She still passes out the hymnals (and bibs at meal times) at Wesley Willows Retirement Center in Rockford, and, you know, she still sings.

My mother found a familiar, but strangely illogical path to “freedom” from her eccentric upbringing with smothering elderly relatives. She got pregnant at age 16, quit school and married my 19-year old father, who had already dropped out of school. Seven months later this girl held her premature child in her arms for a few minutes, after which Linda died only several hours after birth. (Did this make me a dreaded middle child rather than the oldest?) So Mom carried on with her life. She got a Spaniel she named Rags, a good job at the telephone company, and pregnant with me by age 19. She remembers feeling angry that she had to give up that job (the rules for pregnancy were different then), and devastated that Rags was hit by a car and killed at the end of the driveway. Dad started to drink, like all the other men I knew. He always got to work on time, but he kept us up arguing until late into the nights. We all lived with sleep deprivation and no money.

Mom began taking classes for $30 a semester hour at the local community college. She recognized early on that her only leverage would be economic. When she finally threatened to leave my dad for real (I was 18 by then and just off to college) she had a two-year college degree in accounting that she earned, each in our own way, our voice meant that she named it) from her own experience, with or without me. I was downsized as her world got larger, embracing the only political and social philosophy that was comprehensive and realistic enough to satisfy her intellect and her heart. My comfortably antagonistic role became obsolete as she networked, read, and taught on her own. The rewards abound. Now my mother and I speak with one voice—a voice paid for by my grandmother’s hinge-packing and divorced loneliness. An alto voice Grandma passed on that finally learned to speak, as well as sing, through her daughter and granddaughter. Mom and I also had to earn, each in our own way, our voice of pain, our voice of power, our shared voice of feminism. It is a voice that never leaves, and one that we pass along.

Addendum: When I told my mother that I was writing this story, she replied, “Well, then, maybe I’d better write my own version, too!”

Ann Frank Wake is an associate professor of English at Elmhurst College in west-suburban Chicago. She loves to teach undergraduates, but squeezes in research on women of the Romantic period and writes poetry. She occasionally longs for a country life to echo the good in her rural northwest Illinois upbringing.

LINDA FRANK

Conversation Overheard on a Train

Mom, she said to me. You treat the dogs so good. You never treated us so good. So I said to her I never paid five hundred dollars for you either.

Linda Frank is the author of three chapbooks: Taste the Silence (1997), ... It Takes a Train to Cry (1998), and Orpheus Descending (1998).