually met at the community park. As they took a quick walk around the two mile course, they shared things about their lives. But, Sue did much more of the talking. She chatted openly about her relationship with her husband, Erin. He was such a good cook and good lover. He actually prepared most of the family meals. She talked about every aspect of their relationship without reservation or shame. Nina felt that Sue’s openness was close to sacrilegious and, at times, shocking.

She could never match Sue’s stories or her bold honesty so she listened passively offering neither insight nor reflection. Silence became her protective cloak, but it was not a peaceful silence. Nina often felt defensive with Sue, even when she knew it was not necessary. What was she defending, she wondered? Was she defending her family, her marriage or her life?

Nina knew that Sue could not understand the fact that she accepted her life as it was. She did not need to examine it or understand it. She thought of it as natural and normal. The difference in their viewpoints about marriage, made Nina unwilling to be closer to Sue. She circumvented any conflict with complacent agreements and common clichés that dismissed any real intimacy, but was always polite.

Since Sue’s lack of comprehension for what Nina held sacred made Nina unwilling to expand their friendship past a certain point, she wondered why she was devoted to these weekly rendezvous. Maybe, at a level she didn’t understand, she needed the anger, the discomfort they generated. Maybe she needed this woman to remind her that there might be a small morsel of life left that had not been consumed by her marriage. Maybe there was an inkling, that somewhere, there was another door.

On this particular day, as they walked around the park, Sue invited Nina to attend a woman's support group. At first, the idea was unthinkable. First of all, it was to be an evening meeting. She'd never spent evenings away from her family. Whatever privacy she had was scheduled during the day while everyone was busy and her privacy would not deprive them of her attention. How could she get everything done in time to leave? What would she tell Joe? He'd think of her as one of those "women libbers"? Wouldn't he assume this was a betrayal; a dissatisfaction on her part, with either him, the marriage, or the family? He would certainly think this meeting was in direct opposition to their family cohesiveness and their marital relationship.

She felt panic and shame about her inability to accept Sue's invitation, but she didn't think she could. She was emotionally torn in many directions as she tried to decide what to do. She knew it would be refreshing to have an evening to herself, but she felt guilty about asserting her need for a special time for herself. She was interested in the group's purpose, but she didn't want to be identified as a feminist. The 'new thinking' this group represented might challenge the order of her life. Joe's supremacy in her life could be threatened, as well.

She never had trouble taking care of her household and family while Joe occasionally traveled for business or when he and his friends spent a weekend a month fishing and camping. She never questioned the inequality of their free time because she was a woman and her life belonged to her family. Joe worked hard and deserved the free time ... Nina's justifications were indisputable: the children needed her and she knew how to care for them.... she knew what they liked to eat...what to do if they were sick... she knew their friends and the parents of their friends. Her children relied on her for their well-being and happiness. Her focus on caring for them flowed from her generous heart freely and without reservation.

But, Sue wouldn't let up. She called her every day to discuss the support group. Nina couldn't believe how pushy Sue was being. She kept explaining all the reasons why the group would be good for Nina.

What surprised Nina was not Sue's behavior but her own. Why was it so difficult to make this decision? Finally, however, after weeks of Sue's badgering, she accepted the invitation. She told herself she'd attend one meeting. That was probably all she'd need to dismiss the idea of belonging to a community of women. And, besides, what was she supposed to do there? Learn to talk the way Sue did? Nina found it interesting that she was both frightened and excited.

Joe wasn't happy about Nina leaving the house at 6:30 on a Thursday night. The kids weren't bathed, the dishes weren't put away, but he accepted the responsibility for this

one night. For him, household “stuff” and “kids” were too much after a long work day. Nina agreed and acknowledged openly to him that it was a disruption of their agreement. She felt torn between Joe’s non-supportive attitude and Sue’s demands. Who did her life belong to, anyway? How could going to a meeting cause such internal consternation? Obviously the “meeting” had a symbolic meaning in her life that she had not figured out yet.

Joe had never liked Sue. He thought she was an unfit mother and wife. Her kids were never disciplined. They rode around the neighborhood on their bikes after school and weekends without supervision. They always needed haircuts and their clothes never seemed to match. She knew Joe was right, but Nina liked them. They were creative, spontaneous and friendly. Joe thought that Erin, Susan’s husband was ‘pussy whipped.’ What successful mate had time to grocery shop and cook? He was sure Sue hadn’t learned to cook because she didn’t want the responsibility. The couples occasionally socialized together, but Joe’s resistance was too much for Nina to manage, so she rejected most of Sue’s invitations.

Sue assured Nina she didn’t have to ‘join’ the group. It wouldn’t cost her money and she wouldn’t have to speak to the group. Sue’s reassurances left Nina wondering what the benefits could possibly be if she was not required to actively participate. As she walked into the meeting, she was greeted by other women who seemed to understand how uncomfortable she felt. She was relieved to learn that there were other women there for the first time. She wondered if they too came with the idea that this would be their first and last meeting. Did they have to struggle with relationships and ‘time’ to get here? How did they justify an evening just for themselves? Being here seemed so self-indulgent.

A candle was lit and the statement of purpose was read. Nina listened to the silence as she watched the flicker of the candlelight. As she sat there, she felt a strange sense of peace that she hadn’t felt in a long time. “Things to do,” usually crowded her consciousness like flood waters. She had always accepted the ‘flooding’ as a positive indication of her dedication to purpose, love of her family, and the fact that she was so needed and so necessary in their lives. It was a life that seemed imprinted in her very soul, and yet, a part of her yearned for more.

As she listened to other women talk about their lives, she felt less lonely. She didn’t share her own story because she knew how boring it would be. She looked across to her friend. Sue was having a good time. Nina realized that Sue shared without self-censorship. She seemed ‘free’ in a way that was enviable, but foreign. Nina felt a new curiosity about Sue and a new respect. Now Sue’s life was a little more understandable; she came here to refresh her spirit and become a student of her own life.

There was, somewhere deep inside Nina, her inner woman....someone young and free, that long abandoned inner child. For the first time in years, Nina had a glimpse of her forgotten self. She had a revelation: it was Sue who saw her inner self and the possibilities that surrounded her. Sue was the only one in her life who offered affirmation that there was more to Nina than the life she was living. It was Sue's deeper wisdom about Nina's life that made her patient, persistent and a committed friend even when Nina rejected her invitation for intimacy. Every time they met, she expected that Sue would not call again. Part of her was relieved, and another part of her did not want to let go, as if she was waiting for life in some mysterious way.

The two hours passed rapidly. The meeting was drawing to a close and everyone was holding hands. Someone was saying something about dedicating the energy they'd collectively generated into the world of womankind. Womankind? That was a strange word. Could these women possibly understand what she was feeling? Did they all suffer in the way that Nina was suffering: silently, privately, personally, deeply, and emotionally?

She never really thought about the importance of other women. She always kept apart from most other people. When she did think about other women or women in general, she assumed that most were as dedicated and busy with their relationships and family as she was.

As they drove home, Nina was quiet. Her evaluation of the evening was limited by her inability to continue attending. She was sure that some women, maybe most women could profit from the monthly get-togethers, but she was living in the 'real' world. How could she change what seemed to be preordained by generations before her? Isn't the way she was living, the way women were supposed to live? Did she have the right to want more? Did anyone have that right? The idea of making life changes seemed inconceivable and exhausting. She thanked Sue and walked into the quietness of her home where she knew how her life would be. She knew and understood the rules.

As she crawled into bed, Joe turned over and folded his body into hers. She felt his quiet dependence and desperate possession of her life.