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The Father/Mother

Leonard Bushkoff

A few personal vignettes of Cambridge and Boston as the troubled sixties turn into the confusing seventies.

My wife, Sheila, had suddenly died of cancer a year earlier, shortly after giving birth to our son. So I also am turning: from marriage to widowhood; from a smug Detroit suburb to mid-Cambridge shabbiness; and from teaching college history to raising an infant. And from taking for granted the goodness and greatness of these United States into wondering whether the hard, overbearing aspects of American life were only aberrations. Imperial democracy was ascendent, not my parents' immigrant hopes of a just, humane society.

Only much later did I begin to understand what was happening. But an occasional event contributed to what I was seeing and feeling.

A spring Sunday on Cambridge Common, as a youthful crowd gathers around the Civil War monument. Rock music blares from amplifiers, surging outward as I roll Alex's stroller. He roars as I push and let go, catching it at the curb.

Jeans, beards, sandals, dashikis, broad-brimmed hats, field jackets, are the uniform of the day. Teenage boys crawl over the monument, their scrawny torsos obscuring its names and dates. Marijuana smoke forms a thin pall over everything.

For me, it is a glimpse of the counterculture at play. I had, to be sure, seen a troop of Ho Chi Minh celebrants dressed for trouble in shades and boots as they chanted their way down Pennsylvania Avenue, but politics as theater was alien to me. Here, on Cambridge Common, stands a gypsy conclave, with extravagant fabrics, textures, costumes: faces and features are overshadowed by sheer gaudiness. There are luxuriant beards, masking much of the faces, from which eyes peer warily at the bourgeois world.

Beards and politics, politics and beards! How distant from the sober radicalism of my parents, their dark suits and dresses, the commitment to personal dignity and calm behavior that I cling to for dear life since Sheila's death. How close this gathering seems to the macho posturing of Third World guerrillas — and bandits. It hardly seems the way to a better society.

As we glide by, Alex begins battling his stroller. I lift him out, and he rushes away from the crowd, toward the playground where parents sit, their heads stuffed into the Sunday *New York Times*, their children digging vigorously in the sandbox. Alex plunges in, finds a stick, joins another boy in burrowing toward China.

Leonard Bushkoff, a writer on history and politics, is at work on a volume about America's three wars in Asia.

When we return home, I watch the television news from Vietnam. The war is winding down, the big search-and-destroy operations are past, but a trickle of casualties continues: a patrol here, an ambush there — and of course the bombing. My memories as a youngster during World War II are of battles and campaigns that marked victory over Nazism. I remember returning from school on June 6, 1944, having milk and cookies, and listening happily to radio news of the Normandy landing. Deaths yes, wounded yes, and sorrow on all sides, but with a purpose. Where had that purpose gone?

Another Sunday, but cold and raw. Alex and I go with friends to the Saint Patrick's Day parade in South Boston. Alex perches on my shoulder as we leave the subway, the figure-head of a lone ship. Cracked pavements, old cars, scattered trash, close-packed three-deckers: poverty can be seen, felt, almost tasted. But I thought the Boston Irish had clout; are these mean streets the meager reward for the foot soldiers of the political wars? I am just beginning to get a sense of Boston's political geography. Flatlands signify old settlements, hence the poverty, populism, and clan politics of Southie, Eastie, Lynn, Everett, Revere, East Cambridge. But hills suggest newer settlements, higher wealth and status, and distancing from those left behind at the water's edge. Meanwhile, as I watch boisterous men trickling out of bars and restaurants, I worry lest my face and language betray my alien presence. Everybody loves kids: will Alex serve as my safe-conduct pass?

The parade begins. Alex yells with the others as Marines in dress uniforms march by, and at the convertibles, their tops down, with local pols perched on the back. Some are smooth, smiling young men, would-be Kennedys, with pinstripe suits and presentable wives. Others are older men, muffled in scarves and raincoats, more concerned with avoiding colds than in projecting youthfulness: "You know where I stand." Some of the pols shout back as greetings are called from the curb. Others don't bother; a wave, a grin, will do. Motorcycle cops cruise by, ignoring the teenage girls who reel down the sidewalk, beer cans in hand: hey, St. Patrick's Day belongs to *us*!

As I watch the pinstripes, the careful haircuts, the sober coats of the wives, I sense for a moment the shock that Broadway must have felt at the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers. Of course such things happened during the Troubles, to Michael Collins and the others; that was Ireland. But what did it say of the American dream that men of their blood and heritage should be struck down, far from home, in a country which liked to believe that everyone got a fair shake?

I remember other parades, on Memorial Day in West Philadelphia, with GAR markers in the cemetery where lay some of the thousands of Pennsylvania farmboys who had turned out to defend the Union — "We are coming Father Abraham, a hundred thousand strong!" And Sheila had joked about fried chicken, fireworks, and the American Legion tramping through her town in South Dakota on July Fourth. However naive and sentimental, those celebrations linked us to the nation's past; this mixture of tribal rite and political maneuvering on Broadway did not.

A crowded Chinese restaurant in Cambridge. A friend and I are seated at the table of another couple. They look up, cautiously. Both wear sweaters and jeans; no makeup for her, but pink granny glasses hint at playfulness. Everyone has the Cambridge monochromatic look: blue jeans, blue parkas, dusty boots, dun-colored sweaters.

The couple wield their chopsticks energetically, and a few phrases drift our way: "What do you think she wants?" "He's tough to figure out." "D'you think she'll be with us?"

Papers are passed back and forth from a small stack at his elbow. I smell political activism — serious, purposeful — and am both impressed and a bit envious. Here I am, at loose ends since Sheila's death and the nervous withdrawal of those we knew — and these two know just what they're doing.

I throw out some bait by criticizing the war. He looks at me, appraisingly, decides to reply: Yes, it's terrible, but maybe that's not so bad, maybe it'll bring "radical change" — the word "revolution" hangs unsaid — and that's all to the good, yes?

But who, I reply, will make this, um, ah, "radical change" happen? He replies, predictably: blacks, Hispanics, "the working class," and "radical youth" — not just privileged college students, but guys who hate the poverty that "drives" them into the military and Vietnam.

I think of the calm, confident sergeants I knew in the Pentagon. They hardly seemed "driven," despite their wisecracks about officers. And I remember the endless debates at our kitchen table, my dour, blunt father taking the social democratic side against the impassioned Stalinism of Chesin, a family friend, with my mother bringing coffee cake and intervening forcefully when things got too hot. (Years later, she mentioned that Chesin had proposed to her after my dad died.)

So I raise all the obvious questions. How do you intend to win — without bloodshed, of course? In what way? By what means? The silent majority is indeed a majority. And it hates your guts: look at Nixon's election. *That* means order, not change, and with both state power and ballots on its side. The easy talk of revolution angers me, fusing in my mind with Sheila's death and those in Vietnam: enough! Where, I ask, is majority support for this brave new world you want?

They exchange pitying glances: another gutless liberal prattling about "majorities"! It appears by now that these two well-spoken and well-educated radicals hold blue-collar jobs at Mount Auburn Hospital, the better — nothing is explicit — to reach the proletariat. I am stunned, yet fascinated: shades of the old Russia, of young activists "going to the people" and being rebuffed — as these two no doubt will be. Their good diction alone, her stylish glasses, will put off the other largely Hispanic kitchen workers and orderlies. I want to shout, to shake them, half angrily, half paternally: "Cut it out. Get out of it. It'll break your heart." In my clumsy way, I'm trying to help. If I couldn't do that when Sheila was dying, maybe I can do it here?

So I recite the tale of those 1880s activists, their good intentions, their rejection by the peasants and eviction by the police. My audience is bored: what do they care about history, that record of failure by their elders? *They'll* do things differently (the same answer U.S. officers gave when the French failure in Vietnam was pointed out. The French army, they contended, was no good; we'll do things *differently*.)

The woman taps her watch, looking hard at her comrade, who seems inclined to argue further. *We* have more important things to do, her look suggests. They finish, don their field jackets (Why, if they hate war so much, do they wear army green?), prepare to leave. He throws some final words my way. Revolution is necessary in this sick society, hence possible when enough people learn from war, racism, and police nightsticks what a fraud American democracy is. Anyone who defends it is contributing to this great lie — and to the butchery in Vietnam. Meanwhile, they, as activists, are fighting the good fight with the workers and the Third World, while "you liberals" are doing nothing.

My friend is sympathetic to me as they leave, yet vexed. Why argue with them? It just ruins the evening. How can I explain that I thought it *made* the evening? And how can I

explain — even to myself — that I was vaguely attracted to them, that I needed *something* to help get my life back on track? Not for the first time, I realize that the intensity, the argumentiveness, the intellectual-political tussling with which I grew up, confuses and embarrasses most middle-class Americans. Certainly they were wrong, my friend complains, but why did I have to provoke them? Why, indeed?

Politics is everywhere, spurred by the war, by demonstrations in Harvard Square, by tensions over class and gender — even on my grim little street near Inman Square. A short, narrow street it is, lined with small, faded clapboard houses, with tiny side yards and wooden fences. Everyone walks in the street, ignoring the uneven brick sidewalks and honking cars: To hell with you; *we* live here. At one end, a shabby yet bustling candy store (where I learn that soda is “tonic”); at the other, a small fire station, its men lounging in front in good weather, wisecracking with passing young women. (Much later, I discover that its back room is not unknown to some of these women.)

Once a solid working-class street, it is declining along with blue-collar East Cambridge. The warehouses and small plants of nearby Kendall Square have long since closed. Their sites are flattened, covered with rubble and weeds. The big plans for new government buildings, offices, laboratories, have died with Nixon’s victory — or so my neighbors believe. Why should Richard Nixon do anything for Teddy Kennedy’s constituents?

I doubt if it really was that simple, a Nixon-Kennedy brawl with innocent bystanders taking the fall. And what good would white-collar jobs in an elite Kendall Square do for the street? But my neighbors think that way, see life that way. There is a war — and their sons fight in it while those of Brattle Street escape. There is inflation — and their costs rise while big shots profit. There are drugs, hippies, divorce, open sexuality — and their children and grandchildren are at risk. There was a pervasive sense of powerlessness, of being victimized by outsiders who don’t respect their values. (And what does this make me, an outsider with books on his walls, a man so presumptuous — or nuts — as to dare raise a child on his own?)

Survival lay through connections, that is, politics, local politics — by connecting with a pol, serving him, and being sustained by him in return. There were city jobs — fire, police, teaching: *that* is when help mattered. Or there was less obvious help. “Do you know Charley So-and-so up at the Hall?” I was told, “A great guy. He helped us a lot when my youngest was having trouble with the cops.” Hell-raising sons, disobedient daughters, a declining economy: safety lay with a protector, a lord who would care for his vassals. For change was dangerous. The street couldn’t cope with it, feared and hated it. Nobody had the Harvard Square sense of a new and better world acoming.

Especially not the older women, many of them widows, all of them guardians of tradition. They complain bitterly about the state of the world (This war is a terrible thing. Terrible!), the country, the city, the street, and especially the children and teenagers who flock to the candy store from all around. The kids are noisy, irreverent, and remarkably foul-mouthed, the only area in which the rougher girls can outshine the boys: they know all the words. The eight-year-old girl I heard announcing, “I’m gonna punch that bitch in the mout’ ” was no cruder than her peers, simply blunter in embracing the tough-guy, male values that her peers respected.

Male values are trumps, especially “Don’t take any crap from anybody.” The tougher girls seem to sense that “acting like a lady” means losing, being victimized, on a street that itself is losing. “Ladies” — their mothers — too often tolerate, first, rowdy and ex-

plaitive boyfriends and, later, alcoholic, abusive, unemployed husbands. So there are divorces, permanent separations, and very angry teenagers. The aggressiveness and outright brutality of the boys is excused, permitted: "Boys will be boys, y'know." But the sight of fourteen-year-old girls in skintight jeans and black leather boots, spewing sexual obscenities while elderly women walk by, is not something the street can accept.

I keep a nod-and-hello foot in both camps, young and old, partly because, as a bookish outsider, I fear harassment from the kids — windows have been smashed. But also because of the Great Baby-sitter Hunt, which continues incessantly. I am relieved of this activity only in the afternoons, when Alex goes to a play group — and, a year later, to a nursery school. At other times my freedom depends on my taking him to a playmate's house or finding a sitter.

Nothing in my new life was so upsetting, caused so much frustration and anxiety regarding the sheer fragility of our lives, as being tethered to Alex for all but five hours daily. Long years as a graduate student and junior academic had accustomed me to solitude, to the isolated world of books, library stacks, and writing. That was my choice, and it seemed a small price to pay for the opportunity both to create and to sidestep the boredom and banalities of most social relationships.

But it was a long way from a reasonable solitude, voluntarily accepted, to weeks of virtual cabin fever during a Cambridge winter. I now understood what mothers with young children endured, though they, presumably, greeted another adult at five o'clock. As a father who had been dragooned by terrible circumstances into serving as a mother, I saw myself not as a point man in the social revolution of househusbands and male sensitivity that lay in the future, but as a confused rear guard, trying to save what could be saved — while everyone I knew maintained a strained silence that implied I was absolutely crazy.

In my naiveté, I had hoped that my acquaintances in Cambridge, a city so diverse and — allegedly — responsive to new ideas, would accept, even approve, my radical action. I was wrong. Nobody batted an eye. The academics I knew bumbled on about projects, grants, and career, career, career, without missing a beat. Single women exhaustively analyzed their families, friends, sexual adventures, and especially their relationships. And mothers lectured expertly on Pampers and pediatricians, play groups and afterschool programs, as though parenting was simply a practical matter, little different from earning a Ph.D. Even my pediatrician moved Alex and me in and out of his office without ever raising basic questions or issues. The bland, reassuring smile that he constantly wore slipped only when Alex, bouncing up and down — diaperless — on the office couch, suddenly fired off a small, yellow stream; the doctor was not amused.

The difficulty seemed to be that we didn't fit normal categories. I was an academic who no longer taught, a husband who no longer had a wife, and a father who had chosen to be a mother. I was, as the clever child of a friend put it, a "father/mother," a very strange, undefined entity.

All the more reason to find reliable baby-sitters, so I could get out of the house. There had, in fact, been a strong candidate, but that evaporated. I had moved into my house largely because the landlady, who came highly recommended and lived immediately adjacent, had seemed very sympathetic. She had, in fact, volunteered to baby-sit on occasion. Priscilla was a small, brisk woman in her thirties with sharp features and an intense, terrierlike quality. She was divorced, worked at MIT, and had an amiable boyfriend. Fine, I

thought: here is backup if needed. Having a child next door — she had none — seemed to please her. “Of course, Len, I can sit for you some evenings. I’d just be in your living room while Alex is sleeping, rather than mine.”

It never happened. It never seemed to be “the right time”; or Priscilla was “too busy”; or next Saturday morning “isn’t a good day.” I never understood why her mood had shifted, but I did sense that this energetic, taut woman had been brought up to be tough and independent above all, that her unsuccessful marriage had confirmed that vision, and that she neither asked for nor granted support: “favors” was her term. So I took Alex along to the supermarket and, sitting high on my shoulders, even to Haymarket and the waterfront, where he handled himself very well. But this obviously did not solve the problem.

I tried to meet that by speaking to mothers in playgrounds as Alex frolicked with their kids. Everyone had war stories about sitters. How one pushed the thermostat far up, and the parents returned to find their child covered in sweat. Another sitter huddled in her coat and read movie magazines while her charges sat mutely before the telly. (The box, after all, was the neighborhood sitter of choice; that or older children, and Grandma down the block.) Yet another sitter invited boys in, and condoms eventually appeared in the trash. (Only years later did I realize that condoms suggested a prudence rarely shown in mid-Cambridge, where teenage sex marched with fear, guilt, and downright ignorance.) And — of course — every sitter felt free to cancel at the last second.

There remained the older women of my block. Children held no mysteries to them but, with married daughters or nieces constantly dropping off wolf packs of offspring, little pleasure either — no matter that I offered to pay. They seemed impressed by my action in raising Alex unaided, but also puzzled by so strange? unrealistic? perhaps unmanly? an arrangement. Were there no grandparents? in-laws? other family? The whole idea of the freewheeling individual who accepted separation from his or her family, the better to pursue personal ambitions, despite the price, simply mystified my neighbors. Family, turf, job, parish, flag and country, were their eternal verities, but not mine. So my older neighbors offer me a traditional solace: certainly I’ll marry within the year — then all will be well.

That’s fine, I reply, but it doesn’t get me a sitter for Saturday night, when I’m invited to attend a party. “Well, there is Mary,” I’m told. “She’s very nice, not one of them hanging out up *there*” — pointing to the candy store. The store is monitored as though it is a treeline in Vietnam, a likely source of danger. And whether or not a teenager hangs out on its two worn steps is the yardstick by which his — and especially *her* — virtue is measured. No one seems to connect the small change casually given a whining child to buy Cokes, Twinkies, and chips “up there” with the drive of teenagers for instant gratification. When I arrived in 1970, LSD and narcotics were reaching them. Inevitably, everyone blamed it on Harvard Square, which in reality was as foreign as China to kids who felt out of their depth when away from their turf.

Meanwhile, there is Mary — pale, silent, shy, but certainly experienced enough, to judge by the younger siblings she bosses so effortlessly. And she surprises me by actually patting Alex on the head when they meet. We all giggle; I’m touched by her easy way with him.

Mary begins sitting for us; I begin going out more on Saturday nights, and I also begin learning tidbits from her about her family and the neighborhood. That news is grim. She mentions her mother but rarely, her father never. I sense that he has disappeared, abandoned them, and that her mother has an ill-paying job — and a boyfriend. I thought at the

time that the boyfriend was an irresponsible luxury. Later I realized that a poor woman with many mouths to feed, but without my bank account, took her support where she could find it. Economics, not sex, shaped her behavior. The upshot, however, was that Mary, at seventeen, was left to mind her brothers and sisters, with her schooling coming a long way behind.

She and all the baby-sitters are in a bind. Coming from large — hence poor — families, they can't expect a penny from Mom. They need money for clothes, and — I suspect — to help buy liquor and pot for the parties of which they might not otherwise be informed. But they also need to prove themselves by having a visible boyfriend, who in turn wants to prove himself by displaying his girl on Saturday nights. To gain him, she loses sitting — and money.

Sex is the obvious way to get and keep him, but it also has its costs: possible pregnancy, probable gossip, certain guilt. Sex is perceived as dangerous, and the privacy offered by baby-sitting puts a couple at risk. While intercourse itself can be rationalized as love, passion, or the excitement of “I just couldn't help myself” — especially if liquor is present — birth control cannot. In so Catholic a street, it signifies premeditation, the premeditated violation of a sacrament. Sex may be bad, but birth control is far, far worse, virtually a crime.

It takes me a long time to grasp this, but Priscilla gives me chapter and verse, much of it drawn from her childhood in Quincy. How different it is from my youth, when we all took it for granted that sex was the most powerful of the great forces in life, and that our generation would give it healthy, rational expression, as our puritanical elders would not. That adolescents should be gripped by guilt and anxiety as they wrestled on the living room sofa — this is 1970! — seemed to me just another of the cruel anachronisms of life in mid-Cambridge.

Then I realized, after one of Mary's Saturday night stints, that it was *my* sofa — even *my bed* — on which the groping and grappling had been taking place. Several batches of books were out of place — Alex couldn't reach that high. Who had shifted four books on China to the space for Poland, and vice versa? And why were some books that normally lay flat standing upright? The trash contained cigarette butts; I didn't smoke. And my bed was rumpled, its pillows rearranged, a sheet pulled out.

I was saddened, and suddenly very tired: another disappointment, a further sense of things coming unstuck. I knew it was hard for Mary to say no to friends and especially to a boyfriend, but still... Should I have confronted her? Yes, if I was trying to be honest. No, if I expected to air a problem, for she doubtless would look at me silently, with those sad, fatalistic eyes. Being a father/mother was enough. I didn't want to pile still more on my plate. So I didn't call her again.

A postscript. I saw her on the street a year or so later. She was visibly pregnant; her skin looked better, but her eyes were as passive and tired as ever. We mumbled a few banalities. A brother had joined the Marines; everything else was as before. I kept my eyes on her face. Neither of us alluded to her pregnancy.

Finding reliable baby-sitters was central to a more important issue: finding single women. This was not to be easy, though I didn't understand why and how until much later. I was intensely needy, and that is no path either to close and stable relations or to mutual understanding.

There were other factors as well. My late wife and I had grown up in the 1950s and, unknowingly, shared its traditional and hierarchical gender values. We took it for granted

that men and women were “made for each other”; that marriage was the natural, normal state; that the unmarried were to be pitied, perhaps scorned as losers; that men should wield power, while women, as housewives and mothers, backed them up; and that women’s higher education should focus on cultural enrichment, not careers. The important thing was to work hard, to do the right thing, and to be “normal” — as defined very narrowly — and the quid pro quo would be worldly rewards. With so much agreement, our graduate-school courtship had gone smoothly, almost too smoothly, with too many questions going unasked.

Now it was 1970, and the rules were dissolving, particularly among the Cambridge elite: a losing war caused powerful waves. As women moved up professionally, as traditional behavior lost its power, new rules of the game developed, the principal one being that there were no rules.

In theory, I was all for this new openness, for power sharing, mutual supportiveness, and understanding, all of which followed logically on the liberty, equality, and fraternity that I had learned in both home and school. After all, how could anyone who taught nineteenth-century European history, with its great democratic movements, not support feminism? To oppose it would be to stand with those mean-spirited Tafts, Nixons, and Kissingers who epitomized the ancient régime, American style.

In theory. Practice of course was quite different. Many years later, I began to realize that the assumptions I bore into the seventies were not all that egalitarian, that practice often contradicted principle, and that my growing expertise with diapers and snowsuits did not necessarily enable me to better understand women.

There was, for example, the question of dating, with its mixture of pleasure and apprehension, acceptance and rejection. And *this*, at age thirty-eight; how ridiculous! And what are the rules, nowadays? I remembered what they had been fifteen years before, at the University of Chicago: if she wanted to go out, she said so; if she didn’t, she said that, too. The environment was tough, hard, and the words were blunt, truthful — or so I remembered them. Cambridge, however, seemed slicker, smoother, less honest, far less of a community than was the great university of which Sheila and I were proud to have been a part.

Still, I grabbed whatever chance I could — baby-sitters willing — to get out and around. I remember a party in the snowy winter of 1971 with the usual Cambridge mix of teachers, professionals, managers, and various odds and ends, both married and single, from their thirties upward. I spoke at length with a small, dark, lively woman, whose phone number I got. We said good-bye with moderate warmth, and I announced that I would call; she seemed pleased.

I did call, once, then twice: circumstances apparently prevented our meeting. I failed to take the hint, didn’t even realize that there was a hint. After all, in both my family and the university, no one agonized about saying no; defining ourselves, in fact, consisted of saying yes to some things and no to others. Hence my perplexity when I called a third time and heard the irritation in her voice as we plunged into another conversation. It centered on Canada, which was very much in the news that winter. Yanks who hardly knew Toronto from Vancouver were hearing about Quebecois nationalism, the abduction of two political personages — one was killed — and Pierre Trudeau’s demagogic use of the army against terrorism. Somehow this entered our talk. I allowed that Trudeau’s action, perhaps, violated civil liberties. She responded testily, “You’re probably all for the terrorists, aren’t you? You don’t care a bit that they murdered that guy, do you?” And more.

I cut in to say that of course I cared about a sudden, terrible death, if only because my son and I knew about similar things first hand. But it was too late. There was nothing to say — rather, there was everything to say. Nothing but good-bye, that is. Only later did I realize just how unnerving an approach by a young widower with a child in tow must have been to a woman who lived alone and had never married: she could hardly dismiss the invitation as mere reconnaissance over a drink or coffee. Only later did I begin, very slowly, to realize that centuries of social conditioning by a male-dominated society has made any evasion, any subterfuge, safer for women than a flat no, which might trigger God-knows-what reaction from a disgruntled male.

Time passed. We soon moved to West Cambridge, where the grammar school was better and the mood was calmer. Alex began growing up, passing all the milestones, from kindergarten through Little League, to his first two-wheeler and summer camp. The fears I'd had proved unfounded. There were no disasters, no illnesses or major accidents, and no damaging unhappiness for this child raised by his father. He recently graduated from a college in California; now living out there, he is a practical, level-headed young man, ambitious, energetic, creative — and fairly self-contained.

I gradually regained my hope and energy as Alex left infancy behind, and began freelance book reviewing and writing on history and politics for various American and foreign newspapers; I've never felt any desire to return to academic life. Now I'm writing a book about — what else? — war — the three we've fought in Asia since the day I lay on the rug with the Sunday comics while news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio. I will soon marry a fellow writer whose children are grown. I fantasize the two of us passing our respective manuscripts back and forth across the breakfast table. ☺