WORDS

*"Of course, I'll be your witness, girlfriend."*
— Florence Ladd, Sarah's Psalm

*"Girl, I'm so pissed off, I don't know whether I'm coming or going."*
— Terry McMillan, Waiting to Exhale

*"We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." It was a fine cry — loud and long — but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.*
— Toni Morrison, Sula

# "Girlfriend"

*Carla Kaplan*

A few weeks ago my friend Julie died after a six-month battle with leukemia. Now one of the things I miss most is hearing Julie's deep, tired voice on the other end of the phone saying "Hey, Girlfriend," and settling in for a long, slow chat. Julie probably had been saying "Girlfriend" for years. In the way of Californians, she was not particularly anxious about whether her language would be seen as appropriating somebody else's cultural dialect. Like me, Julie was white. But if it worked for her, she used it. And "Girlfriend" worked for her.

"Girlfriend" really worked for her. In the months before she died, while undergoing bouts of chemotherapy and taking day trips to Point Reyes, Julie surrounded herself with a network of women. It was a sisterhood of just the type for which I have been pining for years. Locally, there were Erika and Maya, who arranged shifts whenever Julie was in the hospital. Celia was technically part of that threesome, but commuting

between Berkeley and Long Island where she was also caring for her mother's Alzheimer's. Jacqueline was up the coast in Portland, close enough to fly in often. And then there was Margaret, spending the year in Connecticut. And me. Six women.

IN HIGH SCHOOL THERE WERE SIX OF US too. Three pairs. Kathy and Susie. Elsa and Annie. And Tracy and I. I say pairs, not couples, because we were all straight. Meaning only that we were all fucking boys, that we all had boyfriends. But it was the girlfriends that counted. And that we counted on.

For example: at sixteen (this was 1973 and abortion was still illegal in Illinois) we started "the abortion fund." This was a joint savings account opened at the downtown Evanston bank with all six signatures and about fifty dollars each. The idea was to always have three hundred dollars on hand should one of us need to go out of state for an abortion, money we could withdraw on a moment's notice, without involving our parents, and — this was crucial to us — without having to depend upon any of the boys we were sleeping with. Not that they would be let off the hook. They would be expected to contribute — eventually — but it was taken for granted that they were not to be counted on when it really mattered, that we would take care of our own.

Three hundred dollars was a lot of money in 1973. So was fifty for that matter: money we saved out of teenage jobs as landscapers, waitresses, tutors and, in Tracy's case, doing voice-overs for industrial employee-instruction films. But the abortion fund was used three times, by two of the six, and replenished (by everybody) every time, without concern for whether or not everyone was getting equal use of it or whether some of us were putting money in and never taking any of it out — a position that those of us lucky enough to inhabit certainly recognized as its own form of good fortune.

Now it's in the nature of something like a teenage "abortion fund" that it be a secret. So maybe it's not surprising that I've never heard of





this done by any other group of teenage women (and with parental signatures now required in most states, an abortion fund would hardly be enough to give teenagers the sense of autonomy, control and safety I remember our giving one another). But there may be a question of cultural moment here as well.

When I was sixteen, there was nothing embarrassing about sisterhood. On the contrary. Declaring yourself a feminist was one sure-fire way to register being tough and independent. In 1973, if you wanted to be in on something sexy and a little dangerous, you became a feminist and you formed a sisterhood, multiple sisterhoods. You took care of your own — loudly, publicly, as visibly and defiantly as you could. You made sure everybody knew about it. That everyone knew what it meant to mess with you, knew who would know where you could be found, knew who did — and did not — know your business, where your interests did and did not lie. (Much of what motivates gang behavior, I suppose.)

Julie's sisterhood stunned and moved me, in part, because it seemed like such a throwback. Being with Julie and her women friends in San Francisco felt blissfully nostalgic, almost like being sixteen again, when we talked about "the women's community," "women's culture" and "women's language"; when we raised money for women's buildings and women's organizations; when we spent our time in consciousness-raising groups learning to identify with each other and with women we'd never met, learning from the Redstockings manifesto that we must "define our best interest as that of the poorest, most brutally exploited woman"; when, in places like the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which I joined in 1974 when its membership was already in the hundreds, we unselfconsciously called each other "sister."

That last, especially, is pretty embarrassing. Partly because it reveals how unselfconscious we were about aping, even appropriating, black speech, that use of "sister" and "brother" which was such an important gesture of defiance and solidarity in the early civil rights movement. But it's embarrassing primarily because what all sophisticated versions of

feminism now teach is that "sisterhood" not only allowed straight, white, bourgeois feminism to hold on to being straight, white and bourgeois, but that the very notion of "sisterhood" was a categorical error, founded on insufficient understanding of concepts like identity and difference. Since "woman" is nothing but what Judith Butler calls a "regulatory fiction" which reinforces the dual-gender system, the worst thing we can do is to foster identification with "women": as if we were all the same, as if we shared an essence, as if there was something substantive that connected one "woman" to another. "The 'us' who gets joined through such a narration is a construction built upon the denial of a decidedly more complex cultural identity — or non-identity as the case may be," Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*. And as identity increasingly takes center stage, one continually hears that as women we have no basis for solidarity, let alone for sisterhood. Indeed, prominent academic feminists have recently begun to argue that all forms of collective self-address — and "feminist" identifications in particular — can only serve to misrepresent our differences and that our energy is best spent avoiding all such terms.

But what then will be the message "we" will give to young women instead? And how dangerous, really, is the identificatory premise we're so bent on unraveling? When I joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, for example, and called those women "sister," I didn't really believe that we were all the same. After all, even though those hundreds of members were mostly white and middle class, it was still a pretty varied group, including, I can't help remembering now, Shelley Long-Solomon, who at the time was selling cheap, installment-plan furniture on late-night television ads but would go on, after simplifying her last name, to become famous for playing Diane Chambers on *Cheers*. I never confused our metaphors about sisterhood with being a *real* "sister" to someone who was so much smoother, blonder and thinner — so much more *goyish* — than I or anyone in my family would ever dream of being. I understood that "sister" was an ideal and idealizing term. It meant that we were supposed to look after each other and take one another's interests to heart.





Nor were we naive about what "interests" meant. I have no idea what Shelley Long-Solomon was "interested" in. And I suspect she wouldn't have been "interested" in what concerned the six of us (schemes for collective living that would enable each of us to work only ten weeks a year, as I recall). The point was that I never had to feel I could relate to her, I didn't even have to like her particularly, for us to be "sisters." Taking each others' "interests" to heart didn't mean erasing difference or making illusory assumptions of putative and constricting sameness. It was about rights. Our job, as "sisters," was to watch one another's backs, to look out for any instance in which our categorical status as women could be made an excuse for anything less than as good a deal as men were getting.

(Attacks on welfare and affirmative action, widening job and income disparities, lack of childcare, challenges to abortion law, the demonization of young single mothers of color — all of these would have followed naturally as matters of "interest"; now they often seem upstaged by preoccupations over identity politics and anti-identity philosophy.)

As a teenager I took in the double message of sisterhood — for double message it most certainly was — and immediately made sense of it by, first, working politically for women's rights, whether I could relate to my "sisters" or not and, second, turning to the women I *could* relate to, in the intimate sphere, to help me organize my life. This worked pretty well. And I don't think that the contradictions in the metaphorics of sisterhood addled my senses or made me blind to difference.

BUT, AS THEY SAY, THAT WAS THEN and this is now. For many years, the feminist intellectual vanguard of my generation has been part of a different double message. While many feminists have been proving that "sisterhood" is a pernicious myth that endangers difference, and thus encouraging students to see "feminist" as an old-fashioned appellation they are loath to adopt, popular culture has been saturated with nostalgic constructions of girlfriends. It's no coincidence that *I Love Lucy*, *Cagney and Lacey*, *Mary* and *Rhoda* — all the girlfriend

shows — are back on the air. Or that the dramaturgy of talk shows turns the entire production into the occasion for collective "girltalk" — that erotic, defiant discourse in which problems are aired, solutions devised, resolutions adopted. The talk show formula presents its dilemma — should I leave/marry/confront him? should I reconcile with my mother/sister/brother/boss/father/friend? should I remove my tattoos/leave the gang/turn in my sibling? — and the message that Ricki/Oprah/Montel/Sally must engineer is one that allows the audience (regardless of age or gender) to participate in "girltalk" by playing at being girls, mimicking, in fact, what is coded as the voice of tough, defiant, black girls (sassiness). The most important moment of the show is that in which advice and solution is offered: tough, defiant, no-more-nice-girls advice — "Girlfriend, kick him to the curb" or "Girlfriend, forget about whether he thinks you're fat and worry about your own self-esteem" or "Girlfriend, confront her and get it over with and get on with your own business" or "Girlfriend, lose that job 'cause you deserve better" — a message which, regardless of who says it, becomes the voice of the audience as a whole.

It's not that surprising that half the country (and white feminists in particular, perhaps) want to be able to talk in this idealized voice of black women. I remember in junior high school how desperate all us white girls were for a form of discourse that seemed tough mostly because it seemed so grounded. The black girls, in our imagination at least, never seemed confused about what their interests were, who was on their side, who was and wasn't a "sister." And if the talk shows are any indication, there's a deep national nostalgia for imagined forms of such groundedness, group identity and affiliational clarity.

BOYFRIEND" IS A SILLY WORD. (Unless you're a gay man, of course.) No woman in my age group wants to admit to having boyfriends. We have lovers. Or partners. Even Significant Others. But "Girlfriend" is another matter. There's something inspiring, even ennobling in the continued, renewed use of "Girlfriend," in being part of





the tradition that turned that word around by laying an altogether different stress (make it almost two syllables) and intonation (the voice goes down rather than up) on "girl." Where "boyfriend" designates a certain amount of inconsequentiality, even triviality, "Girlfriend" is sober. It has substance. It carries weight. In the sense I've been using it here, "Girlfriend" doesn't have to be rushed through your teeth as it is in describing a woman as some man's "girlfriend." And since it's used regularly and with aplomb by lesbians, its deployment by everyone else seems vaguely racy, doubly or maybe triply transgressive.

"Sisterhood" used to be like that. But then again, so was "feminism."

Recently, the *New York Times* reported that Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, a Southern Baptist minister, refused to authorize a $430 Medicaid payment for a developmentally disabled 15-year-old who'd been raped by her stepfather and, upon becoming pregnant by him, wanted, but could not afford, an abortion. Shouldn't some feminist sister be calling this woman "Girlfriend"?