

Mine for Life

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On the shame of mentorship.

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In the middle of Muriel Spark’s brief and elliptical novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, one of Brodie’s protégées is asked about the biggest influence of her teens. Sandy, turned Sister Helena after joining a convent, can only say what she repeats again in the last line of the book: “There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.”

What remains between the repetitions of this line changes every time I read the 127-page story, published for the first time in its entirety in a 1961 issue of the *New Yorker*. In the text, Sandy and the five other girls who make up the “Brodie set” discuss their junior-school teacher as though it was a privilege to be taught by her, matching the comically arrogant way Brodie speaks about herself. Told they are the “crème de la crème” of Edinburgh’s Marcia Blaine School for Girls, and bonded by a cliquish feeling of superiority, the girls share gossip about Brodie the way only a close-knit sect of young women can. But eventually, their relationship to Miss Brodie comes to resemble a trauma, revealing

more every time it's unearthed and reiterated.

Each return to the topic of Miss Brodie's influence cements it as the defining narrative of their lives. They all have individual fates: Sandy becomes a nun, Rose a "great lover," Monica marries and then separates from a scientist, Jenny tries to be an actress, Eunice becomes a nurse, and Mary dies young in a hotel fire. But beneath each life runs an understanding that they became who they were because Miss Brodie emphasized certain characteristics in them, orchestrating some events while avoiding others. "She thinks she is Providence," Sandy realizes eventually, "she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end."

Brodie wouldn't disagree, judging by her own motto: "Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life." Here, she makes an explicit distinction between the roles of schoolteacher and mentor. The former simply teaches the curriculum, but the latter leaves an unshakeable imprint in the student's project of becoming herself. "To me," Brodie intones, "education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul."

With Brodie, Spark creates a woman who unwittingly demonstrates the dangerous slipperiness of mentorship, that relationship responsible for creating a "great influence" in any life. While Brodie's dictatorial command of her students is emphasized in the novel, often for ironic effect (she admires Mussolini, but concedes that Hitler was "rather naughty"), it draws attention to specific tactics common to all kinds of mentorship. There's her sharp fluctuation between praise and condemnation, her instant ability to see a student's most prominent insecurity and leverage it to induce humiliation, and her consistent, unflagging reinforcement of a core tenet of her teaching: that only she can show you how to flourish towards a "prime." Not only does Miss Brodie believe she sees the souls of her pupils rather than reflections of herself—she also believes her influence is necessary, above all else, to wring meaning from their lives. She revels in the way it possesses these young girls, makes them recognizably *hers*, and her proud understanding of this type of possession presumes it lasts—well, forever.

Can anyone who believes they are entitled to exert influence be a good mentor? And when power plays, as it inevitably does, into mentorship, are "good" mentorships possible at all? This particular question has haunted me for some time, largely because my experiences as a reader and a writer, a woman and an immigrant, have led me to hold enormous stakes in both sides of the argument. I feel like an eternal mentee, one who perpetually shifts gears to absorb what she can to become the person she wants to be. The part of me that picks up crumbs of voice, character, and spirit from others needs to believe that mentorship can be a good thing, that growth, artistry and actualization are learned partially from other people. Yet, as a reader, the representations of mentorship that I find most exciting for their intensity epitomize a human lust for power and control. They reveal the ways that, no matter how wise, mentors are by their very name woven into relationships that leave room for manipulations of authority.

The strangest thing about my question—do good mentorships exist?—is that both answers, yes and no, are sources of anxiety. If there are no good mentorships, all influence leads in some way to grooming, manipulation and trauma. But if there are good mentorships, then attributing to them someone's talent or success bypasses something crucial and complicated in the structure of this relationship. It ignores the tendency mentorships have to derail lives or actualize them, and the strange hunger for metamorphosis they thrive on.

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When I first encountered Miss Brodie, it was in film; the 1969 movie directed by Ronald Neame stars a young Maggie Smith. I was preoccupied and distressed. It felt like I'd watched someone pull back

the curtain shielding my inner self from the world. Mostly, the movie reminded me of a man who'd approached me in my first writing workshop. For years, I did everything I could to not think of him, because it was painful to pick apart the various threads of that confusing time. But then and now, if I was asked about "the biggest influence of my teens," I'd answer with his name.

I was seventeen, and the Saturday writing class I signed up for was a weekly respite from my family home during the summer before my senior year began at an arts high school. My only friend was away until September, and I'd developed something of a claustrophobic reaction to my bedroom, where it seemed I'd already spent too many hours reading Gabriel García Márquez and scrolling through the fashion blogs of emaciated white women. I waited all week to subway from Etobicoke to a bland office space above a coffee shop on the Danforth, where a miscellaneous group of seven adults and I spent long stints writing prose poetry inspired by quotations and single-word prompts. We took turns holding a stone or a feather, trying to muster up lines of flash fiction. In August, as the last session drew to a close and while the other members of the workshop milled around, happily complimenting each other, someone tapped my shoulder. "I'm starting my own workshop," said a male peer I'd been friendly with. He spoke to me with excessive gentleness. "I see so much potential in your work. I know there's something more there, so I'm asking you to join."

I went home that evening vibrating with adrenaline, feeling chosen. I'd told him I'd think about it, but I already knew I would say yes. It didn't matter that I hardly knew him. What mattered was that I, trapped in a severe teenage loneliness during the exact months of my life when I desperately wanted to feel adventurous and free and loved, saw a small way into altering that life. After so much time spent hunching under the pressure to make something of my time, and fearing that I would never succeed, I was being given an opportunity, not just to do something else, but to become the kind of person who would have no reservations about hanging out with a bunch of adult strangers. It was a relief, at the time, to push aside the nervous feeling in my gut, lie to my parents, and dive in.

There were four of us at first, and we met in a library for two Wednesdays, continuing the prompt writing and discussions we'd begun in the previous workshop. The third Wednesday, it was only myself and the man who invited me, who I still knew almost nothing about. When I arrived, he said, "I thought it would be interesting to show you some writers I like," and pulled out of his bag some Hemingway, Ford, and Salinger stories he'd printed from the web. The insights I offered after reading them seemed to impress him. He fed me ways to earn his compliments—writing exercises, prompts, memorization—and I consumed them eagerly. We met every week for a few hours, first at the library, and then at his house. We switched back to Saturdays after my senior year of high school started. He kissed me on the street, and I pretended not to see people staring. When she returned, I told my best friend that I was doing the two things I'd wanted more than anything: I was becoming a writer, and I was falling in love. Cradling the phone to my ear in my family's backyard late at night, I told her he was older, maybe too old. I didn't yet know how old he actually was: forty-one. She told me that I should do whatever felt good, but that I should never trust him. I said I didn't, that I was in control. I had chosen this.

After a month, he became my first boyfriend. I saw him every weekend under the pretense of participating in a writing workshop, always at his house. In a way, it *was* a workshop. He gave me assignments, story prompts, deadlines. He edited the stories I wrote into new shapes, sometimes adding characters that stood in transparently for himself. He made his touch and affection a reward, something I'd earn by doing my work. After a year, I left the city for real writing workshops and for college, but that wasn't the end. Even after our break-up, he sent emails, letters, voicemails, packages of books he thought I should read. I alternated between desperate attempts to reason with him and long bouts of silence. In one of his emails, he wrote:

with some gentle pushing from me and a firm commitment from yourself to keep your promises, by the time you reach my age, you will be far more talented than me

In another:

we connected at a deeper level about literature and music and life and travel and dreams and hope and it would be nice to reconnect on those things again

but if not, then i'll try again later

and again

and again

until you call the police and have me jailed i suppose

I never called the police, but when I watched *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, I felt sick with excitement. I had been pushing away the idea that the man who tried to turn me into a writer shaped me in any permanent way, but here was a reason to stop avoiding it, to instead examine it as closely as I could. It was clear that whether I ran from it or held it close, the fact of his influence was inescapable. Watching the five girls in the film bend to Brodie's will, wary of and yet fascinated by her manipulations, influence turned from an invisible shame into something I could see and acknowledge and chart. At least if I understood it, I could make something from it.

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Probably because their work has so much to do with developing the self, writers are particularly embroiled in the machinery of mentorship. For *The Atlantic*, Rick Moody writes about studying at Brown with Angela Carter and John Hawkes. He is witness to the now infamous scene in which, on the first day of workshop, a young male student casually asks Carter, "Well, what's your work like?" to which Carter replies, "My work cuts like a steel blade at the base of a man's penis." This clears the room of several students, but Moody remembers thinking: "*This is the teacher for me.*"

Carter makes Moody feel that he "not only grew as a writer, but improved as a person."

Moody goes on to emphasize the embarrassing thing about mentorship: it changes one's drive. He wrote to impress his mentors, to make himself memorable to them. He says that he got better "by writing in order to please them." In an interview for this magazine with Miranda Hill, Moody describes mentorship as someone getting "lodged in [your] unconscious," so that you see everything you do through their eyes. Internalizing the mentor's tastes, interests, and preferences, and working to impress their sensibilities indicates a particular vulnerability. In order for mentorship to work at its deepest level, the mentee needs to not simply tolerate, but actually lean into dependence.

In an essay from his collection *How To Write an Autobiographical Novel*, Alexander Chee describes Annie Dillard's class at Wesleyan University, the rigorous and thrilling pace at which she did everything from critiquing student pieces to eating individually wrapped caramels. "By the time I was done working with Annie," he says, "I wanted to be her." Chee's essay is anthologized in the only nonfiction work I've been able to find with an explicit focus on literary mentorships, titled *Mentors, Muses & Monsters: 30 Writers on the People Who Changed Their Lives*. It is full of writers explaining how older, more famous and infamous authors teaching at MFAs and elsewhere swept them into private

intellectual worlds and public literary acknowledgement. So many writers have a guardian who brought them into writing, and they all seem to know that to change the writing, you have to first change the writer. To produce a specific kind of work, you must become the person who is capable of producing it through the very process of writing.

Even in this anthology, the unseemly side of mentorship isn't touched. There are no mentions of the literary relationships that cross over into a specific kind of gendered trauma, often wrought within romantic entanglement. We are familiar with this story, the two ways it is most often told: a young writer seduces an older one for connections, privilege, clout. Or: the older writer falls in love with the younger, who later speaks out about being abused. In reality, there are as many differing versions of those stories as there are people who experienced them. But I point out those two because they are ways of answering the question most people in these mentorships are left with, once it's over: Who is to blame?

This is the question Joyce Maynard wrestles with in her memoir, *At Home in the World*, about falling in love and living with J.D. Salinger for the better part of a year. Upon its publication, this book was criticized as shameless, tawdry, and exploitative, and Maynard herself called a parasite and a predator. During a reading she gave after it came out, several literary figures rose from their seats and walked out. While the work dwells on Maynard's childhood, her parents' influence and her own ambition, it also dissects the strategies Salinger employed to turn her into a particular kind of writer. When they begin a correspondence of letters spurred by fifty-three-year-old Salinger's attention to a photo of eighteen-year-old Maynard on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, she notices how her language begins to mimic his, each line composed and tailored to suit him. In her preface to the 2013 edition of the memoir, written fifteen years after its original publication, Maynard writes, "I had grafted his view of how a person should be so utterly onto my sense of who I was in the world that there existed a time when I no longer knew who I was, separate from Jerry. Everything I believed came from him." This mentorship digs to the root of how a person can be irrevocably shaped by another's influence. Why, then, was it so despised, and Maynard so shunned?

Serious mentorships, the literary world seems to believe, are only ever about the work of writing. To do justice to them, one must put aside the messy reality of human emotions and traumas, the desperations and desires that serve as scaffolding to every artistic practise. Yet it seems clear that the power that lies at the center of mentorship has to do with literary experience and expertise and recognition, but also with emotion, desire, connection and character. These facets of human interaction can create a mentorship dynamic, even if the roles of its participants aren't formalized by an institution. The way a person speaks, inhabits a body, and creates a particularity of gesture all contribute to a magnetism that defies proper definition. Observing that person becomes a privilege. Collecting bits of information on them feeds a hunger. Speaking to them is stressful, sometimes unbearably so—or else steeped in urgency. All interactions accrue power when you see someone as a one-way route to becoming who you want to be. Like falling in love, this has the added dangers of being utterly projected—one's innermost desires appear through a fun-house mirror, reflecting back a distorted vision of another human who has managed to become everything you craved, everything you're not.

There is shame associated with the excitement of absorbing an influence. Feeling the ground of your selfhood shifting in real time has a dizzying effect—there appears to be a choice. You *choose* to change, to pursue desire, to involve yourself in a relationship. And if that relationship twists down paths you couldn't see—well, too bad. You're along for the ride. You are choosing, in effect, to become something other than what you currently are, to diverge from the self you see moving along its predictable, narrow path, and instead take a calculated risk to become unknowable to that self, for better or for worse. The shame comes, in part, from showing the person who influences you this disavowal of yourself. It comes

from saying, “I will take whatever improvements you can make to me. I am sick of this thing built of my experiences. Change me so I am more like you.” Later, this choice becomes the basis of self-blame. Who else can you blame, if you remember asking for a specific person’s towering presence in your life—if, in fact, that choice leads to one of the most emotionally vibrant periods of your life?

In *My Education*, her novel about a graduate student falling in love with both her married professors, Susan Choi writes:

We weren’t zigzagging forward but wildly seesawing, the ups ever higher, the downs ever lower.... Martha’s flights of hedonism—Martha’s brooding resolutions and remorse. I’d like to say I defied gravity just as often as feeling its snare, but my efforts were most likely spent clinging on with white knuckles to not be dislodged. Still, that was my heroism—my tenacious fidelity to her, though it was based on a grave misperception. I thought desire *was* duty. No trial could not be endured nor impediment smashed in desire’s holy service...

This desire to incorporate someone else into your own being is a confession we love to make in art, but rarely in life. “Do I want to fuck him, or just be him?” reads a piece of dialogue from the scene in which Choi’s protagonist first lays eyes on Martha’s husband, her Chaucer professor. Imitation, like love, makes us incredibly vulnerable. But while love is a feeling that moves outward from the self, permeates the self, even ennobles the self, imitation suggests there is no real self. It suggests that the self facing the world is a forgery, concocted out of lies and cheap deceptions, void of originality. To be caught imitating someone’s phrase, gesture, or style while trying to pass it off as one’s own is embarrassing at best. We like to think we made ourselves, or that events ordered in a meaningful sequence made us. When that stops feeling true, as it abruptly did for me, one is left with the shame of mentorship.

Examples of these dynamics abound in literature and film. That kind of mentorship-desire is buried in Magda Szabo’s *The Door*, in which a well-to-do writer develops a friendship with her reticent housekeeper, and in *Apt Pupil*, a Stephen King novella, in which a boy hunts out a Nazi war criminal in hiding and forces him to recount his crimes to feed his own hateful obsessions. It’s in Robert Musil’s 1906 novel, *Confusions of Young Törless*, where one precocious, impressionable pupil joins his peers in the sadomasochistic abuse of another student. As an archetype or a formula, this dynamic depicts more than infatuation or obsession. It illustrates what it means to be forged, as a self, from within a fiery exchange of power. If mentorship teaches you how to be yourself, it does so in the most charged way, by testing your limits: how much you’re capable of giving to and taking from another person, and how much of that exchange you can withstand. It separates the core of you from the chaff by creating deeply rooted narratives about the self—about exactly what you are worth, and why.

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When I moved back to the city where I’d met my older boyfriend, I checked for him on every street I walked. I was afraid of running into him because I knew that if I did, it wouldn’t be a coincidence. It would be a deliberately orchestrated event in which he would decide the circumstance and the rules, maybe after digging online to learn which Master’s program I was enrolled in, which classes I was most likely to take. He would realize I now studied at the same campus he’d once taken me to on autumn weekends, the same campus he studied at two decades earlier, and he’d corner me in one of the charming old buildings where we’d sat together reading. I looked around every corner for weeks. What I worried most about wasn’t how I’d flag someone down or get away if I saw him, though—I wanted to know if he’d think I’d changed in the absence of his influence. I wanted to know if I still appeared as the gawky, insecure, childishly knock-kneed girl he’d chosen to manipulate because he knew she was

impressionable. I desperately wanted to see myself through his eyes again. I believed that only then would I be able to judge for myself how ill-intentioned he was in approaching me, or whether I'd worn my desperation as an invitation.

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Gender and sex are two of our earliest and most intense influences. They shape our expectations before it is possible for permission to be given, and create the many-handed mentor that teaches us what to look for in others, so that we might build ourselves. To different degrees and different ends over the course of Western history, patriarchy and mentorship have formed the foundation for how we pursue our identities. Not coincidentally, this has everything to do with power and the institutions that govern its exchange.

In *Queer City: Gay London from the Romans to the Present Day*, Peter Ackroyd maps queerness and sexuality as a distinctly influential part of London's history and, in doing so, elucidates the connections between same-sex love, patriarchy, and mentorship. Queer love was widely documented as common practice among Celtic and Roman men, he writes, before Christian influences took hold in the sixth century. Their "world of warriors, governed by a rich and intense male culture" exemplified the many ways that everything from cultural beliefs to military victories depended upon a sexual structure of mentorship between men.

Handsome young men customarily bottomed for older, more powerful men in the Roman city. Seen as part of a nobleman's pleasurable lifestyle, they took on "a passive role as part of their transition to adulthood." Sodomy, pedophilia, and pederasty (sex with an adolescent), far from being taboo, were widely accepted practices—"admirable activities" that mainlined a sense of youth and power into the active partner. Having sex with male prostitutes, slaves, or preteen boys made sense within the independent city-state's hierarchy. Rape went hand-in-hand with military conquests, and prisoners and children, Ackroyd points out, possessed "no political role" other than their victimhood. The undesirable union, in this era, was one that took place between free men of equal status, since it violated the Roman sense of sexual conquest and created the potential for political consequences.

The layers of political and sexual power run deep here. First, there's the fact that patriarchy was used as a tool against men and boys in addition to women. Women possessed no political power in Roman London—meaning no vote and essentially no state-recognized identity. They simply were not people in the sense that men were. In effect, this correlation between gender and politics extended both ways: women were identified with the lack of political power, and the lack of political power feminized everyone else who didn't have it. To Roman men, this meant turning male foreigners and children into appropriate sexual partners without queering their own identities or risking their morality. Their masculine heterosexuality, for all political and ideological purposes, was maintained and reinforced not by the gender of their sexual partners, but by the power structures within which they had sex. The "world of warriors" consisted of a simple binary, imposed upon relationships not yet considered deviant or aberrant: conquer or be conquered.

There's also the implication that in order to ascend to a position better than one's own—whether that was a position of powerlessness, insignificance, political invisibility, or simply youth—one had to survive a rite of passage that doubled as a kind of sacrifice, offering up the self to forces that were entitled to use and abuse as long as they forged someone new in the end. Ackroyd's playful documentation of gay monikers throughout early Western history includes as many references to young boys as not: glabrione (smooth skinned boy), catamite (from Ganymede), puer delicatus (sweet, dainty), pullus (chicken), mollis (soft). In some cases, the terms refer also to any male who takes the passive

position during sex, such as pathic (sufferer). In certain contexts, a sexual relationship between an older man and a boy supposedly created a transfer of power to the latter, making him likely to gain status as a result. To some degree, the power went both ways: sex has historically proved to be the higher class's most useful tool in the art of grooming. As an extension of the warrior's, diplomat's, or king's status, the handsome young boy behaved as a masculine symbol of his older lover's immortality and fame.

At the end of the seventeenth century, William Bentinck became one such handsome young boy for King William III, who ennobled him as the Earl of Portland. Bentinck was then quickly portrayed in gossip as the "catamite who rules alone the state." In being physically desired by a man of higher stature, and in sexual service to his needs, the young courtier gains rank by proximity and enacts a kind of promise to live according to the specific hierarchy he is molded by. Even if, like Bentinck, the court mocks his sudden rise to favour, the envy of his peers and the marked gains in title encouraged sexual closeness to the king. Ackroyd notes: "A flatterer is described by Richard Nicholls as 'he whose tongue the tail of greatness licks.'" Etymologically, this is probably where we get "ass-kissing." It also links flattery and mentorship together with a transfer of power in sex acts. For boys, an indoctrination into a world of patriarchal order is meaningful when it advances the "greatness" that benefits them all: male power.

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While works about the damaged female psyche focus on the fraught, embittering process of trying to shape a self, narratives about the male psyche give us an impossible trajectory of struggling to master the self. In *Whiplash* (2014), nineteen-year-old Andrew Neiman (Miles Teller) sets out to be the best jazz drummer in the world. As a Buddy-Rich-obsessed freshman at the Shaffer Conservatory of Music, he falls under the mentorship of infamous conductor Terence Fletcher (J.K. Simmons), whose violent style of instruction—basically a case study in toxic masculinity—pulls Neiman's personal life into shambles. Everything about this mentor's influence is rooted in the idea that to be a musician, Neiman first has to be turned into a certain kind of man—the kind who plays until he bleeds, cares for nothing and no one except music, and will suffer any loss to be the best. The kind who does not indulge in basic human needs, who does not have a desire to be cared for or loved, who does not want anything that music cannot give him.

Fletcher's chosen tools of transformation are fear, alternating with sweet-talk: he terrorizes his all-male band, screaming at individuals for being out of tune, off tempo, or late to practice—then he tells Neiman he should "just have fun." Chairs are thrown, verbal abuse hurled, and traumas inflicted, but it is all, Fletcher's aura of greatness promises, for the sake of *music*: "You know, Charlie Parker became Bird because Jones threw a cymbal at his head."

Neiman dumps his girlfriend, the only non-musical element of his life. He bleeds over his set and "earns the part" on a brutally fast piece of music, all in the name of becoming "one of the greats." In the making of his supposed musical talent, though, Fletcher has also made an egomaniac out of Neiman. Dismissed from Shaffer, he agrees to file a complaint against Fletcher, then decides to quit music for good, only to run into Fletcher playing jazz at a bar. "I was there to push people beyond what was expected of them," he tells Neiman. "I believe that is an absolute necessity. Otherwise, we're depriving the world of the next Louie Armstrong or Charlie Parker." Soon, Neiman is back, playing for Fletcher, reeled in by the promise of a specifically male, merciless greatness. When he gets on stage for a crucial performance, he realizes Fletcher deliberately hasn't given him a piece of sheet music. The film ends with Neiman flailing during the first piece, humiliated, but making a comeback to cue the band on his own for the rest of the performance, delivering a fifteen-minute solo with his trademark blood dripping down the sticks, Fletcher staring into his eyes.

Up until this point, the imperfect little scar on Miles Teller's chin, the scattering of acne there, his father's insistence on putting Raisinets in movie-theatre popcorn—all of it immerses the viewer. But during the solo, as Neiman plays, he transcends the believability of his circumstances and that of his emotional abuse to overthrow his mentor. Fulfilling the dream of masculine mentorship, he achieves what has always been dangled in front of him, what we know is bait thrown by a narcissistic jerk. He gets to be great, and Fletcher, the man who terrifies him, is now his convert. The film isn't about music—as Richard Brody points out in the *New Yorker*, it's pretty inaccurate about jazz—rather, it's about an archetype. It enacts the wish fulfillment of men who want to believe that competitive ambitions can replace emotional intelligence and a human connection to the life happening around themselves. If the female mentorship represented in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is about manipulating and controlling female desire, male mentorship in *Whiplash* is about militarizing it, so that nothing vulnerable remains.

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As observers, enthusiasts, and finally students of her love life, the girls challenge the basis of Miss Brodie's prime on a metaphysical as well as sexual level. In addition to being younger and eventually smarter than her, their existence as her mentees undercuts the essentialism of Brodie's claim that her "prime" makes her more valuable than other girls and women. She treats it as a natural state of her body, like fertility—this quality of being at her intellectual and physical peak that comes from within, tingeing her every act with some divine feminine virtue. But she also continuously promises to impart this supposedly internal condition to the girls, by teaching them to wash their faces with witch-hazel, sit up straight, speak in full sentences, appreciate "Art and Beauty," and eventually, in Rose's case, to seduce Teddy Lloyd, the art teacher. The façade of her prime crumbles not because she ages, or because she fails to groom Rose for her old lover—it breaks down into a pathologically recycled mask, worn out by overuse and false logic.

When Sandy realizes that her permutations of self are as replicable as Lloyd's portraits, she gives away a secret to the school headmistress that finally forces Brodie into retirement. "It's only possible to betray where loyalty is due," she tells Monica. She points out that crucial cog in the wheels of mentorship that Miss Brodie never understood: in teaching the girls of her supposed prime, she also teaches them the inner mechanics of her manipulations and deceptions. She teaches them of her intense hunger to control, and in doing so, shows them how to thwart that same control. In a bid to escape the manipulations of Brodie's puppet strings, Sandy spends her life in the nunnery. She writes on religion and morals, at least partially because she knows Brodie would disapprove—they are far from her influence, even if her influence is precisely the thing that drives Sandy there.

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My obsession with mentorship manifested in a frenzied desire to collect any and all representations of this dynamic. I couldn't watch a movie without understanding it through a lens of influence, manipulation, self-transformation, or metamorphosis. I re-watched scenes that gave me the same quiver of excited anxiety *Miss Jean Brodie* did. Angelina Jolie's first appearance in *Girl, Interrupted*, when she's led after an escape back to the halls of Claymore in cuffs, each of her ward-mates visibly affected by her sudden re-entry into their lives. The lunch scene in *Carol*, when Belivet is intimidated by the way Carol orders without looking at the menu and, when the waiter turns to her, can only say, "Um, I'll have the same." The moment in *Mona Lisa Smile* when Maggie Gyllenhaal, playing Giselle, looks in the mirror and asks, referring to the controversial new art history teacher, "Do I look a little bit like her?"

These women, in female company, live in an ongoing act of overlapping influence: traces of it flash through dialogue, bearing evidence of how they actively choose to shape themselves into and against each other. I watch that terrifying little moment cross their faces and think of how I once jotted down every gesture in my fourth grade classroom that impressed me, from the way my teacher wrote her number 3s with jagged zigzags to the fluid movement of a blonde classmate packaging her hair into a hot-pink scrunchie. In immersing myself in stories of mentorship and sifting through them, I felt some kind of purpose. I wanted to figure out what made us (*us*, all humans, but more specifically, us, young women) like this. I wanted to calculate how many insecure attachments it took to tip certain individuals into a dissociative state fragile enough to absorb influence so hungrily. I wanted to know, most of all, what they did with it, how they survived, what they became. I couldn't scroll through Twitter without thinking of mentorship on a grander or smaller scale (Larry Nasser's trial, Reddit relationships posts, *Queer Eye*, Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos). I listened to podcasts about infectious diseases and sat haunted by the idea of my desire to become other people infiltrating my identity, replacing it on cellular level.

I found writing about mentorship paralyzing. It was difficult not because I didn't know what to say—I could, and did, speak with friends at length about my obsession—but because I felt, in my endless note-taking, that my ideas only added up to proof that there was no way out of this maze. I was observing literary and cultural patterns that reflected at me from every surface of life: they made up the texture of the world I lived in, the things I consumed, the way I behaved, the way I wrote. It wasn't just in the air around me—it *was* the air. I couldn't see it from the outside, because I had defined it for myself in such a way that there existed no outside. The search for representations of mentorship resulted in my being convinced that I needed someone to explain my web of citations and references to me, so that I might understand how they—how *I*—fit together. Describing my system of becoming did nothing to dismantle it. It only grew more complicated, more difficult to distinguish between the framework of my questions and the content I'd used to form them. As the art teacher of *Miss Jean Brodie* repeatedly paints Ms. Brodie's face, no matter which of her pupils he uses for reference, I wrote the same things down no matter which film I watched. *Does mimicry reveal weakness in a person?—or power, in its chameleon-like detachment? Does a toxic mentorship fundamentally change the person experiencing it, or does it only bring out a kernel of selfhood that always existed?* The questions feel truer than their possible answers. For now, I will have to be satisfied with them.