

Volume 1, Issue 5, 2016

**Nuclear Fallout Family: Tales
From Miami**

Heidi Hutner, *Stony Brook
University*

When people ask me where I am from, I have no answer. Occasionally, I give them the long version describing all of the places I've lived, but mostly I just say, "nowhere," or "many places." "Oh, so you're an army brat," they reply with excitement. No, hardly! My parents were peaceniks, activists, and part of the 1960s hippy culture. As a Jew, my father eagerly joined the army in World War II to fight against the Nazis, but after the war was over, he wanted nothing to do with the "evils" of the U.S. military complex. My mother worked at Peace Centers where they helped young men become conscientious objectors so they stay could stay out of the Viet Nam war. My

parents went to great lengths to keep my older brother from Nam. No, we were not a military family.

We traveled *just because*.

Because my parents wanted their children to be *special*: multilingual and 'cultured'—not like the typical TV and drug and materialistic thing-addicted Americans. Because my mother wanted to get my father away from whatever woman he was sleeping with. Because my father wanted to appease my mother and wipe out his guilt. Because they needed a *tabula rasa*, a new home in a new land. Because every time my father philandered things fell apart and they would go somewhere new and start over. Because that's how their marriage worked.

The trajectory: My parents met in Miami Beach, had three children

five or so years apart, each of us born into different residences. These homes improved in size as my father's income grew. The eldest, Iris: born into a tiny house on Miami Beach; the middle child, Joel: born into another house, just a tad larger, in South Miami; the youngest, me: born into a big new suburban yellow house in South Miami designed by my mother. The yellow house had four bedrooms, a maid's room, a large screened-in patio room at its center that opened to the sky, and a pool with a curvy slide and diving board. It was situated in a new suburban neighborhood surrounded by strawberry fields sprayed with one or more of the following: Endrin, Temik, Fumigants, and DDT. These toxic chemicals were commonly used on strawberries farms at this time. As a toddler, I used to wander through the fields with my black nanny Margie (as the youngest, she was "my" nanny) eating unwashed strawberries right off the living plants.

We lived in the yellow house from the time of my birth until I was four, from 1959 to 1963. Between 1963 and 1972, we moved to Berkeley, California, France, and Israel. In the summer of 1972, we returned to Florida and my father bought a big Spanish-style stucco house in Miami Beach on La Gorce Drive. I could hear rats crawling inside the walls of my bedroom at night. Rats were common on the "beach" as we called it, because of the proximity to manmade canals and water. Dad put in a long narrow lap pool in the small backyard and Mom planted orange flowering trumpet vines that crawled up the garden walls. When my family moved back to Miami in 1972, I went away to boarding school and visited on holidays and in summers. I spent one very strange semester at Miami Beach High School and then fled, again, to a different boarding school. The population at Beach High then was made up of predominantly rich Miami Beach Jews, very poor African American kids from the city of Miami, and a smattering of Cubans and middle

and lower income whites. I felt out of place and isolated. During lunch, I took long walks alone to the Miami Beach public library near the beach, or occasionally hung out with a few African American girls, one of whom was very pregnant, but she was so tall and thin, it was hard to tell. She said nobody in her family had figured it out yet.

Miami was a not-home home.

* * *

Water Baby.

My earliest baby memory: lying on my back on the cobalt blue tile ledge of the pool with my mother's long fingers across my belly, water lapping over my skin, or being held in my mother's scaly sun worn arms and as she bounced me on her knee and hummed, cigarette dangling from her red painted lips.

Those first few years I was often wet—swimming, playing in the rock pond with our pet frog in the screened in porch, or playing with a hose outside. I could only swim

in the pool when my mother was home to watch over or swim with me. My mother was often out working at the Miami Peace Center or organizing with her Civil Rights and Anti-Nuclear activist friends.

Years later, when I would visit my parents during school or college vacations, I swam with lovers, kissing in lit up swimming pools under cloudy night skies, or at the beach at dusk, our bodies meeting in the gentle waves of the not-yet-hip Miami Beach. In those days, South Beach was inhabited by the very old and a few lonely looking men. As a young teen, I didn't understand these men. I didn't know yet what being gay was, not really. All I knew was that they were not looking at me, and they were by themselves staring and staring out into seeming nothingness on an empty beach.

* * *

In 1972, Miami was a 'coming home' for all of my family members except me, and I resented our move back there.

The place was hot, boring, and a city in decay. I had no memories of the people my family knew and felt close with. I remembered only water. My older siblings had strong bonds with aunts, uncles, older cousins, and the children from families we had been close friends with before we moved away in 1963. The adults in these families had all been activists with my parents in the 1950s and 60s. They welcomed my mother and father back into the fold. There were many parties and celebrations for us.

We stayed with one of these families for a month when we first returned, and our two sets of parents almost decided to live together permanently and form a commune of sorts. It didn't happen, but I remember many discussions and a visit to a very large house they considered buying together in Coconut Grove.

The Viet Nam War would end -- at least our U.S. military direct involvement in it, within a year of our return to Miami -- in 1973.

George McGovern was running for president in the summer of 1972 and he ran an anti-war campaign. My family would help to support his election. I put McGovern leaflets on cars in the parking lot of Dadeland in South Miami, America's first big mall.

* * *

Over the years, I fell in love three times in Miami. I married the third, lived with the second for two years, and should have stuck with the first, but dropped him on a teenage whim. Number one's family had a big warm swimming pool and a hot tub and a boat. His mother, a linguistics professor, had had breast cancer and was given too much radiation and so the heated water soothed her pain. She swam naked, with one breast. We swam and talked for hours, just the two of us. Number one, her son, would slink away from the pool area as we talked, probably uncomfortable with his mother's nudity. They lived on a small island off of Miami Beach in a very large

house that faced an inlet of Biscayne Bay. Number one and his politician banker father taught me how to waterski. This first love was part of my parents' web of Miami Beach Jewish left wing family friends whose origins went back to the flood of immigrants from the north who migrated south, back in the 1930s and early 1940s. Number one and number three's fathers were business partners. Both families of one and three attended the same synagogue, Temple Emmanuel. My parents no longer belonged (my father and mother became disenchanted with the focus on wealth in recruiting new members and so became Unitarians), but several of our grandparents or great-grandparents had founded this synagogue, including my father's father, and all of our families had attended or been married or bar mitzvah'd there. Our aunts and uncles and parents were school and college classmates, and many were civil rights, anti-nuke and peace activists together. A history book was written about the Jewish Miami women activists from this

group, including my mother and her activist friends. One of these women friends donated her papers to Swarthmore College's peace library. Some of our great-grands and grands were friends and could tell stories about our older relatives and their friendships, most of whom we, the younger generation, had never met. They were a tribe. A few of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren have stayed in Miami and raised their own children there, but the synagogue no longer exists, and the majority of the adults from my parents' generation and their children have died or drifted elsewhere.

Everything migrates: air, water, soil, water.

We are wandering Jews. We moved south to Miami, we moved away, we moved back, and some of us moved away again.

* * *

1945: The year my parents met.
The year we dropped the atom

bombs, Fat Man and Little Boy, on Japan. The year World War II came to an end and six million Jews became the final number murdered by the Nazis. The year my Dad hired my mother to be on his communist radio show in Miami Beach and they became friends first and two years later he asked her to date and then marry him. The trauma of World War II and the effects of the Great Depression were part of the fabric of my parents' bond. All but four or five of our European relatives had been tortured and murdered by the Nazis and America had let these deaths happen --"not accepting many Jewish refugees, not bombing train tracks that led to the camps, waiting too long to enter the war and FDR knew, long before the American public did, about the 'final solution' and this well-loved American President chose to do nothing for too long; he let millions die"— I recall my father screaming such words at dinner parties after a few glasses of wine. My father had just come back from the Philippines where he'd been stationed during World War II. He had wanted to

stay in the Philippines, become a big game hunter, and find wild animals and sell to them zoos. Dad also wanted to be an actor. Joseph, his father, said no to all of the above and coerced him to come home, to go to law school at the University of Miami. Joseph wanted his sons to be lawyers, to help with the family real estate business.

So, my father returned to Miami Beach, started his communist radio show, hired my mom and they eventually married. It was a lackluster love. He went to law school and studied at night with his buddies in the apartment that my parents rented from Grandpa Joseph. My mother worked and paid the rent. Mom was bitter. She had wanted to go to college straight out of high school but gave up this dream to go to work as a secretary and help her poor and sick parents back in New York; now she was helping my father. She didn't think they should have to pay since Joseph was the one who insisted Dad go to law school in the first place. She wanted a baby.

Dad did not want a child until he graduated and had a job. My mother was twenty-four and thought her body might dry up, so she stopped using her diaphragm and got pregnant. Things would never be good after that. The marriage might not have been happy anyway, but not telling my father about the lack of birth control was a fatal error. Dad terrorized her for having "tricked him." Yelled. Bullied. Swore. Mom had never experienced such rage, such language; her parents were quiet, gentle people. She hated her baby for destroying the marriage, for turning her husband into a monster. She was afraid. My father began having affairs and bringing the dirt home. Telling my mother. Telling her again and again. He was like the hunting cat that drops his mutilated half-dead prey with pride at its master's feet. A psychiatrist and Unitarian minister told her, in their paternalistic way, that my mother could fix my father. My mother sat on the minister's lap weeping, as he told her she held the steering wheel to the marriage. But she couldn't

make my father stop sleeping with other women or stop him from screaming at her. The only thing that made him stop was the fear of death. When Dad became terminally ill in his sixties, he finally stopped having affairs.

* * *

After we dropped the atom bombs on Japan, and a few years into my parents' marriage, the American public became aware that the U.S. had entered the nuclear arms race with a vengeance. Everybody knew the apocalypse could happen at any moment. Check out the number of films made about nuclear disaster between 1946 and the early 1960s in the U.S. Dr. Strangelove was one of many. Ducking and Covering was a concept nobody could possibly believe would protect them, yet that's the American way, turn the end of the world into a singing sales pitch. In 1959 (year of my birth), the bomb shelter honeymoon in Miami would be announced -- an ambivalent image of marriage and the safe harbor of

the nuclear family unit. The stunt was meant to palliate the public's fear of nuclear war. We became a western world of zombies pretending to believe we were safe, especially Americans, the guilty party. The atom bomb had the desired effect.

My parents and their friends, unlike the masses, organized many anti-nuclear actions, including a protest against the nuclear fallout honeymoon. My parents knew there was no such thing as safe shelter from nuclear war.

* * *

Miami is my home and not my home.

During my childhood, we swam in chlorinated swimming pools and the aquamarine ocean. We felt the effects of the nuclear arms race and spreading a monstrous radioactive poison that lasts hundreds of thousands of years. We drank contaminated liquid and ate contaminated food and it was the American Dream. We sprayed

the large Florida cockroaches and other insects with toxins, and many of these creatures were, just like us, invasive immigrants.

My parents' marriage was a fallout marriage. They would both die with or from cancer in the late 1980s and mid-1990s in South Miami. I would get cancer, too, a year after my mother's death. I cannot pinpoint the origin of these cancers, nor can I pinpoint my sense of place.

My parents did not love each other. Not in the way they wanted to, or we children wanted them to, but love does not bloom well under the shadow of annihilation and extermination. Jews have a complicated history of migration. Jews built much of the early infrastructure and Deco architecture and culture of Miami Beach and Miami.

My father and mother did not live to see the city become the international hipster sensation it is today. I wonder what they would be thinking and doing, if they had

lived out their lives until the present? I imagine they would be thrilled with the new arts and culture, but they would also say Miami had become a play land for the fascist far right and they would be appalled by the climate change denial of the Florida government. My parents would fear the rising seas swallowing up Miami Beach and Florida, drowning the Everglades and causing nuclear power plant meltdowns.

They would be acting on that fear: organizing, marching, protesting.

They would also still be fighting-- with each other.