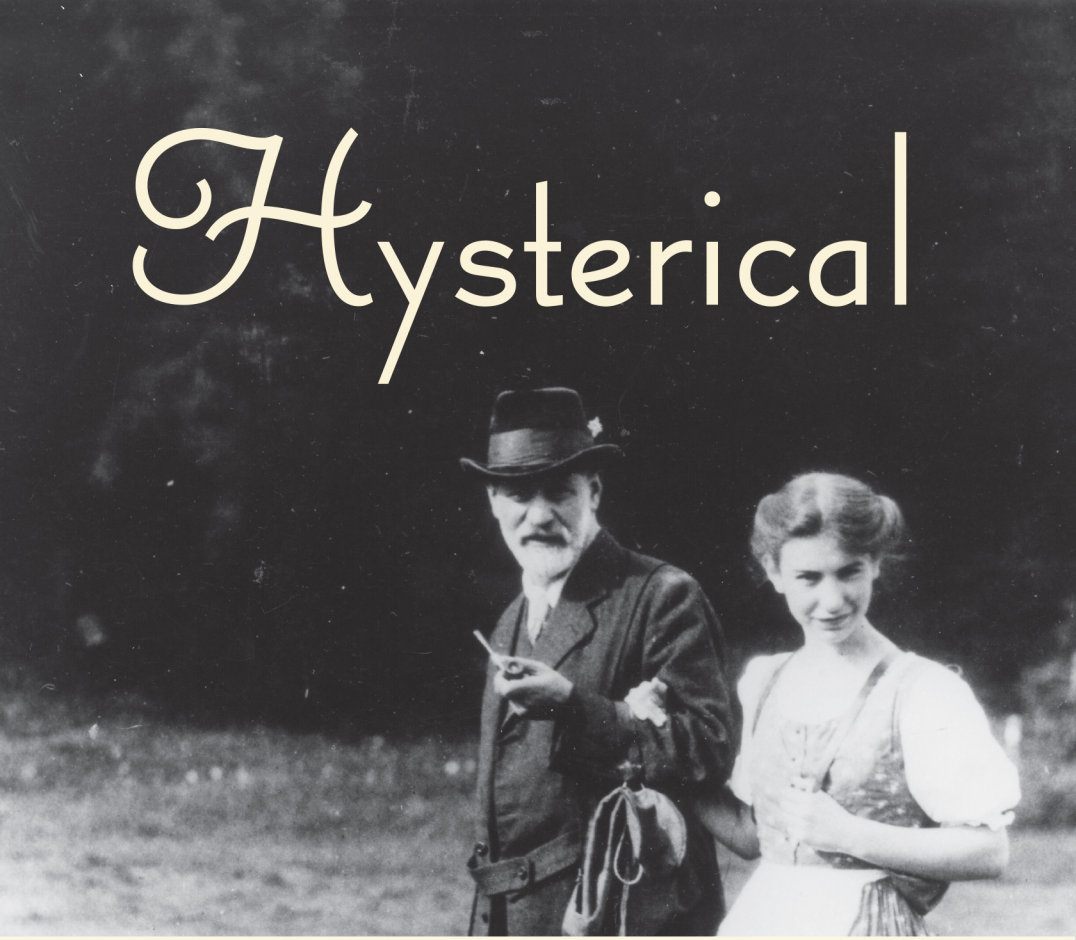
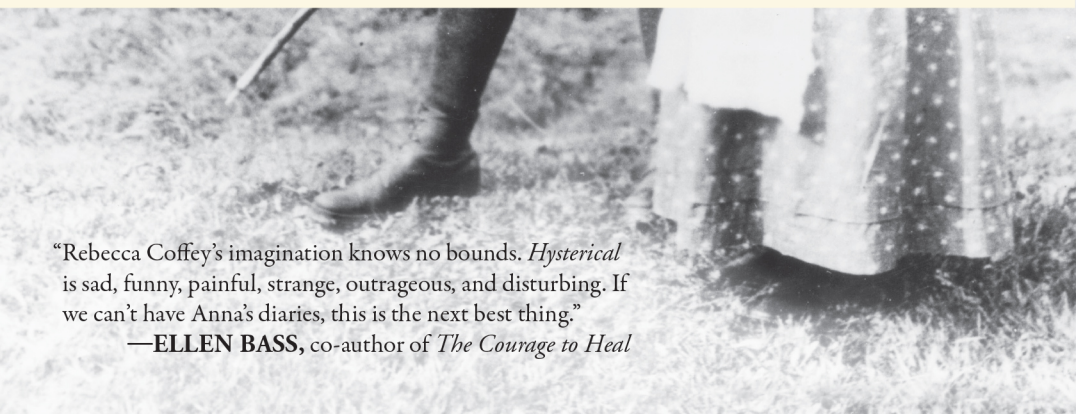
Hysterical



Anna Freud's Story

a novel

Rebecca Coffey



"Rebecca Coffey's imagination knows no bounds. *Hysterical* is sad, funny, painful, strange, outrageous, and disturbing. If we can't have Anna's diaries, this is the next best thing."

—**ELLEN BASS,** co-author of *The Courage to Heal*

Advance Praise for *HYSTERICAL*

"Completely absorbing and entirely believable, *HYSTERICAL* is both a lovely work and a treasure. This is the book we all wish Anna Freud had had the courage to write."

—Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson,
author of *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* and former Projects Director of The Freud Archives

"…[A] wonderfully insightful fictional glimpse into the Freud family dynamic and, most notably, its impact on Sigmund's theories about lesbianism. How did Freud père receive the announcement that the daughter to whom he was closest—his right-hand girl and protégé—loved women? How did he deal with her long domestic partnership with another woman? Coffey's presentation of what may have happened between Sigmund and Anna is nuanced, intelligent, and wonderfully persuasive."

—Lillian Faderman,
author of *Naked in the Promised Land: A Memoir*

"…[A]bsolutely fascinating and interesting. Reading it brought up a lot of tears because of the memories it evoked about the people and the time. I was so happy to have Freud's relationship with his daughter revealed."

—Sophie Templer,
95-year-old daughter of controversial Freudian psychoanalyst Otto Gross

"Rebecca Coffey's imagination knows no bounds. She makes you believe this is exactly the way it all happened. *HYSTERICAL* is sad, funny, painful, strange, outrageous, and disturbing. If we can't have Anna's diaries, this is the next best thing."

—Ellen Bass,
author of *The Courage to Heal*

"Moving, irreverent, often very funny, and a remarkable tour de force, *HYSTERICAL* lets us eavesdrop at the keyhole of the Freud family. And, oh, what we learn!"

—Leonard Foglia,
Broadway director of *Thurgood, Wait Until Dark*, and *Master Class*

Hysterical

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Author's Note

A yenta brought along an assistant to a conference about a bride. This assistant's job was to agree with every claim the yenta made on the potential bride's behalf.

"The lady in question is cultivated and elegant," said the yenta.

"Very elegant," said the assistant.

"She is an able counter, and can outwit tricky merchants," said the yenta.

"Very smart woman," said the assistant.

"And such a kind heart!" said the yenta, "Wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Kind as kind can be," came the echo.

"She is handsome in her own way. Magnetically attractive."

"Very attractive," repeated the assistant.

"However," the yenta began to admit at long last, "she does have one very small problem. There is a slight hump on her back."

"And what a hump!" said the assistant.

It's an old Jewish joke. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, loved Jewish humor, as did his intellectual heir, his youngest daughter Anna.

For all I know, Sigmund and Anna enjoyed this joke in particular. Or at least I like to imagine them enjoying it. For although Anna came to be an enormously influential and even revered child psychoanalyst in her own right, she never stopped parroting the ideas of her father.

And those ideas had "humps"—bulging, grotesque ones that she never pointed out. Two of those humps weren't only troubling on a theoretical level. They endangered Anna herself, and to her very core, thwarting the growth of her spirit and personality in much the same way that a strong pair of root clippers keeps a bonsai tree weirdly small.

But let me make this clear from the outset: Anna Freud grew free of the small container built for her by her father. That's the story of this novel. She may have been his best defender. She may have been even his "pet" of sorts. Arguably she was deformed by the singular struggles of her coming of age. But over the course of her long life, her independent contributions as a child psychoanalyst became many and impressive, and they were especially remarkable for what they reflected about both her common sense and her humanity. Read quotations from Sigmund alongside quotations from Anna. His will seem academic and self-consciously literary. Hers will make evident that she was a hugely original thinker motivated by deep kindness and a determination to rescue whomever she could from whatever was killing them or clamping them down

As I've said, there were two ugly humps. The first was Sigmund's set of ideas about female morality. Sigmund believed that women are inherently devious. According to him, it is only through committed consort with a man that a woman can gain moral and emotional fortitude. Lesbians don't enjoy intimacy with men. And so, in Sigmund's world, the very act of making love with another female sets a woman on a path towards breakdown.

Published excerpts from Anna's diaries and correspondence suggest that she began having intensely romantic feelings for women by her early twenties. Undeniably, by the time she was thirty she had begun a monogamous relationship with Dorothy Burlingham, heir to the Tiffany fortune. Neither woman ever publicly acknowledged the relationship as sexual. But it did continue, merrily, committedly, and concertedly, for more than five decades.

Anna's biographers have largely ignored this central relationship in her life. Sigmund's biographers have, too. Why? Most of the biographers have themselves been Freudian psychoanalysts. At the risk of sounding like I'm trying to analyze the pros, let me suggest that the biographers may have been ego-invested in upholding Sigmund's reputation as a theorist—and even as a family man.

The "family man" aspect of this long-ignored secret may be the real key to understanding the child she was and the woman she connived to become. Not only did Sigmund consider lesbianism a gateway to mental illness, he taught that it is always the fault of the father. In other words, Freudian theory holds that if Anna were a lesbian, Sigmund was the selfish father who ruined her emotional health and any chance at a "normal" adulthood.

The second "hump" in the theories that Anna so patiently parroted is that Sigmund consistently warned his students and colleagues that psychoanalysis is inherently an erotic relationship that one should never, ever engage in with a family member. Regardless, during two separate periods of her young adulthood, he analyzed Anna, most probably six nights a week. What they primarily discussed were her masturbation fantasies.

The analysis was an open secret among the Freud family and its circle of friends and colleagues. (So, for that matter, were Anna's fantasies.) Still, as with her preference for partnering monogamously with women, most psychoanalytic biographers have refused to comment on this analytic relationship. It was an unaligned biographer—political scientist Paul Roazen—who disclosed the analysis. He did so in 1969. Not until 1994 did a psychoanalytic biographer mention it. Even so, in *Anna Freud: A Biography* Elisabeth Young-Bruehl assigned not so much as a hint of impropriety to the arrangement. Historian Peter Gay did, however. Not being a psychoanalyst and therefore having no need to buttress or endorse Sigmund, in his 1998 book *Freud: A Life for Our Time* Gay called Anna's analysis "most irregular," and labeled Sigmund's decision to

analyze Anna "a calculated flouting of the rules he had lain down with such force and precision."

Please. Imagine growing up homosexual in a household where your world-renowned psychologist father has pronounced lesbianism to be a moral and emotional death sentence for a young girl.

Imagine then being drawn by your father into an erotic power play. Imagine that he psychoanalyzes you for a total of about one thousand clinical hours.

When doing so, keep in mind that your father has also defined the birth of civilization as the moment that mankind realized that incest is *verboten*. This means that even if the verbal foreplay of your psychoanalysis makes you occasionally feel (way too) heterosexual, nothing that is aroused is going to be consummated.

What might have happened to your sexuality and sense of self during those years of analysis?

What might have happened to your love for your father?

What might have happened to your sibling relationships and to your relationship with your mother? By the time that lengthy analysis had ended, where might you stand emotionally in relation to your family, given that you were the only family member with whom your father ever expressed an inclination to transgress?

How would you feel about what had become of your youth and your possibilities? How would you feel about your life choices?

"Hysterical" is a word that has been defined in rather a lot of ways over the years. Possessed by erotic desire (Sigmund's understanding of the word), laughing helplessly at the irony of it all (Borscht belt comedians' understanding), feeling distraught and more than a tad berserk (modern psychiatrists'). Any way you look at it, the word may describe how Anna felt. And again, at the risk of sounding like I'm analyzing a pro, I suggest that "hysterical" in all of its shades can explain why Anna became a committed emotional rescuer—especially of children.

The life of Anna Freud (1895-1982) spanned two centuries, three continents, and both world wars. Her public life in Vienna and London was, by any standards, extraordinary. Owing to her father's prominence, she encountered in her home some of Europe and America's leading intellectuals and artists. A tumultuous whirl of ideas and activities undoubtedly shaped her.

Anna was the last born of Sigmund Freud's six children, and the only one of the siblings to follow in her father's professional footsteps. As her father aged, she became his collaborator, his closest companion, and his nurse. As he became increasingly frail, the two of them even shared a bed. Upon his death, her active devotion to him did not lessen. On the contrary, she proudly defended his ideas about women and, indeed, hysteria from detractors and competitors. And as she accomplished all that she did, she loved women. With one historically notable woman in particular, she partnered permanently and co-mothered children.

I wanted to know how Anna Freud accomplished all of this given the theoretical prison her father had constructed around her. This novel is the product of that curiosity. In writing it I have relied heavily on facts and materials from the historical record and on commentary from Anna's and Sigmund's supporters and detractors. (The bibliography in back lists my sources.) But I have also relied on invention. I have created dialogue, scenes, and situations based on both fact and imagination. I have followed implications to their logical and sometimes outrageous conclusions, and I've made small adjustments to chronology in order to better relate a complex story within a sound dramatic framework. I have invented no characters, although I have sometimes given personalities to characters about whose actual singularities I am unsure. I am particularly indebted to Michael Burlingham's *The Last Tiffany: A Biography of Dorothy Tiffany Burlingham.* From his facts I was able to spin stories about the woman and children whom Anna loved so well.

The photos in this book are from the Freud Museum in London.

Many of the jokes are classic Jewish jokes that Anna would surely have known, given her father's fascination with wit and with Jewish humor in particular. Others are merely ones I've heard or read over the years. In all cases I've tried to identify their provenance and have come up with nothing helpful. If I've stepped on toes by using them without attribution, I apologize for the failure of my best efforts to identify and acknowledge their creators.

Although typographically it is laid as a joke, the fish anecdote in Chapter 36 is a folk a legend—or so I believe. At any rate, it is not original with me.

By and large, my aim in writing has been to create a compelling tale guided by research but not limited by what is not available or known. Truly, much about Anna remains a mystery. Perhaps it always will. Information about her is held at bay by The Sigmund Freud Archives, an independent organization founded by a small cadre of psychoanalysts who had strong personal loyalties to Sigmund. The Freud Archives holds the copyright to Anna's diaries and papers, and decides who can and who cannot read them. Much of the written record Anna left of her life remains sealed.

—Rebecca Coffey

Prologue

October 10, 1982, 7:00 am

Sitting alone in a just-tidied kitchen, Paula Fichtl was glad for her second cup of coffee. Being English coffee, it was not good, but it would do. After all, mediocre coffee had sufficed for all of the years that she and the Freuds and Burlinghams had lived in London.

Better than her second cup of coffee was the fact that the Freud Museum was closed for the week out of respect for Miss Freud's passing. The absence of museum visitors meant that Paula did not have to accept murmured condolences from people who meant nothing to her and whose names she couldn't remember.

When the museum was open there was no avoiding such people, for the museum was part of the home in which she and Miss Freud lived. Paula was Miss Freud's maid. The fact that Miss Freud had died and the museum was temporarily closed did present Paula with a problem, however. That nice young researcher with the Bermuda shorts would not be available to lift the boxes of books she was trying to organize. Paula had no intention, at her age, of lifting books herself. And surely he would have offered. And just as surely, it would have been a treat to watch him bend over and hoist.

Oh, nonsense! Paula knew that such thoughts were not wrong. Even in the very old sexual feelings are normal and healthy. In the Freud household they had been part of everyday conversation, always, and of everyday jokes.

"A man goes to a psychoanalyst," Miss Freud had said only a few weeks ago to the nice young researcher now occupying Paula's thoughts. "'The doctor says 'You're crazy.' The man says 'I want a second opinion.' 'Okay, you're ugly, too.'"

Wait. That one wasn't even sexy. Come to think of it, it wasn't very funny either. Evidently Miss Freud had been gently testing the nice young man's appetites for humor and all the rest of it.

And he had shown real hunger, though for what she and Miss Freud had not been immediately sure. Hearing "ugly" had made him howl with laughter and then begin snorting air like pigs sleeping on a Sunday. That sound made Miss Freud and Paula open their own mouths wide and howl along with him. They'd opened so wide that they'd shown off the dental work on their back teeth. Of that Paula was certain, because when the researcher saw it he'd howled and snorted even more loudly.

Nothing wrong with that, either.

"How many Freudian analysts does it take to change a light bulb?" the nice young researcher had quickly volunteered.

"How many?" Miss Freud had asked.

Before he spoke again, he started up with more of that pigs on a Sunday business. But then he stopped. "No, no. I'm sorry," he said, wiping his nose. "Give me a minute to think of something else."

"As you were saying…" Miss Freud had insisted. She could be stern when she needed to be. You could almost imagine her tapping her foot against the floor and frowning through half glasses (which she didn't wear). "Tell me what has come to your mind, young man," she prompted cheerily. "Always do so, as soon as it comes to your mind."

The answer, as it turned out, was two.

"One analyst changes the light bulb while the other holds the breasts, I mean ladder."

Topped! Miss Freud had been topped! His joke was funnier—and sexy, which Miss Freud hadn't even dared. Miss Freud had immediately shown her dental work again, and so had Paula. And then they

learned that the nice young researcher had three fillings of his own on his back teeth.

Ah, well. Without someone to do her heavy lifting, today's accomplishments would be limited. Paula rinsed her coffee cup, dried it, and put it in the cupboard. She walked upstairs, carefully holding the handrail as she did so. Once at the top, she opened the door to Miss Freud's bedroom.

A rush of melancholy met her. She stood for a long while with her hand on the doorknob; her eyes were reluctant to leave the sight of her mistress's bedclothes, which were still wrinkled, and which still emitted Miss Freud's baby powder smell. The outline of her small body could still be seen in the white sheets. Her large pile of knitting lay on the bedclothes right about where her knees would have been.

Paula was relieved to see that, when she had died, Miss Freud's pillows had still been nicely plumped. Paula had always kept them just so. But she was aghast to notice that she had never removed yesterday afternoon's coffee tray from Miss Freud's room. Of course, the coffee had gone cold, and the cream had curdled. Such a waste.

"There's no fool like an old fool," she scolded herself.

Paula lifted the tea tray from the nightstand and placed it carefully on the hall table. Then she opened a window to let a little autumn into the bedroom. All of London was glorious that morning.

The single most miserable part of the day's work would be dealing with the bedclothes. Just by changing the sheets, Paula would eradicate the last traces of Miss Freud's living form. Washing and tidying, however, must be done. Indeed, the bed must be made up again prettily, freshly—exuberantly even.

Paula believed in exuberance. It was where she had always placed her faith, much in the way that other people place faith in God. In some of the crises she had survived with the Freuds—wars, hunger, Nazis, deaths, impossible children, possible ones, separations, suicides threatened and real—she'd had little time to grasp what was happening as it happened. Thank goodness understanding wasn't her job. The

Herr Professor'd had the brains for understanding. So had Miss Freud. But they hadn't had exuberance. That had been Paula's responsibility; tidying up requires it.

"All right," thought Paula. "Bedclothes last. Dusting first."

She looked forward to it. Dusting Miss Freud's bedroom she would once again hold objects she'd tended for years. On the top of the mahogany bookcase were Herr Professor's pocket watch and the neatly arranged display of colored ribbons that Miss Freud had treasured for as long as Paula had known her. One shelf down were the penny bank that doubled as a toy guillotine and the cigars that the guillotine beheaded. There was a frog skeleton that Miss Freud affectionately called "Prince." There was a rat skeleton she called "Ernest." There was a statuette of Venus with a broken spear. It was a genuine antiquity, probably Greek, Miss Freud had told Paula. The most recent item in the collection was a many-paged memoir that Miss Freud had written during her infirmity.

The memoir was only her most recent project. Miss Freud had been writing one thing or another for almost as long as Paula had known her. She had authored so many articles about children that it had taken eight big, hardcover books to hold them. Not until writing her memoir, however, had Miss Freud laughed while she wrote. Certainly she had never before cried.

Picking up the manuscript, Paula noticed on the cover page two titles. *The Unauthorized Freud, by The Unauthorized Freud* was crossed out. In its place, *Hysterical* was written with a desperately weak hand. Brandishing her duster like a sword, Paula drew it across, around, and underneath the manuscript before hurling the entire stack of papers into the trash.

Keeping order—physically and otherwise—was her purpose on Earth. And what good had being hysterical ever done anyone?

Paula cleaned picture frames and *tchotchkes*. She accosted wood with linseed oil. She shook sad thoughts free from her own brain. And she charged exuberantly on.

Part 1

The Origins of Hysteria

(1895-1902)

Sophie (rear, left), Mathilde, Martin, Anna, Oliver, and Ernst Freud, 1889.

Chapter 1

If you had seen my Papa in my young years, you would have noticed the light burning in his eyes. The nights are long in Vienna mid-winter. And when I was born, back in the time of royals and castles, even in broad daylight coal dust darkened the sky. Thankfully, light beamed out of Papa's eyes morning and night on his tromps around the Ringstrasse. On his smoking-and-thinking walks he illuminated a path for everyone.

Funny, aren't they? The exaggerations in children's memories?

But I'll wager that each one of my siblings remember Papa's eyes that way and recall being obliged to troop behind him twice a day. Before breakfast and again just before supper we ran like mad to keep up, all six of us plus Nanny and a governess. Bundled in layers of wool, we dodged carts and made "unnecessary noise."

Summers in the mountains were best, though, for there we could relax. Our family hikes were leisurely, quiet, mesmerizing—just strolls, really. Papa and his brood in the mountains in the bramble. There were endless days of mushroom hunting, with Papa calling, "Come out! Come out! It's safe to come out!" and then, having enticed fungi, trapping them in his hat, much to our wild delight.

"One of life's real pleasures," Papa would proudly announce, "is rooting out wild things."

If you had visited us then, if you had seen Papa in his tall socks and warm-weather pants, you wouldn't have suspected. His Alpine

attire held no clues to his habits and fancies. You wouldn't have known about his sunburned face going even redder at night while he talked to Mama. You would not have imagined Papa and the dog yelping together in the summer garden in the early morning dew.

Winters. Six children, Mama, Papa, my Tante Minna, one nanny, and one governess. Papa's patients. One bathroom. Papa always said that stuttering and lisping are upwards psychological displacements of conflicts about excrementory functions. We all lisped. Even Papa lisped sometimes.

My sister Sophie was Papa's favorite child; she was older than me by two years. She was far prettier, she hated me, and already she knew how to wrap a man around her little finger. My sister Mathilde, eight years my senior, was obedient and kind, and for these qualities Papa was grateful. I especially liked her kindness. But she often sang aloud to herself; she couldn't help it, even though extraneous sounds annoyed Papa. My three boisterous brothers were all loud, too, which set Papa on edge.

And so I developed a singular talent that afforded me my own special relationship with my father. I alone among our gaggle could promise to be quiet and then do it.

When I was five or so, Papa rented an apartment downstairs from our family's quarters. He used it as a professional suite. He couldn't really afford the apartment. He'd trained as a neurologist, but only rarely accepted neurology patients. And not all of his psychology patients paid him for his attention. In fact, he paid some of *them* to allow him to ask questions and learn. But poor Mama just needed him to bring home some bacon. In an unforgettable alto tone she would weep loudly about the added rent. And of course Papa's face would turn red.

Papa wanted deference. But he didn't want to shove away his entire family. So while I was still too young for school, he routinely invited me to accompany him downstairs to his suite of professional rooms.

While he met with patients in his consulting room, I played on the Persian rugs of his waiting room. Sometimes, between patients' visits, he read to me from books of fairy tales.

They're not subtle stuff, those fairy tales that have traveled for a thousand years through India, the Mideast, and Western Europe. They're not for the squeamish. Giants eat little boys' livers. Parents chuck children into the woods to fend off witches all by themselves.

Good always triumphs in fairy tales, of course. But whenever Papa returned to his consulting room, I wondered about the times when good might not triumph in time. It never seemed to when Sophie tormented me. It hadn't seemed to for the pure-at-heart children in *Jack and the Beanstalk* whose livers were eaten by the giant *before* Jack arrived.

The waiting room had no toys. Aside from my doll, I had nothing with which to entertain myself when I waited for Papa. Usually, right after Papa entered the consulting room with a patient, I stuck out my tongue at his consulting room door. Once, while proudly appreciating my tongue's length and flagrant pinkness, I noticed that my vision had changed. It had lost focus of everything except for the tongue itself. Of course, I'd just crossed my eyes. Still, I held them in their tongue-seeking position while I moved my head about. The effect was dizzying.

I didn't really dare walk that way. But I did stumble upon the discovery that, when my eyes were crossed, within Papa's ornately woven Persian rugs I could see more than the abstract designs that everyone else saw. I could see people. The clumps of wool and silk in one rug, for example, resembled women. If I jiggled my head while keeping my eyes crossed, those women danced. The spiky yellow and brown forms in a second rug became manticores racing about. A third rug's lumps resembled vegetables and fresh fruit eerily floating through the air.

My single boldest action while alone in Papa's waiting room was when I looked one day at my tongue while standing on my head in the middle of a large, circular rug. From that perspective I saw a tower and houses made of stone. I even saw village people. The rug itself was

surrounded by a deep blue border, and so the village itself was surrounded by a sea to which tiny, woolen dots of children ran to swim.

Wouldn't you know, Papa walked in with a patient while I was enjoying the view. Evidently my cheeks were purple with blood flow and my eyes were, well, funny looking.

"If you fall, your face will stay like that," Papa warned, commenting not at all on the fact that my undergarments were on display.

And so I called my own halt to the tongue game. But I still enjoyed the rugs now that I knew they were neighborhoods.

I also took up a chalk-and-slate activity that today's psychologists might call "counter-phobic." For example, if Sophie had bossed me around earlier that day, I drew pictures of her bound and gagged. I often drew pictures in which I was bigger than she—bigger than Mathilde, even. With my crude sketches I changed everything I didn't like, even some of the fairy tales Papa read. In my versions, beanstalks didn't grow into the clouds; Cinderella's mother did not die; and Cinderella had no sisters.

Fascinated by what I created, between appointments Papa helped me turn my graphic tales into stories with words.

The drawings I made of *The Frog Prince* are long lost. Only the words I dictated have survived.

The Frog Prince

Once upon a time there was a princess who, when sitting on the edge of a lake, dropped a precious ball that her papa had given her. A frog retrieved it for her, thinking he might get a kiss in return.

"But I don't want to kiss a frog," the princess complained to her papa once she had the ball back.

With no problem at all, her papa understood and explained the problem to the frog.

The king walked with the princess as she led the frog to a

wide creek, where she pointed him downstream towards the river.

The princess and her papa waved gaily as the frog lifted up his little butt and hopped in.

The frog swam away disappointed, for he had hoped that the princess would be his love. Still, he was pretty sure he could find the river.

"Bye, bye!" the princess whispered. She looked beautiful with her curly, blonde hair and her new princess shoes.

"Bye, bye!" the frog whispered back, without complaining. What a prince he was!

The frog went on to live happily ever after, and so did the princess and her papa.

Here's a good joke.

Mrs. Cohen," the psychoanalyst says. "I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this. Your son has a terrible Oedipus complex."

"Oedipus, schmoedipus," says Mrs. Cohen. "Just as long as he loves his mother."

Papa loved that joke. It's been a long time coming, but these days, so do I.