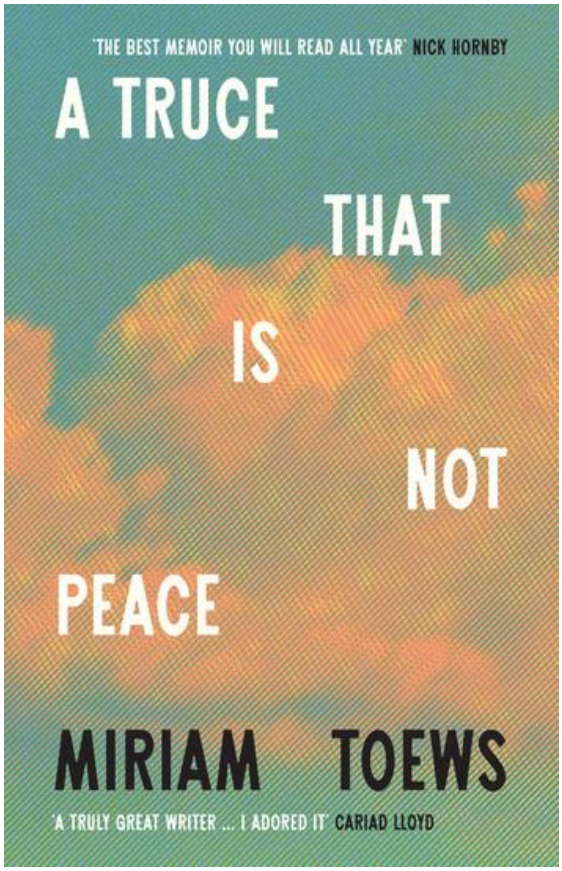

A Truce That Is Not Peace

Miriam Toews

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My Book Notes:

My mother had prayed for six years to become pregnant again. Had she considered avenues other than prayer? That was my older sister's joke. And when I came along finally, they gave me an old name from the Bible – 'Miriam' – that means bitter and rebellious.

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I screamed non-stop for the entire first year of my life. And my father stopped talking for that entire year. He was completely silent, like a mime – but without miming. He would forget that I had been born.

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I think about my older sister. Raucous laughter and bewildering silence, like my father. Two years, first and fourth, my mother said. But there were times in between those years too.

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My sister's silence was a creative act – or was it? Had her suffering destroyed her language, or faith in language, and left her unable or unwilling to speak? Or was her silence a creative choice, an act of creation, an effort? Or was it language, or its futility, its shortcomings, that destroyed her first.

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Thirty-eight years ago, the biological father of my son wrote a letter to my father. He wanted my father to know that he had asked me to marry him many times but that I'd refused every time. He had done his best to do the right thing. Now, he had to leave. He had to disappear into the Pacific Rim. He's tried everything to get me to listen to reason but it hadn't worked. He had to go.

My father kept the letter, opened or unopened, read or unread – we don't know – for ten years, without mentioning it to anyone. Then my father killed himself. My sister and I sat on either side of my mother on the couch in my living room and told her, He's gone.

My sister stored all my father's 'paperwork' in her basement. She kept that letter, written to my father by my son's biological father, for ten years. We don't know if she read it or not. Then my sister killed herself. I told my mother over the phone from Toronto, she's gone.

My sister's partner kept the letter in his basement for ten years. Then he met another woman and decided to move. He needed to clean out the basement and sell his house.

One morning, he gave my sister's 'paperwork,' which included my father's 'paperwork,' to my mother.

That afternoon my mother read the letter written thirty-five years before by the biological father of my son to my father and instantly tore it up. 'There was no reason for that letter to exist,' she said. 'There was nothing edifying about it.'

First order of the day. Clean up the blood.

Kept ten years by my father, kept ten years by my sister, kept ten years by my sister's partner. Destroyed in one second by my mother, its shreds tossed into the garbage can under the sink. We laughed.

Numbers and letters.

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Many years ago, I stood next to the Assiniboine River and contemplated suicide but only got as far as throwing my cellphone into the water before being talked away from the shore.

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My father's last meal was an uneaten ham sandwich, and his last joke was directed at me. Did you have much trouble deciding what to wear?
I had worn the same torn jeans and green hoodie every day for the two weeks leading up to his death.

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Recently, an all-women's university English class in California has, after much consideration absolved me of guilt for writing one of my books in my father's voice. 'Because I did it with compassion.'

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Was writing in the voice of my father an act of compassion? Or born of an urgent need to know why and how, a creative act from a deep, dark hole, a well of fear. Would I do it too? If I could become my father, I would understand. And if I could understand why and how, I could understand why not and how not.

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Literature is not compassion, it is war.

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After my father killed himself, my mother stopped opening her mail, moved to an apartment in the city a few houses away from mine, and began to memorise three-letter words. I photocopied hundreds and hundreds of pages of three-letter words for her to memorise, and she kept these in piles all over her apartment, in every room, on every surface.

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'I have no words,' my mother said.
But there they were – all the three-letter words we could find. She began hosting Scrabble tournaments in her home.

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When my father didn't speak for an entire year, the first year of my life, he would walk and walk and walk until his feet bled and his long body collapsed next to my tiny one on the living room floor. He would look at me and wonder: Who is this?

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In her late teens my sister went silent for the first time. She didn't talk for months. Had my father taught her this?

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Once years later, during one of my sister's great silences my young daughter sat quietly beside her on the couch watching cartoons. During the commercials she put her head on my sister's lap and my sister rested her hand on my daughter's small shoulder.

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In the weeks following my father's death I yelled often, viciously, in public – and always at men attempting to explain the rules to me. There were no more rules; every rule lay smashed to pieces on the ground.

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My mother's pacemaker had been bothering her lately. But after tumbling out of bed – sustaining some dark bruising – she had declared that her pacemaker is working better now because of the hard knock it took.

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Is silence the disciplined alternative to writing?

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There is an element of impulsivity to suicide, a therapist friend told me. We were walking along the edge of a steep bluff that forms a horseshoe around Niagara Falls.

Yes? I said.

I don't believe my father and my sister were impulsive. They spent their lives planning their deaths, living their deaths, almost dying every day, dying almost every day.

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And they wrote and wrote and wrote. My mother, on the other hand, does not want to write or need to write, and she does not worry about being understood or about escaping herself or erasing herself. She understands herself. She read whodunits to solve problems, but not the problem of herself. She is not a problem to herself. And she is not suicidal.

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But for those who wish to erase themselves by writing, why write at all?

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Is suicide both death and survival?

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My therapist friend – the one who walked with me along the bluff around Niagara Falls – had lost a child to cancer. She hated some of things people said to her afterwards.

I can't imagine your sorrow. I can't imagine your pain.

My friend told me she had never felt more alone and sealed off in her coffin of grief than when people told her, even lovingly, even with tender hugs, that they couldn't imagine her sadness.

Try! Stay! Stay with me!

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I didn't understand my sister's silence. It annoyed me, disturbed me. Do I understand it now? Now that I am older?

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My sister is the stark white space around our cluttered, battered, inserted, deleted, ridiculous prose, our messy ink, fouling octopi trapped in barrels on boat decks, gulls shrieking, flailing, dark words, and murderous sentences. And she says infinitely more than we do.

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In that silence she was holding on to something tightly with every muscle, every bit of energy, her soul, her self? Tethering?

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Why did they do it, my father and my sister? To kill themselves, to stay alive, to stop themselves from moving further and further away from the truth., that aimless drift, that spit of land? Or to escape the truth?

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Is writing the acceptable alternative to killing oneself? Does suicide end the pain and preserve the truth? Does writing attempt to achieve the same thing, and are both suicide and writing incomprehensible?

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Suicides and overdoses are now being called Deaths of Despair in the newspapers, in the studies, in the statistics.

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My therapist friend says: We will be dead, so we won't feel pain, yes. But in the meantime, we anticipate the end of life, of love, of beauty, of the beautiful world, and in that anticipation, we feel so much pain that we bring on the end. To end the pain of anticipating the end.

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My sister made a decision. She would not give me, us, the world, any more of herself.

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In Winnipeg, my sister was getting sicker and sicker, not leaving her house, not eating, not speaking. I was crazy with grief, guilt, and dread. My legs weren't working properly. They were stiff and foreign to me, wooden spokes that seemed ready to crack or fly off at any moment. Any time I walked it felt like the first time.

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We were Winnipeg for two months, my mother and I, to help out with my son's daughters, who at the time were a three-year-old and a newborn. My mother was old, eighty-five, with a bad heart, and all she could really do to help was to hold the baby and sing lullabies in her ancient language – Plautdietsch, or Mennonite Low German – which, if you think about it, is a lot. It's almost everything.

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That's what grandmothers do, eventually. We make space in the cave for the little ones. We just bow out.

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I was trying to write a book at the time, but it wasn't going very well, and I didn't really know what I was trying to write about. A line from a book I was reading kept coming back to me: 'The air between us crackles, as it does when you speak of your beloved dead.'

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I was trying to organise my thoughts, and everything, every thought, every memory embarrassed me. I had never experienced such a deep, excruciating sense of embarrassment, of mortification. Was it the embarrassment of wanting to write when I was, by now, a woman in my fifties, a grandmother of four, responsible for the care of her old mother? I needed my body to turn itself inside our, to expose what was inside and let it blow away and become mist or dust or whatever happens to what is inside a person when her body is turned inside out. I wanted so badly to stop obsessing about rearranging words. I wanted to disappear, or at least I wanted my mind to disappear, to step aside, to stop. I wanted to exist fully as… I did not know what. As a grandmother, perhaps. As a benign but wise grandmother, with a soft lap, a smile, no thoughts but ones of love, encouragement, optimism. No need to rearrange words. And as a better daughter to my old, dying mother, patient, confident, tender. I felt guilty about everything. I really believed that I had been a terrible mother to my kids, never fully present, as they say, and that the reason for that was that I was always, always a million miles away in my head, rearranging words, long dark sentences on white pages, like the dark, crumbling bridges seen against this snowy city from airplane windows. Maybe I had a soft lap, and a smile on my face, but the truth was I was the opposite of everything I wanted to be. I was so ashamed of being a woman in her fifties who was not the woman she wanted to be.

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Two days after my father killed himself, I woke up in the middle of the night convinced that I was dying. I quietly got out of bed, not wanting to wake my husband or kids, or to worry them after everything that had already happened. Talk about overkill…

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I had that… dream again. The one about the long corridor, and my mouth being shot off, and my anger at not getting out the way fast enough. But this time, in my dream, there was a door. Perhaps it leads somewhere. Or perhaps it was a dream within a dream.

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At the age of twenty-four my sister left university, left her boyfriend, left the city and moved back home with my parents. She stayed in her old bedroom most of the time, making lists, reading poetry, sleeping, wearing a green terry cloth housecoat, her wild hair a black tornado, her green eyes getting wider and wider, it seemed to me, while she whispered with my mother, late into the night.

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Then she stopped making sounds altogether. She wrote words that she sent to me on yellow lined paper, her neat sentences straight at first, then dipping downwards at the end like rigid fishing rods with baited lines.

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I'm trying to write stuff down about our life, as per your instructions. I wrote about Dad sitting at the kitchen table in his J C Penny cotton undershirt, his head bent over his Cheerios, just emanating despair but trying to be brave, trying to smile because I had walked into the kitchen. And Mum saying, 'You are suffering,' and putting her arms around his hunched shoulders and holding him...

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Remember how Mum always says 'How goes the battle' when she meets anyone on the street.

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Dear M

I don't know what to do. I have this terrible feeling about things, a terrible feeling.... I love you. Love is very important – it's the only comfort. I wish I could take your sadness away. I'll call you this evening.

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Was my sister's silence an attempt to translate something? Something that couldn't be said? Something that would cause too much pain if it were to be said? By saying nothing was she also not telling us that she wanted to die? Or did the silence convey the pain? Was that the wish? Was there a wish?

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My father had a heart attack at school, in the classroom, his favourite place, a world where he made sense to himself, a world bustling with excited eleven-year-olds, a few

weeks before Christmas while standing on a ladder hanging elaborate decorations, lights, mistletoe, celebrating the miracle of the birth of a saviour, his saviour.

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My father never returned to his classroom. But his body survived for another few years. He came home from the hospital, finally, with my mother, on Christmas Eve. The house was cold and dark, uninhabited for a month while my mother stayed in the city at his bedside. My father had decorated his classroom beautifully and never was I it again. He was no longer a teacher, no longer – in his words – alive. The lights had gone out. But we, his daughters, continued to learn from him.

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'All language is… silence.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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All silence is language.

Was my sister's silence holding on to something vital.

Was her silence a flirtation? A first step? An experiment?

Writing isn't talking. Writing is also non-talking.

Consciousness, experience, existence. In silence was my sister able to begin to ask herself questions?

Why live?

Why die?

What was she holding on to? Why would it be called 'withholding'?

'The refusal to give something that is due or desired'; 'to hold back, restrain or check.'

But why should she talk? To risk telling lies, to be misunderstood, to lose consciousness, to give away her self. Why shouldn't she be silent?

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Why did her psychiatrist, in the last days before my sister died, refuse to see her if she wouldn't speak? What harm was she causing? What was she holding on to?

For dear life.

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It is true when she was silent, the attention of we who loved her was attuned to her.

When will she speak, why isn't she speaking, what will finally make her speak, will it be anything, what will be the words she needs to give breath to, the first words out of her mouth, why must she talk?

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If silence says more, why write?

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Why do I write?

Because she asked me to.

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My sister asked me for all sorts of things. To write her letters, to help her live, to help her die, to understand, to try to understand, to let her go, to go away, to come back, to make lists, to race to the pharmacy...

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My sister punctuated her life with long periods of silence. It was during these periods that she begged me to write her letters – about anything, my life, the days – and in that asking was an offering. She taught me how to stay alive. Silence and words: both are good, both are failures, both are efforts, and in that effort is where life lies – not lies, or maybe it does – but where it exists.

And the fragments in between are the spaces where she and I met.

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Silence. Suicide. Writing. Within all of these we are holding.

Does her silence hold the perfect expression of her suffering?

Is her silence a communications success, my writing a failure?

Are writing and suicide related? The same thing? Or estranged relatives, at least? Angry siblings whose origins are the same. An attempt – a fragment of an attempt – to save life, preserve life, to freeze it in a moment, to end what is real, to survive by ending. To preserve, in silence, what is authentic.

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Writing is artifice and silence is truth. No? Well, yes. No?

But writing is life, listen to me, you clown, you don't quit, you don't grimace and wave away your audience, tell them the show is over.

Writing is life and silence is the final step before the metal rail, the sharp scent of creosote, the wind.

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Why must I draw a comparison between writing and suicide? To stay with her. To stay with them.

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(Remembering my mother's response to my question about why they – my father, my sister – went silent.)

It was something they could control. (They could control the beginning of not-being?)

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After my cellphone-in-the-river episode, the breakdown, the torn coat lining, the madness, the divorce, the sickness, my sister's silence, the dread, here we go again: the only thing I can control, the only alternative to doing away with myself, as they (who?) say.

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The immense altering of silence, of writing. It is the same. We are sisters. We are thieves. We steal ourselves and others, and we alter them… into something that tracks, that scans, that makes sense, that remains.

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But being alive is worth something.

Why do you write?

Why do you live?

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'Going to war with our minds: There is yet hope for what Freud called 'normal unhappiness', wherein we might remember the dead without being haunted by them, give to our lives a coherence that is not 'closure', and learn to live without memories, our families, and ourselves amid a truce that is not peace.' Christian Wyman

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Every two or three months I need to affirm a narrative for my mother; that she was not a failure, that she did everything she could, that she couldn't have saved my father and my sister in the end, that she had to survive and remain and breathe for the rest of us, for herself, for me.

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But of course, this narrative is not necessarily true. What is true is that she chose to remain.

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Silence and writing are, if not quite the same thing, then allies – each a misdirection of the unspeakable, and each a way of holding on.

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‘If we can’t salvage the bits of memory and matter that have made us what we are, let us at least acknowledge the whirlwind.’ Christian Wyman

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