

Insights from My Sister's Love Letters

"I'm really easy to get along with once you people learn to worship me."

—Anonymous

Barbara Oakley, PhD

It is a muggy midsummer; a fluke thunderstorm has just turned the roof of the house into a raucous resonator. But I'm enjoying relative peace while the kids are gone, and have commandeered the kitchen for the weekend. Moving to the heavy thrumming of the raindrops, I've hauled the massive cardboard box in from the garage shelf where it's grown a fine sprinkling of dust over the past months. The odds and ends in it had caught my brother's eye while he was in Sequim, trying to find an estate handler to clear out Carolyn's apartment after her untimely, mysterious death. He had mailed the carton to me several months later, mentioning offhandedly that it had some old pictures and "stuff you might be interested in." Bless his heart.

The staccato rain overhead sharpens. I glance up at the skylight—the water sluicing thickly above me makes me feel like I'm standing in a noisy submarine.

Up periscope.

I wonder what Carolyn would think of my looking through her things. Through the dark gray comes a trembling flash of white, followed instantly by a rifle crack of thunder. The cupboard doors bounce; the fluorescents quiver. I'm left momentarily in darkness.

Hi Carolyn.

The kitchen lights flicker again, then steady; the gray outside begins to recede. The rain scales itself back.

Carolyn's carton is heavy—about the size and weight of a midsize microwave. The dust is gritty. I cut through the duct tape over the top and pry open the flaps. The room fills with a musty, stale smell—I can't help but sneeze as I peer down curiously. Smaller boxes lie inside. Packets. Manila folders. Albums. More diaries. Everything has been neatly organized—the compartments of Carolyn's life.

But I discipline myself now and instead pick up Carolyn's last diary, which had come earlier, separately. After glancing at the final entry, I'd set the diary on the stack of books by my bedside. There it had sat, for months, always demoted to the position of next. I open a page randomly: Saturday, June 26th, 2004: *"Created*

bitchin' dinner—fillet mignon avec green peppercorn hollandaise, white truffle oiled potato, zabaglione with cherries.”

Carolyn did love to cook. I could never figure out if she actually ate, though. Fifty-eight when she died, she was thin as a skewer, her skin white as bleached bone. The bouffant blonde wig she wore made her look top-heavy—pencil-thin legs lagging as she arched her body forward, suspended over the crutches. It wasn't always like that. There were times, when she was in her teens and early twenties, when she even went to dances, her lopsided frug seeming almost natural.

THE EARLY YEARS

My sister was born in 1945, more than a decade before me, after my father stopped flying World War II B-17s and began using the GI Bill to slingshot himself through veterinary school in Pullman, Washington. Pullman was where Carolyn was born. And that's where, at three, she took off one lazy summer day and grubbed in the dirt at the far end of the alley with neighbor kids. My mother swore that was how Carolyn caught polio, from “dirty kids,” since polio spreads feces-to-mouth from people who generally don't even know they are infected.

But polio is both a disease of poor sanitation and good sanitation. In the dirty old days of open sewers and untreated drinking water, infants were exposed to poliovirus while they were still protected by their mother's own poliovirus antibodies. Thus, being infected with the poliovirus as an infant has a perversely protective effect. Maybe the virtual autoclave of tidy cleanliness my mother kept the house in also played a role—my then three-year-old sister had had no opportunity to catch the virus as an infant, when it would have done little harm.

Once Carolyn had unwittingly swallowed the virus, and it had established itself in her intestines, it seeped into her bloodstream. From there, it crept into her central nervous system, where it killed critical motor neurons, leaving her with flaccid limbs. Two of my maternal cousins also experienced the ravages of polio with subsequent paralysis and withered limbs, although neither shared Carolyn's strangely sinister personality. Polio, as it turns out, runs in families. Identical twins, for example, with their matched sets of genes, are much more likely to both catch polio than fraternal twins.¹ As Dr. Richard Bruno, the world's foremost expert on post-polio fatigue, writes: “You can't get polio if your genes don't allow it. Polio within families, going back generations, is very common.”²

But by the time my brother and I came along, more than a decade later, Salk's polio vaccine was finally broadly available. It no longer mattered at all if we had a genetic predisposition for polio.

Saturday, April 3rd: *"Got to turn this around and will. The big clock debacle. Am so lucky to have these critters in my world. Leftover sandwich."*

Each entry in this diary—her last—is short; mostly only a sentence or two. Carolyn wrote with a fine pencil—careful, sweeping strokes that caressed each word. I had admired her artistic skills as far back as when I was seven, in Lubbock, Texas. I sat beside her, watching as cartoon chipmunks flowed from her pencil and gamboled on the paper, as gleefully as if she'd released them from a cage. I would think: *I can hardly wait until I grow up, so I can draw like that!* No such luck.

Big clock. Debacle. Lubbock. My father's Air Force transfers are like my own big clock, making it easy for me to keep track of time. California was when I went to kindergarten. Oregon—first grade. Texas—second grade. Massachusetts—third grade. Pennsylvania—fourth grade. Tick tock. Lubbock is the only place I remember Carolyn living with our family. I remember how she'd hide when one boyfriend would come by, so she could go out with another. She liked to whisper secrets to others, ostentatiously cupping her hand so my little brother and I would notice.

Carolyn told me later that she used to baby sit for us in Lubbock all the time. That she practically *was* our mother while she lived with us. I don't remember that at all. I do remember trying to catch horny toads. They had two big head-spines jutting from a forest of smaller spines, like horns on a little demon. Supposedly they could squirt blood at you from their eyes.

I haven't mentioned Carolyn's looks. As a young woman, she was an echo of Audrey Hepburn: pearly lips, delicate chin, aquamarine eyes, wide and trusting as a baby's. Her sense of style set off a sylphlike figure. Even as a youngster, her voice was mellifluous, throaty, sultry. She spoke in low tones with pauses that somehow commanded attention—one had to stop everything else and pay attention to hear anything at all. Boys were nuts about her. And she was crazy about them. I know, because my first diary was a hand-me-down five-year diary first written in by Carolyn.

I can hear her husky whisper as I read her first entry: Sunday, October 21st, 1962. She was seventeen. *"Granny P. came to visit—has my room so I'm a bit disorganized. She gave me this diary which I wonder how faithfully will be kept."* Not very. After two weeks of sporadic penciled musings about boys, the entries stopped, as if she had simply gotten up and wandered away in the middle of a conversation.

My rough ten-year-old scrawl takes over three years later. April 7th, 1966: “*MOM WENT TO THE HOSPITAL. We called the doctor and he called the ambulance. Dad was in New York and wouldn't be home till tomorrow. Suddenly she just started to fall and began to spit up.*” I remember that: squatting over my mother's open, staring eyes, trying to tell her jokes, in case she was still aware, my little brother nudged into the living room to watch *The Munsters*. The next day: “*Today we found out that a main artery broke so they have to operate in Mom's skull.*” Kid-speak for aneurysm. Carolyn wasn't home when the aneurysm happened. This was because several years earlier, at age nineteen, she had disappeared.

A month after the aneurysm, Mom came home. But things changed. For one thing, Mom didn't know who we were. It must have been strange for her: she wakes up in a strange place and after a few days, the doctor introduces a nice man who claims to have been her husband for over twenty years. Then these slobbering, smelly children come up and hug her like she's their, well, *Mom* or something.

For us kids, having Mom back home turned out to be unexpectedly fun. Damage from the aneurysm had changed her personality markedly—she was nicer. She actually focused on us, even if only because she was lost and often, probably, desperately confused. Each night, she'd set out the best plates, saying, “Your father is bringing someone special home to dinner tonight.” My father would show up with no guest in sight, and we'd enjoy a gourmet dinner. That summer is the only time I ever remember my father laying a hand on me. Cleverly, I'd asked my newly agreeable mother if I could stay late at a friend's. When I came home that night, a trifle guiltily, my father took me out to the back and paddled me. “How could you ask your mother something like that? You know she isn't right in the head.” The words stumbled out hard—he never spoke ill of anyone.

My mother's memory loss and my father's reticence are probably why I never heard details of what Carolyn was like as a child. When I was much older and knew more of the truth about Carolyn, my father confided—while setting up Carolyn's trust fund—that he was deeply puzzled, and ashamed, that he could have fathered such alien spawn. Once, a year before he died, my father mentioned absently, while pouring coffee in his cereal, that he thought the polio had done something to Carolyn's brain. (By that time, the Alzheimer's had done a *lot* to my father's brain.) Of course, being me, I took a look at the research literature.

Apparently, poliovirus not only invades motor neurons of the spine, but also, as if drawn as if by a magnet, always invades another area—the *midbrain*, an ancient neural area that humans share with reptiles.³ The midbrain includes the *reticular activating system*, the oldest system, in evolutionary terms, above the spine. The reticular activating system is responsible for keeping you awake and focusing

attention. Overwhelming damage to this area can result in coma or death. This system, in fact, ties in with a number of neurotransmitter systems, including those using serotonin, norepinephrine, and, especially, dopamine. It is little wonder, then, that damage to this area can have a broad effect on the brain.

Reticular activating system lesions caused by poliovirus infection can leave adult polio survivors with a perpetual feeling of fatigue, and children who had polio with difficulty staying awake, paying attention, and concentrating. Psychologist Edith Meyer described these effects quite clearly in her 1947 study of fifty-two polio survivors aged eighteen months to fourteen years old. As related in Dr. Bruno's *The Polio Paradox*:

For three years, Meyer followed these children's performance in school and measured their mental abilities. She discovered that "a high percentage of children clinically recovered from poliomyelitis insofar as motor disability is concerned, had qualitative difficulties in mental functioning which, as a rule, do not appear in the conventional type of intelligence test." Through special psychological tests, or merely by observing their performance in school, Meyer found that the children had "fatigability and fleeting attention" for months after the polio attack. When tested, she discovered that the children had short attention spans, difficulty concentrating, and poor memory for visual designs. These problems were "present in cases in which the medical history notes drowsiness, severe headache, and, in some cases, only nausea during the polio attack." Meyer found that even children who had "non-paralytic" polio, who had no paralysis or even weakness, had symptoms of poliovirus damage to the brain activating system.

Bruno further notes, "Children who'd had polio had the equivalent of what today would be diagnosed as attention deficit disorder."⁴ He suspects that poliovirus-damaged neurons recovered to some extent and eventually were able to send out new sprouts, which compensated for the widespread damage in the reticular activating system.

Strangely enough, although the poliovirus invades the reticular activating system along with the cortical region motor neurons, it never invades the *non-motor* "thinking" neurons in the cortex. Thus, polio leaves higher-order cognitive processes intact, which is why polio survivors often attain "social, educational, and professional achievement as high or higher than those of the general population."⁵

As far as I could determine then, polio *could* influence personality, if only in its effect on alertness and one's ability to pay attention. But there was an occasional hint there might be something more going on. Edith Meyer's study, for example, revealed that nine of fourteen mothers of three- to five-year-old polio survivors were certain that their child had become more irritable and disobedient since the illness. "Unsatisfactory emotional adjustment was observed," noted researcher Edith Meyer,

“which improved gradually after the child’s discharge to the home, but in most cases left some marks upon the patient’s personality development.”⁶

Overall, however, I could find little evidence that polio produced the kind of dysfunctional, Machiavellian traits Carolyn showed. In fact, most research shows just the opposite effect: “Polio survivors from around the world have transcended mere normalcy to become the world’s best and brightest,” writes Richard Bruno, going on to cite polio survivors who are chief executives of international corporations, artists, sport heroes, members of the British and Canadian parliaments, the US Supreme Court, as well as an American president.⁷

But my father had raised an interesting point. In the years after his passing, I would continue to scour emerging research. Aside from polio’s understandable link to disorders such as depression and anxiety, however, few new studies emerged related to polio and psychiatric dysfunction.⁸

Perhaps this was because there was little real relationship to be found.

THE MISSING DECADE

The dust from the carton sets me to coughing. I place Carolyn’s last diary down among the packets and randomly grab a black-edged photo album with the words “Polaroid Land Camera” printed in gold on the cover. The album appears to be from Carolyn’s late twenties—she’s with people, partying. There she is on a seedy orange couch, wine glass in hand, cozily holding hands with a dark-haired man who is leaning toward her—more as if he *wants* to know her than as if he actually does.



There she is in a virginal white dress, bouffant blonde wig perfectly coiffed, dwarfed beside a gigantic bouquet of red roses. There she is smiling alluringly again from a bed—a companion picture shows a look-alike for Steve McQueen grinning from under the same set of sheets.

There’s a gray cat with a little bow around its neck. The cat walking along the floor. Cat. Cat. Cat.

Next she’s in a bikini by the pool, lounging with a drink in one hand, cigarette in another,



obviously relaxed and in her element. Her leg is positioned so that the withering from polio is nearly unnoticeable.

It's strange, glancing through the pictures. Sometimes Carolyn is a ringer for my mother, hands splayed out and head tilted back in a gesture my mother frequently made. Carolyn's features reveal the expressive lips, deep-set eyes, porcelain skin, and high cheekbones of our mother's Welsh blood. Then, with a slight change of camera angle and sunlight, Carolyn is suddenly a feminine version of our father, with the dark hair, smooth olive skin, and slanted elfin eyes of what is known in Scandinavia as the "black

Norwegian"—my father's father's people. It's like one of those novelty lenticular photographs—move the image slightly, and you see something completely different.

I reach for a second photo album in the same dark, peeling style. The party theme continues. There's Carolyn in a rainbow-colored shirt, seated on a couch, body turned away from a bearded man who is hugging her. She has a satisfied, feral smile as she glances over her shoulder toward him. Her hands are clasped over his, as if to help his hands hug her more tightly.

I flip through quickly. There are many pictures of this bearded man.

Incongruously, there are several pictures of children—a boy of five and a girl of perhaps fourteen who are obviously brother and sister. The boy has the wide-eyed, frenzied glee of over stimulation; the girl has the long, straight hairstyle of the '70s. She gazes forlornly toward the camera and Carolyn—a lost look that makes me want to reach through the years to hug her. But I can't see what the girl sees on Carolyn's face—my sister's back is to the camera.

Here's Carolyn by a pool with four scruffy-looking men in their mid-thirties smiling uncertainly into the sun. There's Carolyn braless in a revealing white dress, legs straddled around a man as she sits on his lap facing him. In the background sits a beautiful blonde—clearly a friend—with a cigarette, drink, and flaming red pantsuit with black choke collar. Some of the photos are dated: November 1971.

The obvious finally occurs to me: These are pictures from the lost years.

My sister had vanished for a decade immediately after my father had accidentally discovered that she hadn't been earning the straight A's she'd been reporting from her studies at Berkeley. Instead, Carolyn had dropped out of college early on with nary a word to anyone, and had spent the next two years living an unfettered life on the money Dad was sending. Despite the subterfuge that preceded Carolyn's disappearance, my parents had agonized for the ten years of her absence, not knowing whether she was alive or dead. My aunt eventually tracked her down to a seedy "escort service" in Las Vegas.

MEMORIES OF CAROLYN

I was twenty when I first remember having a conversation with Carolyn. After my aunt had found her, Carolyn had called my father and asked for the money to come and visit. After sending money twice, which she spent on other things, he sent her an actual plane ticket, which did the trick.

Carolyn planned to visit for a week, to get to know the family again. Apparently she regretted her decade-long disappearance from our lives. I remember greeting her as she limped past my father to give a hug, smiling that broad, artificial smile, enveloping me in the smell of cigarettes and perfume. Her false eyelashes were so large her eyelids looked like roaches. She spoke slowly, enunciating clearly in that melodious voice of hers as we stumbled through our greetings.

Later that day, when the others had left, she confided with a sultry, intimate whisper: "God, I feel so lucky you are my sister. You are the real reason I came all the way here—just to spend this week with you. You're the special one. This will be so fun spending time together."

Actually, *I* didn't think it was much fun, sitting beside this feeble brown-nosing stranger inside the chinked log walls of the cabin my father had built from scratch. But it *was* morbidly interesting. If nothing else, I figured, over the coming week I could perhaps learn about Carolyn's perspective on her early years, and what life was like in my family before I was born. And there was something else, something I could barely admit to myself. What if she really did want to rejoin the family? Maybe something had changed because of the hard years away, and the big sister I had admired was finally, really and truly, coming home.

After a few minutes of chitchat, my sister excused herself to go downtown to pick up a few things. Actually, it must have turned into quite a few things, because I didn't see Carolyn again for another five years. Later, we found she'd spent the rest of the week living with a man she'd bumped into at the grocery store.

THE LETTERS

The rain resumes outside, drops slapping gently against the skylights. I close the albums and my memories and move on within the carton, randomly sampling to get a feel for how everything is organized. Each of the smaller boxes, each large envelope, each packet, seems to revolve around one man: whoever was obsessed with her at that period of her life. Added to each packet are assorted extra mementos from other admirers, like condiments with a main course.

I take a deep breath of the musty air and begin to carefully pick through each piece.

At the top of a thick packet of poems accompanied by dried flowers, I find a sheaf of thick parchment-like double-sized paper:

March 18th, 1969

My Darling,

I am a lucky guy! I have searched for you all these years, slowly dying little by little and more and more. Now finally to find you and to know you exist. The distillation of my yearnings, the well of never-failing interest and awareness.

You command my attention at all times. Though we may be physically apart, I think of you, your vibrancy and zest, your cool calm. Your moods, gay, somber, in all their degrees of intensity, are a part of me, a part of *you* that is always with me. I am so very lucky to have found you. . .

Do I pursue you overmuch? Could I having been loved by a Goddess, feel love again with a mortal woman? . . . I have only my love to offer you at this time, but that is total and eternal for I shall never stop loving you darling.

Forever yours,
Ross

Several days later, Ross had apparently thought of some amendments. On the next page—neatly labeled “Part II,” he continues:

We have an intellectual and philosophical compatibility that I have never experienced before and almost despaired of finding. How precious and wonderful it is, Miss Wonderful! You are inscrutable to most people and perplexing to the rest. Yet we are so much in rapport. It is “natural” and reasonable that you should hesitate to live with me and share your life. . . . Also it is “natural” that you should be hesitant from the standpoint of possible feelings of responsibility for placing my children elsewhere.

Interesting. Ross appears not only to be head over heels for Carolyn—he's ditching his kids to clear the path. I check the dates. *His children must be the kids in the photographs*. The bearded man must be Ross.

But, as I search and shuffle through the materials, aside from the small stack of sweet love poems, there is nothing more from Ross. No notes, no letters, no memos. No more photographs of the bearded man or his children.

Another letter, in an envelope inscribed "Ki." That was Carolyn's self-chosen nickname. Inside the card is a velvet heart with an arrow through it. Preprinted inside are the words: *For My Wife*. A handwritten poem followed.

I'd forgotten she'd once had a husband.

There is one other brief card professing love from him. That's all. No wedding photo album. No marriage license. No mention of him in her will. After all these years, only these two tantalizing bits of paper give witness to the marriage, like bits of flotsam after a ship has foundered.

I go back to the albums, paging. There's my father, holding the infant Carolyn. He looks almost surly, but I know what that look really means: he's sneaking into an easy grin. And my mother stands shyly on a porch, toddler Carolyn smiling in the foreground. My two parents who obviously loved my sister deeply, who were at that point in their lives, and for many years to come, a loving, stable couple.

For an outsider, it may be difficult to believe that my sister was able to bilk my parents of college money and live an unbroken life of deception and subterfuge without my parents having done something—anything—to intervene. Yet the way Carolyn interacted with my own parents was probably little different from the way other similarly afflicted children have interacted with their parents.

Was Carolyn's skewed temperament congenital? Certainly our family has had its share of troubled characters: My mother had her problems with alcohol—she would eventually escape suicide through a hairbreadth rescue. One great-uncle, proudly dry now for nearly three decades, let slip that Mom's father—my grandfather—was probably drunk when he steered into a rocky embankment and died. (All four of Grandpa's brothers were apparently alcoholics.) Mom's oldest brother, who I never met, hip-hopped from place to place as an offbeat, charismatic flimflam man.

On my father's side, there was the pair of great-uncles who, legend has it, stalked each other for three days with pitchforks before being banished from the household and disappearing forever. And the great-grandfather who only spoke one sentence in his entire adult life (the absurdly inconsequential "Bring me my pipe.").

Both my father's brother and his father—my paternal grandfather—were alcoholics. Dad's sister was a gorgeous, eccentric slip of a woman who refused all of her many suitors. Instead, she walked the equivalent of a marathon each day in her work as a post woman, then came home to continue her strange, unending exercise routine—jogging, playing tennis, bicycling—and to consume the gallons of spiked coffee that left her slurring and twitching. I spent the day before her death with her in the unventilated basement room she'd chosen for her final days. The air was woozy with smoke as she lit cigarette after cigarette—she paused our reminiscences to reassure me that her decades of chain-smoking had nothing to do with her terminal lung cancer.

This aunt came by her odd behavior naturally. Her mother—my grandmother—was a whale-sized Valkyrie with nearly supernatural shrewish powers. Grandma spoiled us grandkids with sugar-laced tea, knäckebröd, and mounds of Swedish meatballs. I loved her very much and, since I was only five years old when I last saw her, was oblivious to the insidious Ragnarök she enjoyed creating in my parents' marriage. (Grandma refused, for example, to even speak to my mother for the first years after my parents had wed, despite the fact that she was living in my parents' house with them at the time.)

My family is large—there are twenty-one maternal cousins in my generation alone. Thus, although the eccentrics tend to create legends, both sides of the family are also filled with loving, talented, larger-than-life inventors, artists, writers, doctors, and businessmen, who run the gamut from flamboyant public figures to reclusive hermits. In my family, at least, the seeds of the eccentric, not to mention those of the successfully sinister, seem closely related to the seeds of success.

But what about Carolyn herself? What was life like for her—the once bright-eyed toddler who spent helpless weeks poised on the edge of death in an iron lung? Carolyn's earliest years—literally *years*—were spent living in hospitals. For months after the time of the initial infection, she, like many other young polio victims, was undoubtedly terrorized—stringently isolated from my parents and others, and totally dependent on the care of strangers.⁹ At the time, hospitals were frequently overwhelmed with polio patients—little thought was given to including children on treatment decisions, which were often simply imposed, like torture. Questions or complaints could, in fact, often bring on punishment. Some polio patients felt that, if they did not develop a non-childlike servility in every aspect of their behavior, their lives could be placed in jeopardy by a sometimes arbitrarily cruel staff. Even after Carolyn arrived home from the hospital, there would have been little improvement in her quality of life—she was shuttled back to the hospital for operation after painful operation, and frightening, almost medieval therapies. And when she was able to at last play with other children, she would have suddenly found herself with a new identity—the little crippled girl who other children no doubt bullied and teased.

Many polio survivors became pariahs—others feared that they somehow remained infectious. All of this would have further stressed Carolyn's already tormented psyche.¹⁰

As the intermittent hospital stays continued, year after year, my mother could only visit occasionally, as we younger children began tugging at her time and attention. In any event, hospitals at the time allowed families to visit for only several hours a week.¹¹ No doubt feeling helpless himself at the many hospital separations, my loving, outdoorsy father lost himself in his work—spending eighteen hours a day for weeks on end—roping problematic cattle for vaccination (he was a wizard with a lasso), or being bitten by surly dogs as he tended their broken legs, or pulling calves at two in the morning. The grinding work must have taken his mind off the athletic games he would never play with his oldest daughter. These were the very games he would later play so happily with us younger children—fortunately for us, our good-natured father had escaped the alcoholism and personality disorders that were so rampant in the other members of his family.

No, despite my parents' unquestioned love, if anyone could be thought to have endured childhood stress, it would have been Carolyn.

Who *was* Carolyn? Who was this person who could appear so normal and yet be so disturbed?

On a little red heart dated December 25, 2000—four years before her death—I find:

Santa—I know I have been naughty and I don't expect any presents but since you have opposable digits, could you please unscrew this #%\$# jar of Parmesan?

There is a little scrapbook Carolyn has put together: snapshots, newspaper clippings, and pictures of friends from eighth grade. Sandwiched among the labored signatures of friends, I find:

Good luck in High School, but with your mind you won't need it.
—Marilyn. ('60)

Get to the top even if you have to climb over somebody's back.
—John.

In the late 1980s there are a flurry of letters from Ron and a rival. Ron writes:

MY KILO

My Kilo with an articulate soft musical voice, a wonderful choice of words, laughter that sounds like the soft tinkling of silver bells, the graceful mannerisms of a princess, the poise of a queen. When she enters a room it brightens and seems to glow with her personality. If you enter a room expecting to find Kilo and she is not there, there are no words to express the dismal loneliness of that room. She is affectionate, warm, tender and considerate of others. If crossed she can be cold, disdainful and cruel. Her face has a wonderful animation when she is happy. She is feminine from the top of her pretty head to the tips of her toes. She needs no jewelry to show off her loveliness. Her beautiful ivory white skin and beautiful dark hair accentuates her loveliness. A very lovely woman is my Kilo.

When I have forgotten everything else, I will remember my Kilo and she will live in my heart and pay no rent.

No rent. Sounds like a bargain. Meanwhile, Ron's rival, Ed, writes counterpoint: *"There are lots of fish in the water and a lot of them would love you. Including me."* A smiling fish with hearts fluttering around its nose swims past the signature.

Yes, indeed, things were heating up with Ron. I find a memo dated May 7, 1990, signed by Ron and Carolyn: *"Ki and Ron have decided to meet on the mount in the year 2000."*

But the packet of letters instead fast-forwards to Ron's neatly clipped obituary. He died in Sequim on June 30, 1996, at the age of eighty-three. Carolyn was fifty-one. The obituary makes note of two sons, a daughter, a brother, two sisters, six grandchildren, one great-granddaughter, numerous nieces and nephews, and a "special friend."

Not Carolyn.

L'affaire avec Ed didn't end so well, either: *"I don't think we would ever get along so well, but I'd like to stay friends . . ."*

* * *

How can I make sense of all this? Besides the letters, there are literally dozens of birthday, Valentine, Christmas, and what-not cards from a bounteous assortment of men. There is one from my mother, signed with the spindly writing of her last years, wishing happy birthday to *A Wonderful Daughter*—probably one of the last communications before my mother couldn't bring herself to speak to Carolyn again. There are recipes, report cards, childhood awards, more love notes

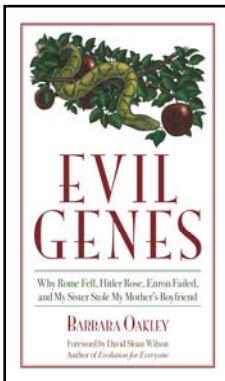
with flattened, perfumeless flowers, mash notes. They tell me everything and nothing about Carolyn—mirrors reflecting mist.

But the letters and notes I've found *do* tell me that Carolyn was deeply loved, not just by my parents, but by many different people. That there was something captivating about her—something that allowed men, for a while at least, to think that she was the answer to their dreams.

I think back to the question that has bothered me for so long—how could a disturbed individual attract so many people? The letters tell me. Beauty. Intelligence. Charisma.

I nudge the last of the packets back into place in the carton and close the flaps. Although I've set aside the diaries for careful reading later, the box feels somehow heavier as I manhandle it around, duct taping the spirits of the past. My weekend of investigation has left me feeling as if I've been shoveling water. But one thing has come clear. Carolyn showed "a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships." Not only with us—her family—but with practically everyone she ever became close to.

I also know that, in 2001, Professor John McHoskey, who had previously done such interesting work relating Machiavellianism to psychopathy, found something very interesting about those unstable and intense relationships. In one of his final, crucial studies, McHoskey found something that might help explain not only the writings from Carolyn's box, but Machiavellian behavior in general.



Excerpted from *Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend* by Barbara Oakley (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), pp. 109-129. Copyright ©2007 by Barbara Oakley. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher. www.prometheusbooks.com
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Barbara Oakley, PhD has been dubbed a female Indiana Jones---her writing combines worldwide adventure with solid research and expertise. Starting with psychology as a frame of reference, Oakley uses cutting -edge images of the working brain to provide startling support for the idea that "evil" people act the way they do mainly as the result of a dysfunction. And that some deceitful, manipulative, and even sadistic behavior appears to be programmed genetically—suggesting that some people really are born to be bad. Among other adventures, she has worked as a Russian translator on Soviet trawlers in the Bering Sea, served as a radio operator at the South Pole Station in Antarctica, and risen from private to captain in the US Army. Currently and associate professor of engineering at Oakland University in Michigan, Oakley is a recent vice president of the world's largest bioengineering society and holds a doctorate in the integrative discipline of systems engineering.

NOTES

1. Richard L. Bruno, *The Polio Paradox: Uncovering the Hidden History of Polio to Understand and Treat "Post-Polio Syndrome" and Chronic Fatigue* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), pp. 47–54.
2. Richard Bruno in correspondence with the author, February 16, 2007.
3. R. L. Bruno et al., "The Neuroanatomy of Post-Polio Fatigue," *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* 75, no. 5 (1994): 498–504; R. L. Bruno, N. M. Frick, and J. Cohen, "Polioencephalitis, Stress, and the Etiology of Post-Polio Sequelae," *Orthopedics* 14, no. 11 (1991): 1269–76.
4. Richard Bruno in correspondence with the author, February 18, 2007.
5. Bruno, Frick, and Cohen, "Polioencephalitis."
6. E. Meyer, "Psychological Considerations in a Group of Children with Poliomyelitis," *Journal of Pediatrics* 31 (1947): 34–48; John R. Paul, *A History of Poliomyelitis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). Meyer's study also examined older and younger children—52 in total.
7. Bruno, *Polio Paradox*, pp. 105–106.
8. S. J. Creange and R. L. Bruno, "Compliance with Treatment for Postpolio Sequelae: Effect of Type A Behavior, Self-Concept, and Loneliness," *American Journal of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation* 76, no. 5 (1997): 378–82.
9. Meyer, "Psychological Considerations."
10. R. L. Bruno and N. M. Frick, "The Psychology of Polio as Prelude to Post-Polio Sequelae: Behavior Modification and Psychotherapy," *Orthopedics* 14, no. 11 (1991): 1185–93.
11. Ibid.