

the alto voice, louder than all others. 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 a class or two at a time over a 12-year period while working full-time in Sterling. Dad sobered up under this threat and they had a good time for two years that I missed while away at college. (I always feared there was a connection between his new-found sobriety and my absence.) But dad died shortly thereafter of a heart attack, in 1980, at age 43 (Mom was 40, I was 20). The church helped. Believing in God helped. But only for a while. Material reality pressed in, complicating her already meager life, now irrevocably expanded by her formal education and her love of reading. Social reality

pressed in—the abuse from drunken husbands, the narrow views of women, no one to talk to. If first the church, then education saved my Mom, it was feminism that ultimately changed her for good.

I used to wish that I could rewrite my Mom’s story to look more like mine—great education, “real” career, freedom, late marriage (I was 31). But she had to earn and discover what I simply assumed and took from her. Like her mother before her, what Mom found, what she kept, and what she gave, was her voice. We both, like Grandma, had better than average alto voices (a motif that I now know links the three generations more tightly than I could know before), but Mom’s voice was always more courageous, if not stronger, than mine. Though I got stage-fright and refused to sing after age 12, Mom sang “Oh Holy Night” every Christmas Eve, bringing the congregation to tears, intensified by the beauty of candlelight. Now, her voice educates school children on domestic and sexual violence. This, the powerful voice, revised at age 55, but always strong and ever-present, and always in my ear.

I had distrusted the zealous enthusiasm of this converted feminist because, I realized later, I hadn’t really looked at her life, or my own. Mom hadn’t needed me as much as I’d thought. She’d have found her own “official” way to feminism (which

means 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!”

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## 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).*