

Leaving Mum Behind ~ 1967- 68

by Deborah Burghardt

Dad, self-appointed ambulance driver, strangled the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands. His jaw clenched, he looked as frantic as I felt. Mum lay comatose on the pillow-laden back seat. My sister, Merri, and I squeezed in the front. We had rushed off from my paternal grandparents' home in Massachusetts to get to a hospital in Pennsylvania—our second twelve-hour road trip in a matter of days.

“Check on your mother,” Dad said in a voice, shaky, like her last steps.

My stomach twisted. Mum's face had paled to the white of crushed shells. I touched her still warm forehead. Her breathing labored with almost imperceptible inhales. Her exhales—specks of air released sporadically like in childhood Hold-Your-Breath contests.

“How's she doing?” Dad said, sweat trickling down his temples.

I pressed a cup to Mum's lips, only to watch the water dribble down her chin. “She swallowed a little.” I lied. “I'm taking care of her. Don't worry.” Why upset him with the truth? We had no choice but to keep driving and keep hoping—hoping Dr. McKelvey could undo what Dad had done.

Earlier that December, home for winter break, I noticed a change in Mum. Her body appeared slight, fragile, lucent in an unfamiliar way. Although she always rested her eyes, she rarely opened them. And when she did, she stared into space, sort of dazed, as if light years away from our living room. The sparkle I prided myself on setting aglow in her had dimmed. She barely acknowledged my college stories and her *My Fair Lady* soundtrack. I worried too because earlier that fall, Dr. McKelvey had hospitalized Mum for breathing difficulties due to weakened muscles in her chest and abdomen. The source of that weakening, a fear I intuited at five—*something is wrong with my mother*—

Dad named multiple sclerosis (MS) when I turned nine. At eighteen, I was intuiting something far worse—*my mother is dying*.

Before I had a chance to talk to Dad, he announced we'd be traveling from Pennsylvania to my grandparents' home in Massachusetts. December 18, 1967, marked their 50th wedding anniversary.

Customarily, we visited Nana and Granddad during Dad's two-week vacation in July. His mood soared the closer we came to departure. Reunited with Granddad, the two talked work—stronger metals and smoother roads—in the vegetable garden. Nana toured Dad around her prized overgrown flower beds, threatening to chastise him should he dare to weed or trim. He'd try to talk her out of one of her paintings, but she refused even his offer to pay.

We dined on fresh clams, fish, lobster, and giant seedy squash—food that Dad adored. Food Mum, Merri, and I pushed around our plates suspiciously.

Every afternoon we sunbathed on Anthony's Beach, lunched on peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches. After a vigorous swim to the farthest buoys, Dad and Merri floated effortlessly on their backs, toes poking out of the waves. More of a wader myself, I settled for the closest raft. Once I met a French woman there, who taught me to twirl my ankles. "The secret to good legs," she said. Much more important to the teen me than those buoys.

Mum used to come to the beach with us, wearing a broad-brimmed hat with wide ribbon band and movie star sunglasses, but then MS sidelined her to the bathhouse porch. Eventually, her body couldn't endure the heat, and she stayed back at the house to nap. I'm sorry to say that it became routine—leaving Mum behind.

Perhaps my months away at college had enabled me to see more clearly than Dad the extent of Mum's decline. I tried again to express my doubts. "Hey, Dad. I'm not sure about this trip. What about Mum's health? What if the car breaks down or we drive into a nor'easter and get stranded? I think she's..."

"Avoiding danger," Dad interrupted, "is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.' Helen Keller." I'm sure Mum agreed with him on her healthy days. And in retrospect, I see how framing the trip as a

“great adventure” set us on an optimistic course, prepared us to face the unforeseen, to be as alive as we could muster.

And so, in the midst of much gone wrong and much more that might, Dad whistled while he tied Mum’s wheelchair to the roof of our Mercury Monterey. He said what he always said on our way out of town. “Ah, I smell the salt air already.”

A few hours into the drive, Mum started. “Oh boy.” Her hair needed a brush. Traces of lush red lipstick streaked her lips. “Oh boy,” she said, “Oh boy.”

I tried to distract myself by studying *Catcher in the Rye* for an upcoming English final. Merri counted out-of-state license plate states and stealthily stretched her long legs over the pillow blockade to my side.

“Oh boy.”

Trying to gain distance from Mum’s mournful sound, I pushed deep into my seat. Held my book in front of my face, simulating a soundproof barrier that blocked the view of her awkwardly angled body.

“Oh boy.”

Darkness cloaked the car as Dad drove through a tunnel, a welcome change from brown hillsides and the gray day that matched my mood. I closed the cover on Holden, pushed my sister’s long-legs back to her side.

“Oh boy.” Mum’s words echoed through the cavern. “Oh, boy.”

College gave me a two-hour escape from home where no one knew my secrets. Growing up, I hid out in my bedroom with my best girlfriend or in the cellar with my boyfriend. There was school and clerking at Troutman’s department store. But inside that damn car, I was trapped.

“Oh boy.”

“Daaaaad! Why does she keep saying that?” With hundreds of miles ahead of us, I figured the monotony of hearing those two words over and over would drive me crazy.

“Try changing her position.”

Reaching over the front seatback, I propped Mum against the locked door, rearranged the pillow beneath her freckled cheek with quick, squally movements. Her lashes fluttered.

Slumped back in my seat, I pressed my forehead against the cold side window. I bit my lip hard.

“Oh boy.”

“Daaaad. What is wrong with her? Is she dreaming?” His eyes darted between Mum and the mist rising from the wet road. He raised his knees high enough under the wheel to steer the car. His hands-free, he reached over and rubbed her hands between his.

“Take it easy, Barbara Boo-Boo. Almost to the George Washington Bridge. Back to New England, we go, ho, ho. Back to the land of our youth. In the meantime, you enjoy a little snooze.”

Dad’s gentle caresses and comforting words, generously given to a woman who couldn’t respond, mocked my outbursts and impatient treatment of my mother. I leaned up and kissed her cheek.

All these years later, I still see those knees steering that car, our peril never occurring to me: adventure *or nothing*. I’ve always been big on fixing, sometimes uninvited, sometimes too soon—ask my children. Maybe, I learned that from Dad—drive with your knees if that’s what it takes.

“Oh boy.”

I no longer remember the name of the restaurant where my grandparents held their anniversary dinner. In my memory, it exists as one with classic New England charm and nautical atmosphere. A place where the host spoke like my Bostonian parents and knew Granddad by name.

The eldest grandchild, I sat beside Granddad at the table and across from my parents. Dad wrapped his arm around Mum’s shoulders and placed his hand gently under her chin to support her head—neck muscles shot. Granddad wiped his mustache with a linen napkin before speaking to Mum. His blue-gray eyes twinkled above

prominent bags I hoped never to inherit. “How long have you been married, Barbie?” She gave him that faraway look.

Dad answered for her. “We’re coming up on twenty-three years.”

“Well, when you get to twenty-five, I’m coming to Pennsylvania to celebrate you. Would you like that?” Neither of them answered.

I suspected Granddad knew the day would never come. And even though he and Nana rarely traveled long distances, if, by some slim chance that day came, he’d be good to his word.

As I watched him watch Dad with Mum, I wondered if he was proud of his son for heeding his advice, another of Dad’s oft-quoted philosophies: “The best way to love your daughters is to love their mother.”

The morning after the party, Mum ran a high temperature and grew increasingly despondent, symptoms that baffled a local doctor, who kindly made a house call. Dad decided to take her home to Dr. McKelvey, who’d been handling the incurable case for the last decade. After her appointments, Dad said they always had a good laugh. That meant a lot to him. I don’t know if he tried to talk Dad into or out of the drive, only that he agreed to meet us at the hospital.

Dad drove, speedometer needle hovering past all limits, determined to get Mum to the man he trusted most to help her. I tucked a blanket around her and sopped up the water she couldn’t swallow. I whispered to her, “Come on, Mum. Please. Give us another, ‘Oh boy.’”

We raced in reverence, the Mercury Monterey, our church sanctuary. Merri, fourteen, didn’t say a word the entire trip. I’m not sure either Dad or I tried to reassure her. I can’t recall driving toward sunset or the phase of the moon.

Guilt had to have been pressing on Dad’s neck, abiding as the humming tires. He had to have been asking himself, “*What was I thinking? Did I push her too far?*” Unless. Unless. Unless he too knew in that knowing place—Mum was fading. And so, he ferried her away on a “daring adventure” a return home one last time.

And perhaps, Mum, feeling herself shedding this life and believing in the promise that heaven awaited her, sang us her farewell. A hymn—composed from overflowing joy.

“Oh boy.”



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