

CHAPTER 2

GROWING UP FEMALE

The Possible and the Appropriate



The experiences of the women in this study reveal the power of cultural symbols and a traditional socialization, both inside and outside of family life, to shape the perceptions and aspirations of young girls. Eighteen of the twenty-two study participants—like the majority of white, middle-class women in the years after World War II—chose a Traditionalist track by the end of high school, focused on a future as wife and mother. However, there were some, the four labeled Nontraditionalists in this book, who found enough support for a more expansive concept of femininity—one that included a career. The experiences of both groups illustrate the struggles that young girls had in defining their female identity in the postwar years.

THE TRADITIONALISTS

Early experiences in their family did not provide the Traditionalists with a sanguine view of their mothers' lives. Many participants were critical of their mothers, believing that they had focused too narrowly on the family. Although the mothers were for the most part unhappy with a life centered on domesticity, they did not question whether that was the way it should be. Deeply embedded in traditional notions of womanhood, they were in no position to impart useful advice for the changing times that their daughters would face.

The daughters, therefore, were left with a sense of their mothers' discontent but with no model or prescription for doing things dif-

ferently. In hindsight, and equipped now with the vocabulary and analysis of gender relations provided by the women's movement, some of these daughters can see that their mothers were products of their times who had limited opportunities. Claudia McIntosh knew that her mother was dissatisfied with being a housewife. "I think she was very frustrated. But I think that were my mother living today she would not have become a housewife." But growing up, Claudia and other women in this study did not have this perspective and insight and considered each of their mothers' inability to change the circumstances of their lives a personal and individual failure. Claudia was upset by her mother's second-class status and powerlessness in the family vis-à-vis her father, an alcoholic. She could not understand why her mother tolerated it.

I didn't like what she put up with from my father. She had no sense of her own power and sometimes she would say snotty things to him. Sort of subtle put-downs. That would be a characteristic I didn't care for. I think that she should have given him the heave-ho. And gone back to teaching.

Evelyn Murphy's mother had also given up teaching when she married. Evelyn contrasted her mother's passive, subservient position in the family with the photos and family stories showing her as a vibrant teacher in a one-room schoolhouse: "I knew that she was in control." Although her mother never implied that she had given anything up, Evelyn felt differently:

I just think it was a tremendous waste. The thing I resent about her was that she accepted all of this. I thought she didn't make any effort to change. There was so much unexpressed anger.

Karen Masters was also not happy with the way her mother handled her domestic situation. There was a "huge part of me that never wanted to be like my mother at all."

I saw her as an absolutely miserable person who resented tremendously staying home and taking care of us, but kept telling us that that was what she should be doing and that we were un-

grateful for this tremendous sacrifice, that she could have been famous, etc., if it hadn't been for us.

This disapproval of their mothers' lives could have encouraged their daughters to look for ways to avoid submerging themselves in the domesticity that had given their mothers such limited satisfaction. But, because the daughters were living in families and in a culture that supported and assumed this way of life, they had little help in envisioning alternatives.¹

Even when mothers worked outside the home, this seemed to have little impact on their daughters' aspirations. Six of the Traditionalists and one of the Nontraditionalists had mothers who were employed. Despite having mothers who were in the paid working force, it was difficult for daughters to envision jobs or careers as a central element in their mothers'—or any other women's—lives.

In part, this was the result of daughters' believing that their mothers worked primarily to help out the family financially. That economic motivation made daughters assume that their mothers took what jobs they could get with little attention to interests or talents. Susan's mother, for example, worked as a teacher from the time Susan was five. "I remember believing that the primary reason that she was teaching was economic, that she needed to so we could live the way she and my father had decided we would live." Such an articulated motivation may very well have been a "cover," disguising the satisfaction that mothers actually had from their work. At a time when outside work was considered permissible for women only if it was defined as helping the family, women were unlikely to dwell on the personal satisfaction they might receive.

Daughters were also aware that women seemed to participate in only a narrow range of occupations. Two of the study participants' mothers helped out in their husbands' businesses as bookkeepers or salespersons; a third, Nancy's mother, was a copartner in the family restaurant. Two others worked as cooks at institutions, one of them later becoming a secretary in a public school. Even the two who were in professions were in the prototypically female fields of elementary school teaching and social work. The daughters could

only conclude from family experiences, and their own observations, that if they had career ambitions these would have to be constrained within narrow parameters.

No matter what their mothers did, their paid employment was trivialized within the family. It was viewed as secondary to their "real work" of taking care of the family and secondary as well to the work that the father performed outside the home. Susan had an inkling that her mother's work as a teacher had some significance in the outside world. But inside the home, she observed that it was accorded little value, while her father's job commanded privileges at home.

In fact my mother was two different people. I knew that she was quite respected at work and that when there needed to be a teacher representative she was often the representative. Some of the tales she would tell would let me know of her strength. I also knew that work was important enough so that sometimes she brought it home. But at home my father was king and she served him. She did everything around the house. They both came home from work about five o'clock and he sat down and she ran around. I do remember one thing that I think struck me even then, that long ago. He wanted her company at night and he didn't like to see her iron, he didn't like her to go downstairs and iron. So she would get up early and iron so that she could give him the time he wanted from her as well.

When Susan thought about her own future, not surprisingly she imagined the parental pattern.

I thought I would be a teacher. That is what my parents told me was a good thing for a woman to do. I was bright and that is what a bright woman did. I was certain that I would get married and have children. Certainly the career was going to be secondary. The teaching was the career because it would fit with my primary responsibility, which was going to be a wife and mother.

Family models were not the only influence, of course, but were continually being reinforced, or, as in the case of Nancy, overridden by outside forces.² For Nancy the fact that her mother had a responsible job as treasurer of the family restaurant had little impact on her expectations. What had a greater influence was the barrage of ideas about women from the media.

We had a TV from 1948 on and it was the beginning of the media blitz in advertising where everyone was wonderfully family-oriented. The father-takes-care-of-the-family sort of an image and that was just the way it was.

The power of these images to construct a more persuasive version of reality than personal experience is striking. When Nancy recalls her girlhood visions of her future, she says:

I grew up in the fifties generation where little girls went to school and then you graduated from high school and you went to college and you got married and you had a family and you lived happily ever after in your little house on such and such a street that looked like everybody else's little house.

Yet while she was growing up, both of her parents were economic contributors, and her mother was gone from the house all day. Living in a postwar world where rigidly demarcated sex roles were constantly promoted, Nancy literally did not "see" her mother's contribution. It was evident to Nancy that her mother was "the mother" and "the wife," responsible for the running of the household. But, like Susan's, her mother's paid work was almost invisible, hidden by her job at home. So, despite having a working mother, Nancy maintained a traditional view of female roles. In high school when she thought about becoming a nutritionist, "in the back of my mind there was always this picture, this image of a family, like 'Father Knows Best.'" Only years later did Nancy realize that her views "were sort of unusual because my mother was really a career person. She always worked."

The interactions of daily life also let participants learn of gender

limitations on their lives. Claudia's experience, one replicated by many of the other Traditionalists, involved a continuing pressure to conform to acceptable ideas of femininity. For girls this often meant being compliant, nonaggressive, passive. Claudia tried to fantasize a life for herself that was different than her mother's.

I was always told and led to believe that I would be a wife and mother, but when I played I always thought I should be Roy Rogers and never wanted to be Dale Evans. I loved building houses out of rocks and would fantasize about building houses and what my house would be like with varied rooms. That is probably as far as I got. I loved Wonder Woman and Spider Woman.

Slowly but surely the expectations of appropriate female behavior molded her into shape.

I was always told that my voice was louder than anybody else's. I loved wrestling and it was a shock to me that, in the second grade when I could still beat all the boys, that that was no longer admired. That wasn't a good thing for me to be doing. That came as kind of a shock to me and I was hurt that that was no longer admired.

Criticism about her unfeminine behavior affected Claudia deeply. She stopped it and, she says, "proceeded to become perfect." This seemed to mean that she began to conform to a more acceptable feminine way of behaving.

I always said polite things to people. I would compliment people. I was saved and rededicated several times. This was a Southern Baptist community. I was generally admired for being a very good person.

As Claudia discovered, disapproval for gender-inappropriate activity could act as a powerful brake on nontraditional behavior. It encourages the desire to be nice or good. This, as Greer Litton Fox has astutely pointed out, is a powerful form of social control be-