

FORMIDABLE TANTE ESTHÈRE

Meredith Resnick, forty-five, a freelance writer in Irvine, California, on her aunt Esther:

I didn't know the word as a child, but intimidated was what I felt around Aunt Esther.

She was a world traveler, and sometimes she'd even come all the way from Manhattan on the diesel train to stay the weekends with us in Yonkers. I knew I was supposed to love her, but she made my palms sweat.

One of the first women to graduate from the Harvard School of Public Health, she went on to work for the World Health Organization. Aunt Esther had huge lolling breasts, thick ankles, and wore sensible dresses even when the humid air hung like embroidery, like a moldy shawl on her back. It protected her image. She squeezed her wide feet into Ferragamo pumps, rarely smiled, and insisted you call her Tante Esthère, preferably with an accent de Français.

Aunt Esther was never a mother or a wife; she was a midwife who delivered other people's babies and told the husbands what to do. She was bossy. And probably, everyone said, a lesbian.

She never talked about that. Ever. But looking back, I see her

biggest challenge was not the obvious—trying to fit in a culture and era that suppressed women. Her biggest challenge was just plain trying to fit in, [something] that would only come from accepting herself for who she was.

She was blessed with brains but cursed with pride. She focused, with all good intentions, on “bettering” the rest of us. I was much younger than my siblings (by twenty-one years) and new material for Aunt Esther to shape: sensitive, shy, introspective, and lacking confidence. She took me to Lincoln Center and the Guggenheim Museum; the United Nations and Central Park. I wore gloves and dresses. She showed me how to drink tea with my pinkie extended, though I never did it quite right. Her mouth tightened. “Keep practicing,” she said.

Thank goodness, she started bringing me books.

I remember the first time. At the end of our living room was a green-and-white club chair. Tante Esthère sat on the wide cushion like a throne and I sat on the arm, close enough to smell the Aqua Net in her hair. She cracked open Doctor Dolittle, pressed the cover page down with her polished index finger, took a deep breath.

Magic.

Sentences rolled off her tongue in English, French, and Spanish. She used accents and read to me in different voices, reading over passages I liked, letting me read to her—and when I did, she didn’t

criticize. This was not Tante Esthère, was it? Nor was I the scared, intimidated six-year-old.

We took turns with dialogue and she showed me how to look up words in the dictionary, told me it didn’t mean I wasn’t smart if I had to do that. I started looking forward to her visits. We read My Friend Flicka and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

She read to me past my bedtime. Once she stayed an extra night just so we could finish a book. She owned words, and then, miraculously, I owned them, too.

I started to love her—at least when she was sitting in that green-and-white chair with a book. She seemed nicer, somehow, maybe because her own fears about who she was evaporated during those interludes. When she read to me, somehow we were both freed. Maybe that was a gift I gave my aunt as much as the one she gave me.