

Dear Selma Blair, Please Play Me in the Movie

11/22/21

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Dear Selma Blair,

You don't know me, obviously, but I just watched Rachel Fleit's documentary, "Introducing, Selma Blair," which was released on Discovery+ late last month. It's a beautiful film and all the things that people will say about you, the clichés they'll fling around – *she is incredibly brave, her honesty and vulnerability are inspiring* – well, in this case, they're all true. Congratulations, Selma. I am rooting for you. And I'm writing to you with a proposition that I hope you'll consider. Let me start by saying that we have some things in common.

You and I are about the same age, children of the 70s. We are both from the Rust Belt but now live in California. We have two sisters.

We both also have one son. They're about the same age (mine is eleven, yours is ten). They are funny and sensitive and have taught us many things.

We also both like to change our hair color a lot.

There's another thing, though, a bigger thing we share:

In 2018, you were diagnosed with an aggressive form of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) that has been taking away your ability to walk, to speak, and to care for yourself and your child. In 2016, I was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) and over the next two years developed related dystonia that also, but in a different way, has been taking away my ability to walk, to speak, and to care for myself and my son. That Instagram message you sent the world about your diagnosis? "*My left side is asking for directions from a broken GPS*"? That made me laugh – that's me, too. And then, that opening scene of the film, when you lose your speech after talking normally to the camera for quite a while? That's exactly what it's like – the brain sends the signal, but the muscles don't obey.

I limp, I stutter, I have a cane collection, though none of mine are quite as fashionable as yours (I could use some help finding my statement-cane). I

was the only mom on the playground with this particular accessory, so I sometimes noticed how different I was, but like you I rarely felt shame about the cane or about my wheelchair. Not one bit. If the choice was between those devices and missing trick-or-treating with my one-and-only kid – it was never any choice at all.

The shame I feel about my failing body, that's another matter.

I was really okay, even super-active, until my son was born and, like you, just never got better. We're fed so much bullshit about pregnancy and motherhood, no one ever really tells you it's like being in an immune, connective tissue, hormonal car wreck. Yes, it's a wreck that brings this golden being into your life and permanently reorients your internal compass so that north is the tip of his pinkie finger. That kind of wreck. Still, it'd be nice to have some warning.

For us, the experience of being a mother is inseparable from the experience of being sick and in pain and worried, so worried, about what our struggle is doing to that little boy's heart. About all the ways it is growing bigger than the average bear. About all the fear they don't yet have the words for.

Of course, there are big differences between us, too. You're a pretty famous actress in Hollywood and I'm a pretty unknown professor in northern California. Maybe our lives are a weird inversion: when I was in high school, I said I wanted to be an actress and a teacher told me I was a writer; when you were in high school, you said you wanted to be a writer and a teacher told you were an actress. That's kind of funny. Interesting, not in a stalker-y way.

Back to the film: I think there's a space in between writing and acting – I think your portrayal of yourself in this documentary is in that space. Maybe you've heard of a feminist artist named Hannah Wilke, who in the 1970s, when we were just kids, took a series of bold, ironic photos of herself that were shown at places like the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art and other sites in California, Paris, and London.

Hannah was model-gorgeous but would do things like put tiny little bubble-gum vulvas all over her, like a disease, like scars. She dead-panned,

naked, into the camera and dared you to try to shame her or think of her as a sex-symbol or feel anything consistently at all. Some feminists didn't like her work because she was too conventionally beautiful. "It's too easy to look at her," they said. "It challenges nothing," they said. She was not celebrated in the same way as, say Cindy Sherman who, while also conventionally "pretty" refused herself vehemently. Hannah's self-love made people uncomfortable.

Then, in the late 1980s, Hannah got cancer, lymphoma. She had a bone marrow transplant, too. As she sickened, she took a new series of photos, "Intra-Venus." In some of this later work she's a Madonna swaddling her chemo-bald scalp; in others, Wilke, whose body is swollen from illness and poison-cure, looks almost startled by the camera. She ironically re-embodies her earlier pieces. When you look at her work over the decades, it puts demands on the viewer, that we not look away, that we own up to the thing that is always staring us down, the body ages, the flesh dies. That can be terrifying and lonely, or it can join you to every other human being on the planet.

"Intra-Venus" toured posthumously to galleries like the Yerba Buena Arts Center in San Francisco and the Santa Monica Museum and other places around the world. Then the snooty feminists from before said "Ah, now we can see meaning in the earlier work. Because that beautiful body was going to die all along. We just weren't in on the performance yet."ⁱ

Some of us seem compelled to make art out of our experiences. There's a long and venerable tradition of writing about illness, from Virginia Woolf to Audre Lorde to Susan Sontag to Nancy Mairs (one of my favorites – she had MS, too, and wrote about it with such wit, and is the author of that famous line – maybe we should get t-shirts made – "*As a cripple I swagger*") to Sarah Manguso and Porochista Khakpour and others.

But film, that's harder. I wrote about this once before, after seeing Jennifer Brea's documentary, "Unrest," about her life with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS).ⁱⁱ Other colleagues in disability studies have talked about this obvious hole a lot: film refuses the sick and disabled body unless we're objects to inspire others, what they call "inspiration porn." But even then, looking at narrative films (think *My Left Foot*, or that recent cinematic affront, *Penguin Bloom*,

even *The Sound of Metal*, interesting as it is) it's a short filmography and those films very rarely, if ever, feature *actually disabled* actors or were written by disabled writers or directed by someone with a disability.

The Inclusion Initiative at the Annenberg School at USC did a study and found that only 2.3% of all speaking characters in the top 100 films of 2019 were depicted with a disability; this number has not grown in five years.ⁱⁱⁱ

Up until I became really disabled, I mostly wrote about academic things for academic audiences. Then I began to tell my story in a way I hoped lots of people could read because the need just seems so great. God, there are just so many of us, women with disabling, progressive illness and pain, and someone needs to be telling these fucking stories.

But I started to run into a problem because how do you write about medical gaslighting in a way that really conveys the full-bodied rage and disappointment and grief that it creates? The rhythms of those awful conversations? Make someone see and feel them? How do you write about all the degradations of the body, the lengths to which you and your disease will go in the competition for control? These are hard things to write, even if you have half-decent dexterity with words. I have tried to do it, I really have, but one day as I wrestled sentences into my notebook I realized that for the first time in my life, what I was writing had to leap off the page.

Film could do it.

So now we're coming to the heart of the matter, the thing I was writing to ask you in the first place:

I'm writing a screenplay.

(I know, everyone in California is writing a screenplay).

But it's a story I think you'll like, it might even feel familiar, about a professor in Santa Cruz who has a little-understood, but obviously-progressing condition that is making her limp and lose her speech and live in constant pain. One day, after a particularly bad appointment with her dismissive doctor and a particularly annoying exchange with her husband (he's a lovely guy, but he thought he signed up for life with Wonder Woman and instead got Couch Crip, so he's resentful, who wouldn't be), this professor goes to pick her only son up from soccer practice. He's about

ten, and he's that perfect blend of snarky and sweet that ten-year old boys always are, and she feels safe in that car in that moment, so she gets on Highway 1 and starts driving south. And just keeps driving. She stops in LA to see an old friend and then San Diego to see an old flame (uh-oh – but it's film, we need conflict, *wink*, don't worry, things work out as they should, though I won't tell you how that is just yet) while we also get the back story about how she deteriorated into her current state. But much of the film is mom and son on a road trip.

When you said in an interview about your film that it was a love letter to your son, Arthur? That's exactly what I've been saying about this imaginary film I'm writing. This is my love letter to Toma.

There's a scene where the mom teaches her son about torch songs. There's another where they eat finger limes and call them tiny alien penises. You know, the stuff we talk about when we're not saying the thing we wish we could say:

I am so sorry that you never got a normal mom.

I am so sorry I am not more.

I promise you that, flawed as I am, every bit of me is for you.

I need the actress who plays the lead to get it.

I mean, *really* get it, not just study it for a few months by following around some sick people. She has to slur and spasm and limp and tic. She has to feel the exasperation with her own body, the devotion to her boy-child, the deadening predictability of medications and doctor visits, the real joy of small victories – as small as cutting a strawberry at the sink. This is method acting on a whole other level.

I'll be honest with you, Selma, it's not like I have a producer or a director or Netflix remotely interested in what I'm up to. There's no backing, no team. Just me. Like I said, I'm just a nobody professor and I've never written a film before. I don't really know the first thing about it, except that sometimes I teach and write about films I like, with messages I believe in. But let's pretend for a minute, yeah? Let's say that somewhere out there someone thinks this might be a good idea. Let's say we're casting.

Will you play the sick mom who takes her kid on a road trip and makes total chaos of her life because it has to change dramatically to make space for a completely different kind of future?

I bet we could find a way to build a work practice around our improved-but-still-unpredictable bodies. I bet we could have kids on the set. I bet there's a sick-woman director out there who's dying for a shot at a new kind of buddy-film feature made by slurry-limpy middle-aged women who are hella charming and have zero fucks left to give.

I'm happy to tell you that after some shitty low-points – not as bad as a stem-cell transplant, not by a long shot, but their own kind of shitty – I seem to be getting better, slowly. Or at least not getting worse for a change. I survived a gauntlet of medical tomfuckery, did my own research, and came up with a rare treatment that for now seems to be helping. So I can write you this letter and not just curse at the ceiling and sleep until my son comes home from school. I can finish this script.

I know in the documentary you say that you're happy being a supporting actress, but I think this is it. This is your role.

Call me and let me know? Or friend me or follow me on Insta? We're Gen X, we can do whatever.

Your Friend,

Megan

PS – Kathleen Hanna, if you're feeling up to it, will you make the soundtrack?

ⁱ I learned much of what I know about Hannah Wilke and her art from an amazing exhibition held at UC Santa Cruz in 2006, curated by Shelby Graham, entitled "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Rethinking Hannah Wilke." Essays in a subsequent volume, *Bodies in the Making: Transgressions and Transformations*, (Nancy Chen and Helene Moglen, eds, New Pacific Press, 2006) from Graham, Joyce Brodsky, Carla Freccero, and Joanna Frueh provide great insight into Wilke's work, upon which I have drawn heavily here.

ⁱⁱ That article can be read via the *Film Quarterly* archives here: <https://filmquarterly.org/2021/01/26/from-the-archives-chronicling-chronic-illness/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, “Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007-2019,” September 2020. Available for download at: https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf