

## Iron-Bound

I stared out of the sliding glass door and watched as two men constructed a tent with poles and canvas. My aunt and grandma carried tables across the yard while my sister chased the dog around with streamers. I had been holding a balloon weight, but it fell to my side. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to spoil your graduation party but I knew I couldn't keep this a secret from you. It's better to have it out in the open so we can deal with it." My mother was not exactly looking at me, but through me, as she delivered the news of her recent stage three breast cancer diagnosis.

*Derived from the Greek for almond, the amygdala sits in the brain's medial temporal lobe, a few inches from either ear. Coursing through the amygdala are nerves connecting it to a number of important brain centers, including the neocortex and visual cortex.*

A young Charlotte Perkins stares out of the window at the boundless terrain hurtling by. The lurching train jostles her pen on the parchment. She must start over. I imagine Charlotte is long past being angry with her mother for packing up all of their possessions and traveling across the country; this was the nineteenth time in eighteen years that the two had resettled. She is also forgiving of the bundles of clothing she has to wear. *When I protested, mother said it was the easiest way to carry them. This I long resented, not in the least realizing how many things she must have had to carry, with two small children to convoy.*<sup>1</sup> Like Charlotte, my childhood was also spent moving from house to house. Our family had changed homes six times in four and a half years before I turned ten years old. It became a ritual to pack my life in boxes and tell my friends goodbye. The night before we would leave, I would tip-toe around and quietly bid adieu

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<sup>1</sup> *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 9.

to each room individually, making sure that house knew I was sorry we couldn't stay.

*What does courage mean / Save strength to help you face a pain foreseen? /  
Dangerous risk of walking lone and free / Out of the easy paths that used to be, / And the  
fierce pain of hurting those we love / When love meets truth, and truth must ride above?*

Charlotte's hand twitches as she writes but she ignores it. The letter must be sent to her daughter by morning. She will not allow Katharine to grow up starved of motherly affection as she had been throughout childhood. *How children suffer from those who love them the most!*<sup>2</sup> Charlotte can remember living by train as her mother chased an absent husband across the country. Mary Perkins would never allow her children to experience that kind of agony, the torment of waiting for love that was not coming, and therefore denied them any affection that they could long for or expect. In the evenings, young Charlotte would prick herself with pins. She had to stay awake. Mary was coming, as she always did. Her mother would enter the room and secretly embrace the child she believed to be asleep. Charlotte reveled in being held and kissed by the only parent in her life.

*While the amygdala is involved in current emotional responses, it is also heavily involved in emotional memory. The amygdala plays a protective role; it primarily is involved in protecting organisms.*

I was a sophomore in high school when my mother and stepfather divorced. My brother and sister, both younger, were moving with my stepfather to Atlanta while my

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2 *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 128.

mother would take a job as a consultant for a hospital which would require her to live in one of five different states four days a week. My grandmother moved in with me temporarily so that I could remain at school. Thursdays quickly became my favorite day of the week; I would turn the television on in every room of the house to drown out the silence from my grandmother's departure back to Pennsylvania and wait for the garage door to open to signal my mother's return from whatever state she was working in that month. The routine was hard, but it was necessary. Supporting a family could not be done without making sacrifices.

*It takes great strength to live where you belong / When other people think that you are wrong; / People you love, and who love you, and whose / Approval is a pleasure you would choose. / To bear this pressure and succeed at length / In living your belief – well, it takes strength.*

Charlotte believed Katharine would be better off in California. A mother with postpartum psychosis could not be fit to raise a child. They had held together, a makeshift family, for nine years. It was time to let Katharine stay with her father. *I did not mean her to suffer the losses of my youth – this seemed the right thing to do. No one suffered from it but myself.*<sup>3</sup> But Katharine would have suffered. She would have read her mother's letters while sitting in the lap of her father's second wife. *I wish – O how I wish! - you were 'near' enough for me to comfort you...I did try so carefully not to hurt you, and to love and pet you as I so longed to be loved and petted and never was. But I suppose you were*

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3 *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 163.

*hurt in ways I never knew.*<sup>4</sup> Charlotte wrote often – constant reminders that she was hundreds of miles away – and Katharine would cling to the pages as if the words still held the scent of her mother's perfume.

*The amygdala, an almond-sized and -shaped brain structure, has long been linked with a person's mental and emotional state. The circuitry between the frontal cortical regions of the brain may be critical in regulating emotion and in guiding emotion-related behaviors.*

Again on a train, Charlotte Perkins Gilman scrawls a letter while the wheels hold steady. She is heading towards New York to work for social reform while recovering from depression. *My own dearest little daughter; I have such lovely little letters from you, dear. They make me very happy...I didn't leave any new address dear heart because I had none. The old one would have done all right enough though – letters were forwarded till I knew where I was.*<sup>5</sup> Charlotte will not be confined; the doctor's 'rest cure' was only a torment, a way to deal with the “nervous and anxious temperaments of women.” She begins to plan a short story. Perhaps this protagonist will not fare as well against depression.

*Afraid at first, yet bound / On such high errand as no fear could stay. / Forth goes he  
with the lions in his path. / And then - ?*

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4 *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 128.

5 *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 130-131.

I could not cry; guests were arriving and I had to greet them and steer them in the direction of food. A knot in the pit of my stomach kept me strangely alert when my body would have rather given in to the temptation of autopilot. My hand remembered the pressure of the balloon weight it was clutching onto and I opened the sliding glass door to stand in a receiving line of well-wishers and friends I would soon be leaving.

January 1932: Charlotte is diagnosed with breast cancer. She takes the sentence in stride. *I had not the least objection to dying.* She talks to me from the pages of her memoir, giving advice to a scared eighteen-year-old as if to her own daughter. *Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, pain, misfortune, or 'broken heart' is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains.*<sup>6</sup> And, as Katharine must have, I felt angry. Fear, regret, worry, a crushing wave of hopelessness. It does not matter how much time has separated a mother and daughter. It does not matter that Katharine and Charlotte have been apart for the majority of their lives; there exists a connection that cannot be broken no matter how many miles lay in between the two.

My own mother was also not afraid to die. After four months of treatment and surgery, she was declared cancer-free.

Charlotte was not.

*The softest, freest, most pliable and changeful living substance is the brain -- the hardest and most iron-bound as well.*

It is August 17, 1935. Charlotte Perkins Gilman sits at her table, penning her last

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<sup>6</sup> *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 333.

letter. The suicide note will explain that she is choosing a peaceful end. *I did not propose to die of this, so I promptly bought sufficient chloroform as a substitute...When all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one.*<sup>7</sup> In Charlotte's only book of poetry, she wrote of compromise: *It is well to fight and win - / If that may be; / It is well to fight and die therein - / For such go free; / It is ill to fight and find no grave / But a prison cell; / To keep alive, yet live a slave / Praise those who fell!*

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**Judges’ Commentary on “Iron-Bound”**

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<sup>7</sup> *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, page 333.