

Maggie Lettvin's Stories about Jerry

My mother told the tale of her sister washing her waist-long, thick hair in the evening and hanging it over the top of the bed to dry overnight. Instead it froze. They had a difficult time ("The devil of a time!") rescuing her.

Bed pans and bed warmers.

Long handled, covered copper pan with hot coals inside, which would be slid between the sheets and moved about so you could get into a warm bed. There was no central heating. Under the bed was a chamber pot. There were no bathrooms. (Talk about being poor? Have you ever heard the expression, "Didn't have a pot to piss in?"). And that is why gentlemen walked on the outside, next to the curb. In the morning what was in the chamber pot was thrown out the window. Those closest to the wall might be missed. Streets must have smelled great.

My mother told me her mother never wore underpants. There were no public toilets. Skirts were so long, she told me, that young men would watch to see young women lift their skirts to step into the street or up onto a curb, just to get a glimpse of an ankle. Long skirts and straddling the curb to urinate were common, as the lack of public toilets gave them no choice.

Laundry had to be a problem. Many petticoats (half-slips) were worn, for good reason. Hoops served a purpose. Saved washing petticoats. The newly washed clothes were laid on the lawn or on bushes to dry. Hence "lawn dry".

Time changes things. Grandmother stories ARE history.

The early party lines.

First you pick the earpiece off the big black wall phone. Then you turn the crank. When the operator answered (we lived in a small town) we would say "Mrs. Robinson, would you get me Mrs. Pierce, please?" In the meantime, anyone in town with a phone would have picked up to listen, as the early phones were, so called, "party lines".

Time changes things.

At that time, on the street, if you came upon someone talking to himself, you were taught to shy away, to casually cross the street. Now you look for the cell phone.

Time changes things.

When I first started wearing a hearing aid in 1948, everyone told me to hide it under my clothes. I never complied because "clothes rub" would have messed up with the advantage of finally, being able to hear, but also, because, if someone noticed, they would, "speak up". An advantage for me. Now everyone has an iPod and think I am a music lover.

Time changes things.

When milk was first pasteurized my mother was incensed. She claimed they were "killing the good bacteria along with the bad." And so incensed was she that she bought a small, seven acre, farm and a cow. The house on the property was in part very old. There were handmade

nails in the early parts. It was quite a gracious home but in atrocious condition. I remember counting as my mother scrubbed the big bedroom floor. Fourteen buckets! And every bucket necessary. She had actually had to have the entire house fumigated before we could even begin to clean it.

And there was no bathroom. When we first moved in we had to use the outhouse which was out by the barn. Until we could afford a bathroom the outhouse was our only option. The Sears Roebuck Catalogue served not only as reading material but also as toilet paper. Of course we tore out only the pages that did not have one of our hearts' desires on it. That started many arguments.

In cold weather the icy wind on our butts hurried the process of elimination. In the summer, it was the flies. Being the wimp in the family I was often trapped in the outhouse by my sisters' pet rooster. He was wicked and recognized me as a ready victim. It is not a place you would choose to be trapped. Did I mention the smell? And twice as bad in summer!

If you needed to go in the night the dog would always accompany you. Very obliging. Always up for a walk. They always slept on our beds so if we ever stirred they were with us. But, of course, we tried to go to the outhouse right before bed and tried hard to hold it till morning.

Jerry and I were on our way through to the Midwest when the grant for the intended work fell through. Our first child was imminent and we were in Chicago near his family. He quickly found a job at Manteno State Hospital as "night physician" in exchange for a laboratory, free housing, and a very small salary. (\$3,000. A year!)

At that time the state hospital had 7,000 patients, seven doctors, including Jerry, four of whom were refugees from Germany. This was in 1948, just after the war. The four from Germany were very educated and knowledgeable but totally ignorant of the local mores. It created some truly hilarious but quite serious problems. One patient trying to get released was asked how many children he had. He stated about a hundred and twelve. They were about to send him back to the wards when Jerry suggested they look at it a little differently. In Chicago, there was a community of new immigrants who felt so strongly that newly married women should become pregnant as soon as possible that the women would save their money and pay a man known to be a good inseminator to impregnate them if their husbands didn't get the job done. The husbands, supposedly, were kept in the dark about this. But Jerry knew. The fellow was freed but only after much disbelief on the part of the immigrant doctors.

Our son, David was born at the Henrotin Hospital in Chicago, and we were in Manteno State Hospital within three months.

The train that ran through Manteno at 6: a.m. Run by a local engineer. He would blow the whistle to say "hello" to his wife, waking everyone an hour before they had to get up for work. He was given orders to stop blowing the whistle because the birth rate was going up way too fast.

When we first arrived at Manteno, there were 7,000 patients and only 7 doctors. It was not just a hospital for the insane. There were many elderly with no place to go. There were those who had come out of hospitals with no home to return to. There were some who should never have been

there. And of course, the ones who did. But how to care for all of them? An almost impossible job.

But who was crazy? It was found, at one point, that what was thought to be a vitamin supplement was really a placebo. The necessary paperwork was done to correct the problem. The answer came back. We had to finish our supply of the current pills before they would send the true vitamins.

None of the doctors at Manteno had ever done autopsies there. Jerry got them started by having them make bets about what the patient had really died of. First they all got a chance to read the often voluminous medical records, then make their guess about the real diagnosis, and then the autopsy would be done. I never attended but heard often from Jerry about the true reasons for the deaths. More often than not, what was thought of as mental illness had a physical cause.

Jerry told me that when he was in medical school (he graduated at 24 years of age) studying at home was not comfortable. He claimed that any young man needs to see a naked female every now and then. So he had taken to studying in a back booth of a strip club, The Pink Poodle, on South State Street in Chicago. Since he was there night after night, studying both his medical books and the naked women, the owner Louis came to know him well, trusted him and turned to him when any of the young women became upset or ill.

As a result of this relationship, several years later, after Jerry had left the army, married me, and had already spent a year at the University of Rochester in New York State, Louis asked for Jerry's help when the Pay for Play, public (and highly public) cameras along South State street were being raided by the cops. Jerry (28 now) arranged the cameras so that the moment anyone knew the cops were on the prowl, all the cameras would shift to an ordinary movie. We heard that the "startle" reaction on the part of the viewers was something to behold. Louis wanted Jerry to continue to help and promised that education money for our children would appear under our pillows unexpectedly. I convinced Jerry this was not such a good idea. When we came back to Mass, Louis wanted to provide us - "gift" us - with a bullet proof limousine. I convinced Jerry it would not be a good thing for me to drive our children to Revere Beach in such a car.

This story was probably because of the density of those patients already on the edge. I was astounded to find out that the full moon really does affect people. Every full moon the attendants at Manteno State Hospital were kept very busy trying to calm the patients. The police would be sending people out from the city who had been affected. Murders would be committed and a handful of people from different areas would claim to be the culprit. The world is a strange and wondrous place. Reality is unreal.

Jerry's' mother decided that our marriage by the Mayor of Rochester, NY was not valid enough. She wanted us married "properly" by a Rabbi. She also wanted me to convert. I did, mostly, try to please her. Jerry and I went to his mother's Rabbi of choice. There was some discussion but finally Jerry said, "the Talmud says a woman taken in the time of war does not have to convert" Finally, the Rabbi put a blank sheet of paper in front of me and said, " Sign here." I responded that it was blank. The Rabbi said "You know it, I know it, Jerry knows it, but we're trying to make

Jerry's mother happy." It was some forty years later that I actually looked at the marriage certificate from the Rabbi. It was not signed. The ceremony was performed at Jerry's family's home. I was seven months pregnant at the time. Usual now. Not then.

Jerry spent his time in the army as a doctor, a psychiatrist, constantly out of uniform. He was in charge of a hospital behind the Battle of the Bulge. Many of the "shell shocked" were sent to this hospital. Because of his stories about this time in his life I have always loved the television program, MASH.

One of these stories is about the men sneaking women onto the wards. There was a terrible problem in the army, with venereal disease. Jerry told the men that if they would bring the women through the infirmary first, so they could make sure they were disease free, they could stay over the weekend. Big hit with the men but not with the Army. But that was just one time the army tried to court martial him.

He had another man come in, severely shell shocked and wearing someone else's dog tags. Picked up on the battlefield, he had no dog tags on him. The medics picked up the nearest dog tags and put them around his neck for identification. Some other doctor had, thinking he was suffering a brain injury, convinced him that he was that person and had gone to a lot of trouble to give him a history not his own. It took Jerry much time and effort to unscrew his head. To convince him he really was a baker from New Jersey and not from Texas after all.

Jerry spent most of his time in the Army in bedroom slippers and without his insignia. I never, in 64 years, saw him brush his hair, so he probably didn't in the army.

The medical unit Jerry was in was given insulin to be used as shock treatment for the patients. They had an overabundance of insulin. Jerry knew the local town had its share of diabetics but no hope of getting medication. He told me of being chased along a booby trapped road where the French knew where the traps lay, but the MPS had to slow down allowing Jerry and the French to make their insulin delivery to the town's doctor.

Jerry was heading up a base hospital behind The Battle of the Bulge. The Army came to Jerry, who was first a neurologist, to ask why so many of their soldiers in convoys through a particular part of France were having seizures. Maybe you have seen photos of those beautiful tree-lined roads. Jerry suggested that it had to do with the rate of speed with which they were passing the trees as they were driving. He suggested they either go faster or slower. It did solve the problem.

Jerry told me about the little girl at the local bar in Auxonne that he used to bring books to. About eleven years later on our way, with a Navy Grant, to the Aquarium in Naples, Jerry suggested we stop in Auxonne and see if the bar was still there. We were barely inside the door when a young woman screamed "Jerry!" and jumped into his arms. I'll bet she's still there. I'll bet she still remembers.

When Jerry was in medical school he did his internship at Boston City Hospital. There are many stories. One Halloween a woman came into the emergency ward, very drunk with her front teeth knocked out and she was bleeding and drooling. The medical records are permanent - they cannot be changed. Jerry put "werewolf" on her permanent record. The head of his department,

Denny-Brown, gave him hell but became very attached to him. They would make bets on diagnosis. Years later he came to a party for Jerry's retirement.

Jerry was still in his residency when the Coconut Grove fire broke out. He told me of the stacked dead bodies in the halls, the sounds, the smells, and the local Mafia turning up with bushel baskets of drugs for the dreadful pain the still living were in.

He told me of the man who came into the hospital with the same symptoms his elderly mother had died from, just a few months previously. Her son had been her only caretaker for years and now lived alone. None of the doctors could find anything at all wrong with him. Jerry was sitting by his bedside trying to get enough information to go further when the fellow said to him, "Doc, I guess it's just time for me to die". Turned to the wall and died.

Another case was an elderly Italian man who Jerry became very fond of. He had a serious problem that made it very difficult to swallow. But he constantly said. "If I could just taste my wife's spaghetti one more time." Jerry told him it would probably kill him which he acknowledged and yet still said it was what he wanted before he died. Jerry discussed it with his family. The next week the whole family came in dressed in black carrying a container of his favorite spaghetti.

Early on, in medical school Jerry became very interested in hypnosis. He told me of an incident that made him very cautious in its use. He decided to try out his new knowledge on a bunch of young nurses. After the usual intro and getting them into an accepting frame of mind he suggested they imagine the entire group without heads.

The following hysteria was a lesson for him. Being nurses they imagined those living bodies with blood spurting all over the room. He said it was a very long time before he tried hypnosis again. But not long enough. I seldom left Jerry to babysit. It was not one of his strong points. I returned home one day to find my firstborn sitting in the kitchen giggling at—nothing! It seems Jerry had hypnotized him into believing he was watching a Disney movie. Jerry was in the next room.

We were visiting at Jerry's family's house. We had had breakfast. His mother and sister went shopping. Jerry went to Warren's lab and I was left at the apartment with our baby and Jerry's father. He was a lawyer and a very sweet and gentle man. Trying to be useful, I cleared the table, putting the dishes in the sink with the dishes from the night before. I was a Quaker from a small town. What did I know about Kosher? Jerry's father must have heard the noise. He came out, stood in the kitchen door, smiled a strange smile, turned around and walked back to the living room. Jerry thought that was funny. Knowing his father, the dishes were probably sorted out before his mother came home.

What I thought was funny/strange was his mother still made up two beds in two different rooms when we came to visit. We already had one child. Not that Jerry ever noticed the second bedroom. His mother did come to visit me in the hospital when the baby was born. She sat on the side of my bed and very obviously counted the months we had been married on her fingers. For some strange reason I always forgave her. Even then I knew that any mother - especially a Jewish mother, would want her son, the doctor, her eldest to marry a wealthy, educated Jewish woman. And to set the example for the other two sons. I really did understand. And we had gotten married in two weeks after three dates. I am surprised she ever got over it. Maybe she didn't. But I became her confidant.

When we first moved to Manteno we were put up in their apartment building while one of their ranch style houses for the doctors was prepared for us. We lived just a short distance from the wards. My poor baby was colicky. (I still wake myself up in my late eighties patting my chest where my pitiful child would be whimpering. I still find myself rocking the grocery cart as I, many times, rocked his coach.) The laundry at the apartment building was in the basement. If the baby ever slept it was my cue to rush to the basement to wash the diapers. (NO throw away diapers in those days. Not even a Diaper Service.)

The capable patients worked cleaning the apartments. They would tell me, "leave your door open. If the baby cries we will come get you." The baby did cry. They did come get me. And then they all went to the basement and washed the diapers for me and hung them out to dry.

At Manteno we, the staff, were given ranch houses, and were allowed to have the more normal patients work for us. But we were only allowed to pay them four dollars a week for full time-eight hour days. I made up for it by giving them gifts. (For which I was reported by one of the other doctor's wives.)

Who is normal? A couple of the doctor's wives would not allow their patient helpers to use their bathrooms. In mid-winter you would see these poor creatures traipsing the half mile to the main building several times a day.

Jerry really got into teaching me about different kinds of mental illness by picking out my "next" helper. I really spent most of our (my help and I) time together over meals and coffee, talking. And our turnover was great as I managed to get many of them back home.

I kept hearing about Birdie who ran the patients library. Every patient I met told me she should not be in the hospital. They apparently were at the same time telling her she should come to me. She turned up at my door one day, was immediately brought in for a cup of coffee and conversation.

She was a pleasant looking woman about mid-thirties. This is the story she told me. She had met, fallen in love with and married very quickly a young soldier. This was very usual during the Second World War. Her husband was, within weeks, sent overseas. She finds herself pregnant and tries to reach her parents who are vacationing somewhere in Europe. They have been killed in an auto accident. She has a miscarriage. Tries to let her husband know. He has been killed in action. She attempts suicide. Lands in mental hospital. I told her I would have been surprised if she hadn't attempted suicide. She has been running the library at the hospital ever since. It had been at least six years since she arrived. Each time they try to release her, she makes another suicide attempt, just enough to keep her in place. "No place to go" she tells me. I got her to go out on passes for weekends only for a while. After several weeks she got a job and moved out permanently. She did end up remarried. She sent me my very first television set as a gift, with a note, "you're going to go crazy out there."

The following story is from before 1951, at the state hospital. Jerry had been telling me about a drug he had used on a patient, a young woman (Parkinson's usually afflicts older people) with Parkinson's and the remarkable results. He invited me to come and see it firsthand. This was an attractive woman who could not have been past thirty, but was as if frozen. She had been brought to the room before I arrived. I still wonder how they got her there.

I don't remember how he gave her the medication, it was l-dopa, but Jerry said, just relax and watch. He talked to her very sweetly for the next half hour or so and as time passed I was watching her body slowly relax. Finally she was moving more easily, beginning to smile, beginning to speak, and finally, on her feet, thanking him profusely and half awkwardly dancing around the room, and begging him to do this every day or to make it permanent so she could go home.

I also watched her ease of movement slowly fade over a few hours. Jerry gave her a pencil and paper and told her to write down how it felt as she slipped back into her normal frozen state. When we left the hospital a year or so later, I couldn't help worrying about her. Jerry continued her treatment while we were there. Unfinished business - painful memory.

Jerry came home late one night from the hospital telling me of an alcoholic who had come in so shaky he couldn't even sign his name. Jerry had been given a drug called Milltown to experiment with. Within some period of time after taking this drug, the fellow signed a perfectly readable signature which he had been totally unable to do previously. Jerry was so impressed he continued to research the drug and reported back to the company. He further told them that the drug lost its usefulness over a period of a few weeks. The company thanked him profusely, paid him for his efforts and gave the research to someone who claimed its good effects lasted as long as they wished. (Or as long as the pharmaceutical company wished.)

One of our doctors was a severe alcoholic. When he would go on a serious bender the hospital would put him to bed in our little hospital in an oxygen tent till he recovered. That was fine and worked well. One night Jerry was called. It was an emergency! When Jerry arrived he found our friend still in the oxygen tent, fighting the nurses trying to get out and brilliant red in the face. Jerry knew what the problem was the minute he saw the tank. It was not oxygen but the carbon dioxide that Jerry had been using experimentally. That the tanks were a different color had not been noticed by the attendants.

Jerry came home one morning telling me he had an unusual night. A very big drug dealer from Chicago needed to disappear. He knew he could be tracked by his own habit. He had been paying off the Chicago Police for years but now it was important that he get his own drug habit broken and totally leave the area or end up in jail for years, or worse yet, dead. He had too many enemies to look forward to jail. He wanted his stay at the hospital to be totally secret for fear of recriminations. He was there under an assumed name. Jerry worked with him for several weeks. One morning he just was not there. We never did hear anything more about him.

I have been trying to figure out how it happened that people came to know of Jerry and came to stay with us and work with him this far off the beaten path. But they did, endlessly and in a sizeable number. He was unique. We were forty miles south of Chicago. The closest town was

of a few hundred people. We had Jerry's good friend Walter Pitts (mathematical genius but incredibly sweet and fragile) who would visit often. And my mother and sister visited often. But there were those researchers from England, France, Italy! How did this happen? When I first met Jerry he was just out of the Army where he worked as a psychiatrist. He really considered himself a neurologist- called psychiatry Voodoo. He wanted to go into research, his mother wanted him to work as a psychiatrist. His mentor, Warren McCulloch, told him to claim he was a biologist and he was sure to be accepted. He did and he was! By everyone! And they loved his work! Astounding!

I gave birth to my second child in a state mental institution, worse yet, on April Fool's Day! The day I gave birth to my daughter, I started my day fixing breakfast; blueberry pancakes, for fourteen of Jerry's colleagues and wives. I knew my labor had begun but there were people to feed. Finally one of the wives caught on, came into the kitchen and said, "Are you in labor?" I replied that it was okay, that I was almost finished, to which she replied that I was finished. The hospital was just a short walk away.

I had totally ignored the fact that my first labor had lasted only two and a half hours. I did have a childhood friend who was working at the hospital as a nurse. Being so short on doctors she was doing her best to keep the baby from arriving before the doctor did. Half squatting with one arm wrapped around one of my thighs, the other hand trying hard to keep the baby in place. Of course the doctor didn't arrive, but the baby did. And so my second child was born in a state hospital on April Fool's Day. My one and only daughter.

Jerry once made a visit to the local retarded children's home. He was white-faced for days and very quiet. Finally he said to me, they should take a machine gun in there. You'd be doing them a favor." He would never speak of it again.

Wiener and the computer cards

Jerry and I had just lately arrived at MIT. We were walking along a hallway with Norbert Wiener, the two of them talking away as we walked. A young man came from behind us pushing one of the rolling carts, filled with the cards, which were used at that time, from computers. Norbert held up an imperious hand and said to the young man as he passed, "Young man, Hold on there a second." The young man, of course, stopped and looked to Wiener. He reached into the cart and took a handful of the cards and said, "Alright, go on." The young man continued on his way with a puzzled expression. Continuing his conversation with Jerry, Norbert took a small detour to deposit the cards in the trash, and continued on down the hall with us. This could, of course, destroy months, if not, years, of someone's work.

Cards, to long rolls, to big noisy printers, to small, quiet personal printers. I saw my first printer, small coffee shop size, completely enclosed in glass because it was so noisy, at the company where I bought my first computer. That printer was so noisy we had to shout over it, even though it was completely enclosed.

I actually saw MIT's first computer. I seem to remember it as being in 77 Mass Ave. As you came into 77 Mass. Ave, it was just beyond the main entrance on the left hand side of the hall. I clearly remember that that one computer was wall to wall, floor to ceiling and I never, ever saw it

when it was not occupied, middle of the day or middle of the night, but by only one person at a time, unless the user had a friend watching or learning. Once someone managed to get to use it, it was very difficult to dislodge them. They came prepared with lots of fast food since they knew if they vacated for a minute someone else would jump in and be impossible to dislodge. Each computer then was one of a kind. Now almost anyone can hold something much more powerful and useful in one hand. Costs a lot less now also.

Jerry and I were also at MIT when everyone had a slide rule in HIS back pocket. It seems they disappeared instantaneously the same year calculators came out. I did not speak incorrectly. There were very few women, faculty or students there at the time. Good thing. Few women wore slacks then. No back pockets to hold the slide rule. Few women wore slacks then either.

Walter Pitts was Jerry's best friend. Jerry met Walter at the University of Chicago when he was a medical student and Walter was, at that time, a paperboy who liked hanging out there. Extremely brilliant, he was constantly bullied by his father and all his classmates and neighbors. He hid out in libraries where he read endlessly. I watched him read once. He would glance at the left/ then right/ then turn the page. It was now in his memory forever for him to find the errors in or connect to other bits of information gleaned in his years of reading.

Jerry and Walter became very close. Walter was a very sweet, fragile and brilliant person. He visited often, living with us off and on. He became very close to our children and loved to sit in the kitchen as I got them ready for school. He found our morning routine very amusing, constantly chuckling and twisting his hair. I enjoyed his enjoyment.

We had a very long and close relationship with him and we all still miss him and speak of him. He had been working in Jerry's lab for years, living in an apartment across the hall from us. Then moved in with us. Our nine year old son came home to find him unconscious and bloody on his bedroom floor - from drinking lab alcohol from Jerry's lab. He had taken a standing lamp with him as he fell. I visited him in the hospital and as gently as I could, explained that his misuse of the lab could cost Jerry his job and that it was important that not happen. Sadly for us, he moved out of our apartment after leaving the hospital and from that time on Jerry was searching the local bars for him. This went on for a few years till Jerry found him, already dead, in his rented room. He had bled to death from the varices from his alcoholism. Could I have handled it differently? Better? He was so fragile. I never saw him again. That is not what I wanted.

His sister and her husband visited us after his death. He had never once returned home but sent yearly Christmas presents to his mother. A very sad story. Jerry never stopped missing him. We all did.

So many other stories of Walter's fragility and brilliance. Somehow Jerry had managed to get him a small salary from MIT. A year or two later Walter moved. Of course he was so innocent he never changed his address at MIT. And, of course, since his checks did not arrive, he believed they had fired him. Jerry found out, by accident, when Walter was looking very bedraggled, what was going on and got a change of address for him. Walter would climb out windows to avoid

unwanted contacts and would return books to the library late at night to the book drop to avoid what he felt were confrontations with librarians.

The mind of a giant (genius) in the body or ego of a child. A truly fragile and sweet nature. I never did figure out how (or even if) he got a drivers license. Walter asked to take my eldest son mountain climbing. I agreed, not even thinking about how this would be accomplished. My son told me Walter was absolutely rigid at the wheel of the car they drove to New Hampshire. Now who would have given him a license? (Yes, and who would allow their child in a car he was driving.)

Jerry never even mentioned to me that he had a very expensive microscope go missing. I believe that was because in Building Twenty there was a tradition of "Midnight Acquisition".

You would do a piece of research and when finished would push the equipment to an unused corner of the lab till it was once again needed. Others needing that particular piece of equipment for a project of their own and not wanting to take the time or the money, would ask around, find who had that particular piece of equipment, and "borrow" it, late some night when it might go unnoticed.

So one night Jerry and I were watching Sixty Minutes, when one of his colleagues from another university, who had been spending much time in the lab, came on, sitting in his lab, complaining that GE had stolen his ideas. The phone rang. It was Brad Howland. He said "Jerry are you watching Sixty Minutes? Look in the background at the lab. There is your missing microscope!

I do not think "Midnight Acquisition" was meant to be universal.

When I began teaching "Self-Designed Fitness" in the Athletic Department in 1967, I was the first woman to teach within those hallowed, all male, halls. We started with four female architecture students and by the end of year one we had two hundred students a day, 95 percent women - in leotards - running through the halls to our class (easily outnumbering all the male athletes at the time). The head of the department was not happy at all. The fencing master, Nitale, was my benefactor, loaning us his room until we had to open it up even further, several months later, adding the wrestling room to our needed space. That heavy attendance was for the school year. Summers were quieter.

Jerry once gave a series of lectures at the New York Museum of Natural History. He was required to be in formal dress. Jerry had never worn formal dress. His daily uniform was a short sleeved shirt, black chinos and sneakers. He might have worn a tie about three times a year on average, for funerals and weddings. This in spite of the fact that his mother continued to send shoes, suits, shirts and overcoats for well into our twentieth year of marriage. At one point we had a full dozen, very nice, absolutely unused, overcoats hanging in our closets.

We rented the formal outfit which he was required to wear for the lectures, at Keezers, a well-known local place. He did manage to get through the lectures decently clothed, but at the end of each lecture, when many wanted to gather at the foot of the podium to ask further questions, Jerry would doff his jacket, roll up his sleeves and (the Natural History podium is unusually high) lie down on the stage on his very substantial belly and follow up on all questions. Every evening

I would get the hotel staff to get his formal wear completely cleaned for the next event. They did ask just what he was doing to them. I doubt these formal clothes were ever used the same way again.

My friend stayed in England in the 1960s. She claimed this as her daily winter routine. Before you went to bed you had to fill a teakettle with water. In the morning all water in the pipes - and the water in the teakettle - would be frozen. You heat up the water in the teakettle and use the boiling water to pour over the frozen pipes and use a stick or hammer to break up the ice in the pipes, to get the water flowing again. While the water was boiling, water would condense on the ceiling and drip down onto her.

Jerry Wesner's retirement party

Of course we went to the retirement party for Jerry Weisner from the Research Laboratory of Electronics. Our families were friends. Jerry W. spoke of being a little concerned that, now that he was retiring, the Navy might decide to hold him responsible for a ship that had been signed out to him during the war, and was somehow lost. Funny and horrifying at the same time.

I went up to him at the end to wish him well and he insisted I take the enormous flower arrangement home with me. I was not into taking flower arrangements. It was the only one I took in my whole life, but he was adamant. We were house parents at Bexley Hall, a dorm at MIT, at the time and my mother, who was quite ill, was staying with us. She was sleeping when we came in so I just put them on the bureau next to her bed as a surprise for when she woke up. She was surprised all right. She told my colleague later that morning that when she saw the flower arrangement (it WAS very large) that she thought she was dead. She was in her late eighties at the time.

My mothers' sister and the tea bags

I know I was somewhere under eleven when tea bags were first introduced. My mother being English, thought they were amusing. She sent some off to her sister in England without enough explanation. Her sister wrote back thanking her but asked if she didn't think it was just too much trouble getting the tea out of the bags.

Jerry called me. I was in Kansas visiting our daughter and her children. He said he was - and had been - in serious pain, for several days. He said he had appendicitis. He was a doctor. Who was I to second guess him?

I, of course, immediately left for home. I knew he would never go to the hospital unless forced. My daughter said he did it on purpose. He did not like me to be away from him. He would have department stores reach me by intercom. His mother used to do the same to him.

On my arrival we turned right around and went to Beth Israel Hospital where he was diagnosed with appendicitis. He was taken right into surgery. After surgery the doctors would not let me see him. After thinking about why that might be, I found the doctor and asked, "Do you think he is having seizures? They asked why I asked. I told them he had sleep apnea and each time he

stopped breathing he then struggled to breathe and it looked "seizure like". They took me in to see him immediately.

Jerry's prostate surgery.

Jerry had suffered for three or four years with a severely enlarged prostate. He was so overweight at the time that neither of us thought surgery was a wise choice but finally we had no choice. The pain and bleeding were so severe I told him that if he did not get into the car immediately I was going to call an ambulance.

The doctors were very reluctant to operate. One doctor who knew him said to me, "I wish he was half as famous and twice as rich." (I never did figure out what the "twice as rich" meant.) His pain was so bad and the doctors so reluctant (he did weigh about 370 pounds) that on the third day I said if they didn't make a decision right away I was going to call an ambulance and take him to another hospital.

The nurse said she would call them for me. He was in too much pain for this to continue. The doctors were right to be nervous. After the surgery they told me his enlarged prostate was acting as a tamponade and when they removed it he almost bled out. I know it took several transfusions to stabilize him. They told me, later, that his prostate was the second largest they had ever removed. I believe it was a little over seven ounces.

I always stay in the hospital with family. So I got to see Jerry being a patient - an impatient patient. After suffering much discomfort for way too long after the surgery he ended up, sitting on the side of his hospital bed, explaining and showing the intern how to flush his catheter. Blood clots in the tubing had to be cleared, before the flow could begin. Jerry showed the intern how to first flush it backwards to allow the flow to work on its own. I always watched and learned. The intern also learned.

I left for a short break and came back to find his bed empty. The nurse said he was doing rounds with a few of the doctors with his drip stand firmly in hand, rolling along with him, the other hand trying to keep his Johnny closed in back.

In my late eighties, with Jerry already into Alzheimer's and our lives having moved us many times, I received two calls. The first one was from a man trying to find out if his father had truly been insane. I got him to send the death certificate and was able to tell him that his father had simply had a stroke and had nowhere else to go.

The other call was from a young woman who had been sent to Manteno as an alcoholic. Jerry had spoken to her at length, told her she was not an alcoholic, and sent her home having her promise to go to AA Meetings. She called me fifty some years later to tell me that the following New Year's Eve she had been dressing to go to a party. She got on a bus and came forty miles to us at Manteno and spent the night with us instead.

Letter from Jerry to Maggie

I think Ruthie was 16 when she and I preceded Jerry to Naples, Italy, by a few months. This is a typed version of the letter I received from him while we were apart. He was unique. I was so lucky.

My Dear Miss Brady,

It is never too late to propose marriage to one's wife. Furthermore, a kind of security to hindsight that makes us promise after the fact so vain, so much a wager as the more glowing and improbable hopes that one presses as certainties on a wife to be. Thus, when I offer this marriage it is with the guarantee of three healthy children, that nineteen years after our coupling, will be both our pride and despair. There is also an absolute certainty that we will enjoy at least nineteen years of living together, endure them, spend them, pass them. Whatever verbs apply. Now I do not know of any proposal with so utterly definite a contract in which there is no provision for failure - and I am obliged to point out that it is impossible for anyone else to issue to you anything even resembling such a conveyance. But it is not on uniqueness alone that I feel you ought to decide to have accepted my proposal of marriage.

For you are in the admirable position of being able, with full knowledge of my character, faults, virtues, and other even less ponderable qualities, to commit yourself, in retrospect, to having loved such a man as I, in spite of a,b,c, etcetera. To be able in this way, to justify the past, but to choose it now, of your own free will, is such a reckless manifestation of passion, as to appeal to you as eternal woman sub specie alternatatis, for even if the past is not contingent, you would not have it other than as it is. History does not usually meet with such warm personal approval, and, very possibly, so cold and unyielding (?) because it has been treated as if it were.

The Protestant Theologian, Kierkegaard, a somewhat too forward-looking man, and for that reason, unhappy, felt that one should live so as to make interesting memories. This attitude, I feel, is more than a little restrictive (?) since it requires you to bring such judgement to
(next line missing)

It would be more to the point, not so much to look forward to a created past, than to play with the past, as with montages, collages, mobiles. Some things certainly, one wants to arrange beforehand, if possible, but there are so many interesting configurations to be made of ordinary things that I do not see why it is the future that one ought prepare rather than the past. Observe what Mozart could do with a worn out melody and compare with the careful novelties of Berg.

So in proposing that you shall have married me some 19 1/2 years prior to this letter, I am not pushing on you a thing you are obligated to all the time (?) after all the time we spent together, in and out of bed, Boston, debt, trouble(?) and each other, there is such an armory or warehouse full of incidents, attitudes, pastiches (?), actual events, and foiled and fulfilled wishes, that no artist could ask for more - and what I propose is to present you this hard-won and quite astonishing past as a gift freely offered. And one I very much want you to accept.

May I hear from you soon? I await your decision with beating heart.

With love as ever,

Jerry