

OUTLINE FOR HER NOVEL ●

Cathy Allman

She wants to write about who she is as the heroine, but her mother creeps into the story. Her creator and her foil haunt every plot twist. She's trapped with her mother's character, eclipsing the beginning and pulling her back toward the place she's moved from.

When she speaks of her husband, she writes of the woman she is to him. It's important to her to be this woman: this homemaker, this lover, the mother of his children, his friend. That woman she writes about from her own point of view is a lovely lady who keeps house, and cooks, and she's funny, and she works out, and she got the kids through fine educations and into good marriages. She has friends. She has deep thoughts that she keeps between herself and the entity to whom she prays. She fills daily blank pages with questions.

But if she writes about herself from his point of view, she's critical. She objects to his habit of not courtesy flushing. She doesn't like the way he piles projects on his desk or doesn't wipe his fingerprints from the counter. She takes offense to the fact that when he feeds the dog chicken, he helps himself to some of the dark meat and skin—a bite for the dog, a bite for him. She doesn't like to watch him pick meat from the bones with his greasy fingers. She wants his portion on a plate, with silverware, napkin, and conversation.

And if she tells you about her children, she can't tell you what they think of her, the way they were unhappy that she made them build snowmen in the backyard so that the front yard stayed unblemished. When they bring this up, they laugh. She explains that the front yard is where the septic fields are, and she didn't want them eating snow that might have groundwater seepage. And that's not a lie. But they aren't wrong. She liked the snow without footprints.

She can't tell you about how they felt driving themselves to school, where their thoughts were, how they felt about merging into rush-hour traffic. She doesn't know how safe they felt when she was behind the wheel. She only knows she was afraid of some collision from a blind spot. Even if it wasn't her fault, there'd be damage.

She doesn't see herself when trying to write these stories.

She doesn't see what other people notice: the gap in her teeth, the gray at the roots of her hair, that sometimes she squints and has an expression that might look like disdain. Often her smile could appear forced. Her children called it her perma-smile. They never had reason to understand her superpower of smiling. They had no idea about her relationship with pretending.

They do tell her their feelings. She knows when they're nervous, knows how they talk their way into finding the positive, of keeping track of the good. She likes to think she passed on, by example, the vision of process, the possibility for change. But does she lie to herself? Does she try to focus on good when she writes in order to not mention the things that are wrong? The mold under the sink where the spray hose leaked; the corner of the garage where the drywall stayed wet and needs replaced. The fact that her daughter-in-law doesn't like her and her son-in-law thinks she's silly.

On a sunny day, you'd never guess that when it rains hard all the water rolls down the hill and turns the bend to saturate her front lawn and pools in her driveway. When it rains hard, she wanders in the runoff without boots. She carries a shovel, cursing, trying to unclog leaves from the drains.