here was room for only one writer in our house, our lives, our marital continent. It would have been the same if I’d said lawyer, doctor, professor, but writer had a different sound. Writing was serious stuff; it dealt with the verities of life and death and sex and sorrow. Writing was not about money, and those who confused the two were sellouts to crass commercialism, like Norman Mailer who, after a promising beginning, was headed straight for the primrose path that had swallowed so many golden boys, like Scotty Fitzgerald or, God help us, old man Hemingway. Or so we thought, in our callow youth, when we met at a small Southern California college and fell in love, or rather I fell in love, with a writer born.

I married this college sweetheart partly because he was a writer. His talent was evident. He’d come out of the War with a lot to say and his talent would give him the means to say it. In those days he tried everything, short stories, poetry, fictional bits and pieces. But he wasn’t going to get trapped by the Romance of the Novel. No way. The Great American Novel was a contradiction in terms, except for Huckleberry Finn. His heroes were not novelists but satirists like H. L. Mencken or S. J. Perelman. He read Twain’s great work, not without reason, as a satire on the follies of American culture north and south. He came out of the War an angry young
man at war with his culture. He’d been physically and emotionally wounded, and that wound would fuel his writing life – the two were synonymous – for the next fifty years in essays and longer works of nonfiction that ranged in subject matter from pastoral images of World War I in England to matters of class in America. But the matrix of whatever he wrote was what had happened to him and fellow infantry soldiers in the trenches, in World War II.

As a high school and college girl, I was excluded from the War, which meant that I was excluded from everything that mattered – to him. I was excluded from writing, because he was the writer. I had written little poems, playlets, sketches, booklets from the time I could hold a pencil or a pen, but they didn’t count. They weren’t serious. I’d earned pocket money in college, for beer and cigs, by writing other people’s term papers. But these weren’t serious. They weren’t professional. It was just school work and I’d long ago discovered how to get maximum results from minimum efforts in that racket. The fact is I didn’t profess to be a writer. The fact is I didn’t dream of any profession. To have a profession, that’s what men did. I wasn’t at all clear what women did except to help their men in their chosen profession. And what wonderful luck to find a man who chose the profession of writing because writing was about Art, and Art was what mattered most in a world trembling on the brink of blowing itself up first with an atom and then with a hydrogen bomb. Life was short, Art was long.

Like many other women in the post-War ’fifties, I defined myself in relation to my man, and since he was a writer and a teacher, a combination that guaranteed a minimum income of $3,000 a year, I was to be his help-mate in all things. In my view, his job was to become a really good writer, although that process was made much more difficult by the strictures of the academy in its determination to outdo the Germans in the rictus of Germanic scholarship, in order to excrete the humanities in as scientific a way as possible. Many writers whom I knew at that time lost their voices during the laryngitis-inducing exercises of graduate school, some recovering later with no residue but a slight hoarseness, some lost for good.

In my view, my job was to be his secretarial assistant as needed, as well as his social secretary, his nourisher, his bed-mate, and eventually his breeder. My job was to not be anything not related