

# MIHI CURA



by Bel Kaufman

To leap in memory over a span of fifty years to the days of one's youth is fraught with error. Like frost on a window pane, memory mists the past; it softens, embroiders, distorts. When I try to recall what Hunter College was like in my day, irrelevancies emerge, dim faces, half-forgotten names, but the whole escapes; like

---

*Up the Down Staircase (now in its 47th printing) is more than a novel about life in the New York City school system; its title has become a permanent part of the American language. Likewise, its author, Bel Kaufman (now celebrating her 50th anniversary as a Phi Beta Kappa, Magna Cum Laude graduate of Hunter), is more than its author; she has become a permanent member of that rare class, American humorists. But unlike her grandfather, Sholom Aleichem, who was known as the Yiddish Mark Twain (or Mark Twain, who identified himself as the American Sholom Aleichem), Bel Kaufman is sui generis. Widely known as a writer, teacher, translator, and popular speaker at educational conventions and Jewish organizations, she has won many honors and awards, such as awards from UJA, Anti-Defamation League, Histrut, Brandeis University (as Woman of the Year), from Educational Press of America for the best articles on education in 1976 and 1979, and from NEA and PEN for winning a short story contest in 1983. Among her numerous other honors is membership in Hunter's Hall of Fame. She is now at work on a theater piece and lyrics for a musical.*

©1984 by Bel Kaufman

the tail-end of a dream, it cannot be caught. I remember only minor incidents. Perhaps they were funny—they now seem sad. Perhaps they were sad—they now seem funny.

In order to recapture it, I look at my *Wistarion* of 1934, the year I was graduated. There it is on my desk—a record, a proof of Hunter as it once was, while all this time the world has been spinning crazily away from it.

In my old Wisty, President Eugene A. Colligan quotes the College motto: *Mihi Cura Futuri*—"To me the care of the future." Now, half a century later, I myself am in that future, turning the still glossy if somewhat faded pages of my youth.

The faces of my classmates, posed formally in neat double rows down the middle of these pages, are all young, all female, practically all white, with demurely marcelled hair; all in identical discreet black V-necks provided by the photographer. How vulnerable they look! Everything was still possible to them. For each of these graduates, it would be a different future; for each, a different memory of Hunter College.

Next to each photo, the girl's name and list of her activities. The longer the list, the more impressive seems the face. What of those who listed only their names and nothing else? Did they come and go, leaving no mark on the school? I remember a line

from Saroyan: a little boy who gets into trouble in school and is sent to the principal says: "All I want is to live and let live, and get myself a little education!" I study the faces of my classmates, becalmed forever on these pages. She must be the one who. . . . And wasn't this the girl who always. . . ? I do not know them, and I cannot remember me.

I try to read my own face—bland, vaguely familiar, it looks new and untouched. It reveals nothing. The spelling of my first name, Belle, startles me, I'm so accustomed to its truncated version. But that is part of history: long before the women's movement, *Esquire* was a magazine strictly for men, by men; it did not publish women. I lopped off the final "le" when I sold my first story to the magazine because "Bel" sounded like a man's name. They published the story with my by-line, but in the same issue appeared a photo of me, looking unmistakably female. I like to think I broke that precedent; they have been publishing women ever since—but my name has remained Bel.

Next to my name, a modest list of my activities. Sec'y of the English Club?—I remember nothing about it. Shakespeare Society?—Oh yes! That was very special: we went from class to class, introducing others to Shakespeare by reciting his soliloquies. Mine was "Once more into the

# TUTURI



breach. . ." Its faculty advisor, Elizabeth Stein, who taught Shakespeare in her strange hoarse whisper, has written in my *Wisty*: "May you have many years of sunshine days." Though quite a few of my days turned out to be rainy, I remember the pleasure of reciting those lines.

Make-up Box? —That was the dramatic society, which accepted me in spite of my faint Russian accent. And here—Journalism Club. It was the only extra-curricular activity for which we were paid! Each member was assigned to one of the city's many newspapers; when our stories were published, we were paid by the inch. My paper was *The Bronx Home News*, and I tried to write a lot of inches. Because of this I was almost expelled from school. I wrote an interview of my friend Joy Davidman, the youngest in our graduating class and a fine poet, who later married C.S. Lewis and whom I visited in their home near Oxford shortly before her death. She was dying of cancer, but she told me she was never happier than in this marriage. "Now I know," she said, "that the movies and the poets are right: it exists!" (I later used this sentence in one of my novels, *Love, Etc.*)

During this undergraduate interview, Joy mentioned to me, among other things, that she wasn't much in-

studying Latin. When the paper appeared on the news stands, there, on the first page of the second section, was a photograph of Joy under a large headline dreamed up by the city editor: "SHUNS CUPID FOR CLASSICS." That morning, when I arrived in school, I was sent directly to the Dean. I had neglected to clear the story with the Faculty Advisor, Prof. Emma Temple, and because of that, and because of the vulgar headline, Hunter was in trouble, since Joy's father, a school principal, was influential in educational circles. While I stood there, waiting to be stripped of my epaulettes, a beaming Joy appeared in the doorway, a batch of the newspapers under her arm: her father had asked her to get him several copies. I was not expelled. And here in my *Wisty* is an inscription by Professor Temple, wishing me success in my future creative writing.

**M**y happiest courses were electives, what we would now call "enrichment." What greater fun than a class in charcoal drawing? I believe Hunter was the first college in the United States to introduce Art into its curriculum. And what greater joy than reading poetry aloud to a captive audience of one's classmates? In my *Wisty* I see an inscription by Marguerite Jones, who taught the course.



Hunter College Archives

she loved the sound of language, and passed that love on to us.

Strangely, I recall most vividly a course in anthropology, which I took for a reason which now escapes me. Our classroom was the Museum of Natural History. I remember the brisk walk, the safe walk across Central Park to the Museum, and our final exam there: each student was given a few pieces of large bones of animals long extinct; we were to identify the bone, and from it—the animal, its habitat, and its era. If education is a preparation for life, those bones prepared me for nothing in mine except providing a fond

I riffle through the pages. Here is an inscription from a forgotten classmate: "To a budding authoress." The reference, I suppose, was to a short story of mine with the embarrassingly sentimental title: "Because the Moon Was Lost," which was published in *Echo*, the Hunter literary magazine. It was a magazine of high literary quality in the traditional style: well constructed short stories; a critique of Ezra Pound; a clever poem about Swinburne, Rossetti, Arnold, and Browning; an interview with Amelia Earhart; a parody—Beowulf as written by Ernest Hemingway.

I turn more pages: here is a snapshot of myself, looking solemn. Why do I remember only being happy?

"Bliss was it in that day to be alive / But to be young was very heaven." Wordsworth said it about another time, another place, but I think of Hunter as that time and place. It was all a part of being young and poor and in New York. I was in love with the city, with Central Park, with poetry, with my French professor, with chocolate malteds, and with a boy whose name I have not forgotten.

My father used to speak with loving yearning about the taste of the marvelous rolls served in the local café when he was a medical student in Berlin. My mother confided to me that they were quite ordinary rolls; it was only that he was young and poor and hungry.

This was true of many of us at Hunter. Most of the students couldn't afford college away from home, a college with ivy-covered walls and *boys!* Some girls resented this; others were grateful to be in a school which cost only a nickel for the subway each way.

We knew we were poor; we did not know how rich we were. Our education was excellent, our teachers were great; at least, some of them were, and memory may have improved others. They were scholars in the days



Blanche Colton Williams, a grande-dame, once a great beauty. She used to come to class in the mornings wearing an orchid corsage.

I try to read my own face — bland, vaguely familiar, it looks new and untouched. It reveals nothing.



when scholarship was admired, authority was respected. High standards were expected, were demanded of us.

All English majors had to study both Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. "Remember *Beowulf*," Blanche Colton Williams wrote in my Wisty. She was head of the English Department, an authority on Old English, a grande-dame, once a great beauty. She used to come to class in the mornings wearing an orchid corsage, and often took her faculty to tea at the Plaza. All I remember of *Beowulf* is its harsh consonants and those orchid corsages.

Middle English was taught by Marjorie Anderson, a renowned scholar. I can still recite from memory most of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*; when I was writing *Up the Down Staircase*, I took for my motto the Clerk of Oxenford's: "And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche."

My favorite was Thomas Ollive Mabbott, the Poe man. He never bothered with the curriculum. He would sit on top of his desk in a semi-lotus position, or perch on the window-sill, dangling his long legs, and regale us with fascinating stories about Poe, stories we would never have found in any textbook. He was the kindest of men, sent us home in bad weather, and wrote a beautiful letter for me to the Board of Education when I was trying to get a license to teach English in the high school system.

I remember with less affection but no less vividness the fiery-tempered Joseph McCadden, who taught logic. His intolerance of the slightest flaw in a student's thinking would send girls darting out of his class in hysterical tears.

Foreign languages were required for graduation. German was easy; I was born in Berlin before my family moved to Russia. My teacher was Dr. Otto Koischwitz, who was passionate about the theater and art. Here is his photo, standing sardonic and aloof among a group of girls in the *Deutsche Verein*. This is the man who subsequently went to Germany and during World War II became the notorious Mr. O.K., the Nazi propagandist.

Though French was not my major, I took several advanced courses in it. I recall reading Corneille and Racine in French with—was it gentle Claudine Gray? But my great love was M. Henry Dupont, Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, who taught a course on French philosophers, conducted entirely in French. I was in love with him as simply and totally and unrequitedly as one can be only at eighteen. I used to spin nightly serial dreams that had to do with his discovery of my beauty and brilliance in his class. We were studying Bergson. One day M. Dupont posed a difficult question about one of Bergson's concepts. No one volunteered to answer. I raised my faltering hand, stood up, and in my halting French explained it, correctly. I sat down hoping—if



My great love was M. Henry Dupont, Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. I was in love with him as simply and totally and unrequitedly as one can be only at eighteen.



The famous E. Adelaide Hahn taught classics and Oriental languages and knew everything, everything.



Hunter College Archives

Joy Davidman, the youngest in our graduating class and a fine poet, who later married C.S. Lewis.

not for outright applause, at least for a smile or a nod from this man I adored. He raised a Gallic eyebrow and said only one thing, which has grated on my soul ever since: "*Mademoiselle*," he said, "*votre accent est execrrrrable!*"

For years, until a full summer I spent in France, I was reluctant to speak French. But I learned one philosophical lesson that was not in Bergson: I learned what *not* to do if I ever became a teacher.

And I became a teacher quite by accident. Several of my friends were taking something called Education. I went along and took it too. One of the requirements was student-teaching. The first time I stood in front of a class and saw all those pairs of eyes fixed on me, waiting, I knew my goose was cooked; I was *fated* to be a teacher.

Whom else do I recall? Harry Levy, small and handsome, who taught Latin. And Joseph Reilly, who taught Victorian literature and ran the school library. And the famous E. Adelaide Hahn, who taught classics and Oriental languages and knew everything, everything.

But whose photo is this? —Dean Hannah M. Egan; her very name touches me with fear: What have I done *now*? A classmate came to school one day in an organdie blouse. She was summoned to Dean Egan, who sternly warned her that such unseemly attire might inflame men's passions. The only men at Hunter were a few male teachers and Pat, the

elevator man, who wouldn't allow students to use the elevator unless they had something very wrong with them. In time, Dean Egan herself had apparently inflamed at least one passion: she went off and got married when she was in her fifties.

They are all gone now. As is the old red Hunter building with its famous parapet. And the crooked tree in front of it, *our* crooked tree. And the Student Exchange, where we bought bargains: half price tickets to concerts for fifty cents each, to opera for a dollar each.

It occurs to me that I must have taken other required subjects, like math and science, but I recall nothing of them. Perhaps because the teachers were not memorable. I speak of teachers because education has to do with teacher and student; Plato didn't even need a room. It seems to me we had such teachers in our day, and students eager to learn, hungry for knowledge.

In *Echo* of Christmas 1932, a young woman describes how desperately she wanted an education, how she fought for it with her very life. This was during the depression, when jobs were hard to find. A number of students worked part time. One semester I got a job in Macy's Book Department on Saturdays and Thursday evenings. It was a large department in the basement of the store; to become a salesgirl I had to pass an examination almost as difficult as my Master's. Because I knew several languages, I was promised a place in

Foreign Books. Instead, I found myself in the Modern Library section during Macy's price war with Gimbel's next door, when prices were frantically cut several times a day, from ninety-five cents down, down, down to seven cents a copy, one to a customer. Eventually I was promoted to Contemporary Novels. One day a woman asked me for a book called *Forty Ways to Amuse a Dog*, and I was about to direct her to the Pets section, when it dawned on me that what she had in mind was Franz Werfel's best-seller, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. Another customer brought me a sample of fabric in "hunter's green"—a color fashionable at the time, and asked me for a row of books to match it.

Laughter is part of my memories. Laughter, and friendships.

**I**n a small community of women, exclusive friendships and haughty cliques are often formed. The need for heroes creates heroes. I admired and envied the leaders of the Student Council, the editors of the school publications, the class beauties, the mavericks, and the few who brought a whiff of glamour to school, like the young woman who used to appear in class in fawn-colored riding breeches, presumably after a canter in the Park. I don't think she was ever reprimanded by the Dean for being inflammatory, since she wore them almost daily. How I envied those riding breeches and the exotic life I imagined she led outside of Hunter! But these were special creatures, to be admired from afar. My own close friends were more earth-bound. There were three. One died young; one disappeared, simply vanished; one lives a continent away. We see each other occasionally and feel the same warm closeness; it's a friendship that doesn't need to be nourished.

I dig into memory and come up

with our annual Sing ("Springtime is Singtime"); our genteel teas; our school song, "Fame," long before the film or TV series by that name. We sang our young hearts out in Chapel with words that went *something* like this:

"Fame throughout the wide world is the wish of every Hunter maiden true. . . ."

Many of our graduates have indeed achieved it. I was proud to see at a recent Alumnae Luncheon the members of Hunter Hall of Fame; so many successful women who had made important contributions to the world. But I am thinking also of many of our maidens true, unhonored and unsung, who have done well, raised families, had grandchildren. . . .

In his welcoming address in my old Wisty, President Colligan told us that in our hands lay the future of Hunter College, of higher education for women, of the place of women in the world of affairs. A grave responsibility. But what will the future be for the Hunter graduates of today?

On my desk is the Wistarion of 1983, a few inches away from the 1934 Wistarion, a planet away.

Today's students are older than we were—not only in years. They have been brought up in the eerie light of the television screen and in the shadow of that giant mushroom. Men on the moon, travel through space, possibility of total annihilation were to us unknown, unimagined.

In today's Wisty, instead of the neat double row of homogeneous white female faces is a lively profusion of informal photos of men and women in a variety of poses, hair styles, clothes: in leather jackets, tight jeans, T-shirts, ponchos. Men with beards, men with mustaches, men with both, men with neither; men and women of all ages, races, colors, nationalities, and back-



Dean Hannah M. Egan; her very name touches me with fear: What have I done *now*?

Thomas Ollive Mabbot, the Poe man, would sit on top of his desk in a semi-lotus position, or perch on the window-sill, dangling his long legs, and regale us with fascinating stories about Poe.



grounds. A veritable United Nations leaps out of its glossy pages as yet unyellowed by age; a vivid demographic variety of the city itself.

Here they are, students and faculty at work, at play, at sports—pages and pages of sports. Students studying, laughing, hugging. And here they are, marching to Albany to protest Governor Cuomo's plan to raise tuition, which is now \$1224 a year for undergraduates, waving a banner: STUDENTS UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED.

We were less militant. There was unrest, there was ferment, but we danced to a softer music. We had Senior Hop at the Ritz-Carlton, Junior Hop at Sherry's; we knew nothing of Rock and discos. In a time of gathering storms in the world outside, school was a refuge, a haven. Today, the outside world is in and is in fact, part of the curriculum.

Our options were few, or so we thought. We knew what was right and what was wrong because we were *told*. Some girls rebelled against the rules; we looked up to them with respectful admiration. Most of us obeyed. We belonged to our all-white school clubs: Newman Club, Menorah Club, Classical Club, Math Club, and twenty-six Greek letter sororities.

In today's Wisty I see Armenian Club, South Asian Club, and I smile to note that the young are still young: on one side—Dominican Perspective Club, on the opposite side, facing it—Frisbee Club.

I read about all the new programs

and departments, reflecting a changing world: English as a Second Language; Media and Human Communications Studies; Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies.

And all the new freedoms.

Sex in my day at Hunter was covert. Whatever went on privately among my classmates, I knew only two girls who were engaged—one wore a diamond ring to prove it; one who was married—a wonder among us!—and one who was rumored to be sleeping with a professor!

And today?

Some things remain the same: the name of the school. School colors: lavender and white. Part of the school location, still on the site of the old red building. The heavy-handed humor in student publications that speaks volumes of social commentary.

Most important, what remains the same is the political involvement of students, their concern, then and now, for social justice and for peace in the world.

In my day at Hunter we had a committee to raise money for the nine Scottsboro boys. (Those are names out of our past: Roosevelt, LaGuardia, Lindbergh, Eva Le Gallienne. . .) We had a Peace Symposium at which another name out of the past spoke: Norman Thomas. We held meetings of pacifists and sent student delegates to the New York Anti-War Conference and Students Against War and Fascism to Washington.

Today students march to Washington to revive Martin Luther King's



Helen Herbstman ('41)

dream; they march for nuclear freeze; they march for peace, and still they march and march for peace.

Minority groups have found their voice. Recently Kwami Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) addressed Hunter students. And on June 5, 1983, the Prime Minister of Grenada, Maurice Bishop, gave an address—just a few months before he was assassinated. How swiftly history moves today; how much faster and louder the clock ticks. . . .

A change that only *seems* swift is the dramatic physical appearance of Hunter. Ask any alumna of 1934 what she recalls of the old Hunter building, and she is likely to say: "The mice in the basement." And mice there were. Perhaps because we used to bring down our paper bags of lunch, since all literary activity took place in that dingy basement: the staff of *Wisty* met there, and of *Echo*, and of our weekly newspaper, *The Bulletin*. The basement hummed with creativity. Perhaps the mice were drawn to our stale lockers.

That was in the old red building on (Park? Lexington?) Avenue and Sixty-Eighth Street, before it burned down. It burned down in the night, a few years after my graduation; a childhood fantasy come true, or possibly an answer to some disgruntled student's prayer? The new building erected on the same site is now the old Hunter building. My classmates remember their sad and shabby build-

ings: the Annex on Lexington Avenue and Thirty-second Street in the sophomore year; the main building in our last two years. The Bronx building we knew only as a rumor.

What a far cry from the skytop complex of splendid modern towers of glass and chrome proudly gleaming in the sun, connected by transparent bridges overlooking the busy city! The new Hunter is a small city in itself, where last week I wandered, a stranger, through its shiny new halls, map and directory in hand. I did not know the students. I did not know the teachers. I did not recognize my old school in this maze of modern miracles. It has grown into the largest of the CUNY colleges, currently nourished by its tiny dynamo of a president, Donna Shalala, who stands on tiptoe to reach the lectern and moves mountains behind it.

I found my way to the seventeenth-story East Building and its Tower of Babel, the International English Language Institute, with students from all over the world. I am told that each semester some seventy countries are represented, and conversations run to Haitian, Creole, Polish, Greek, Ukrainian, Italian, and English—but a different English than I knew in my day. I have been away too long.

Here too is the new computerized library—a self-contained unit on nine floors, with its audio-visual carrels, terminals, microfilm, reading rooms, and listening stations for recording.

How does it feel to be a student here now? It must be wonderful to have all that space and equipment, all those escalators and elevators *any* student may use. I read about the riches offered by Hunter College today with incredulous eyes; one hundred clubs, eighty-four majors, seven different degrees, thirty departments, fifteen lounges, art and dance studios, a TV production studio, a radio station, four gyms, saunas, microcomputer labs, huge lecture halls, and the latest technological facilities.

They know so much more than we did. There is so much more to know!

In *my* Hunter our subjects were few, but they were in depth. Our space was cramped, but well used. And books are books, wherever they may be found. I wonder what creativity takes place in this new Hunter's fifteen lounges, what fresh ideas flourish in its gyms and saunas?

I am talking of larger issues than a surface comparison of Hunter then and now, of the old and new buildings. I am talking about work habits instilled in me at a time when history moved more slowly, about scholarly discipline that made graduate work at Columbia so easy. I am talking about an education that was free, about love of literature inspired by teachers now gone, about the high standards demanded of me in writing. I am talking about a teaching career I stumbled upon in Hunter, and a public speaking career that began with: "Once more into the breach. . . ."

Maybe the rolls my father ate in his youth were not so great—but I like to think they were.

We who have survived these fifty years have had our future, but if the motto of this year's graduates is still *Mihi Cura Futuri*, *their* future should be labeled: "Fragile—handle with care!"