

## **My Mother Did Not Die**

by Mary Ittelson

Was I thirteen, or fourteen, the day my father kicked the door in? I was lying in bed reading a book, or maybe doing homework. Probably it was Saturday or Sunday. I remember the way the sun lit the lemon-yellow walls of my room in stripes through the slatted blinds. Quiet except for leaves brushing my windowpane in the breeze, and a faint tussle in the living room of voices low and urgent.

My parents had let me pick that particular yellow myself. Let me mix it to order at the Sherwin Williams store in downtown Dayton where my dad and I got everything I needed to complete the job: cans of paint and primer, brushes, rollers, trays, edging tape, buckets, and a wooden safety ladder with a supply ledge. We loaded it all into the way-back of the station wagon. It must've been the summer before 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. An age when painting my room myself seemed as likely as flying solo to the moon by flapping my arms.

As a family, we were not particularly handy. My parents were bookish. Though my dad was an engineer, the slide rule was his tool of choice. My mother was capable—a dietician and professor at the university. But she called my dad if something broke in our house. My father would descend the dusty basement stairs to retrieve the tool box. He'd spread stacks of manuals on the living room rug rummaging for just the one, which he would study in quiet contentment before determining it was necessary, this time, to call the repairman.

My mom, anticipating a successful paint job, had already ordered me made-to-measure curtains and a matching twin bedspread from Sears due to arrive in six to eight weeks. We had pored over the catalogue together until we found them—the exact yellow, a daffodil print with magenta pansy accents. The curtains were ruffled and the spread was flounced.

I recall that the work was backbreaking, that I almost quit one wall into the first primer coat, paint splattering my eyes, tears spilling onto the drop cloth. But by the time I was halfway into the first yellow coat, I knew the exact amount of paint to tip into the tray and the precise pressure to apply to the roller. In the end I was painting as if sunshine emanated from my heart directly onto the walls.

The results were splendid. My room was cheerful and girlish. As was I, on this particular weekend day, lying in my bed reading lazily, paying no attention to the noises from the living room where my parents were having a typical exchange.

I recognized the snarl my mother made when she shook her jowls like a rabid dog. And my father's voice careening between anger and panic like a slide whistle. Familiar sounds muffled by the distance and my door. I read on.

Most weekday mornings my father and I hurried to get ready while my mom employed various tactics to delay his departure. Once she seized his collar screaming spittle so ferociously that he had to change his mangled shirt and wet tie before throwing on his coat and dashing out. When the front door shut, she would shuffle back to their darkened room across the hall from mine and lie in bed for the remainder of the day. I would let myself out the back door to walk the six blocks to high school, my gear for gymnastics or student council slung on my back. But I recall that on this particular day, the day my father kicked the door in, I was in no hurry to do anything or be anywhere.

She was screaming. He was threatening. Perhaps it was the other way around. That this particular exchange was escalating was also not unusual. I read on, undisturbed, in my room. My mother was ill. My father was brave. I was fine.

The hyena cackle. The guttural groan. Stomps and clomps. One did not speak of "mental illness" in the Midwest at that time. The word was "crazy." Louder and louder. They screamed, they growled. I read on but a phrase drew my attention.

"I'm gonna get Mary," she announced with menacing gusto.

Now this was a novel angle. But I read on.

"You leave her alone," he said, his voice low and grave.

"I'm gonna get Mary," she repeated

"Lois. Stop. Don't you dare."

I heard a ripping sound outside my door.

“You stay away from her. Lois. Stay away.” His voice rising to a pinched falsetto.

“LOIS!”

Open. In. Shut.

“Don’t you dare lock that door.”

Click.

It was perfectly silent. Until he started pounding. Begging, ordering, commanding. Beseeching her to open the door. To leave me alone. To not touch me. To not dare touch me.

Still in my bed. Holding my book. No longer reading. We looked at one another. Mother. Daughter. Lois. Mary. She was in her nightgown, a tattered grey rag that was once pink and edged with lace. Her wide eyes were set deep in violet oval shadows. Stopped and sad. Her spindly bare legs, the one lame and gutted since childhood. Even with his pounding and the screaming my room felt quiet, just the two of us. One might wonder what all the commotion was about. My father raging as if for his own dear life rather than mine. I was safe with my mom. She would never hurt me; I knew this with certainty. Her rages were as impotent as his attempts to contain them.

My father was neither fit nor athletic. I have no idea how he defeated the solid oak door. A swift kick? A full body check? A running start? The door swung open, whacking the wall behind, the metal strike plate twisted off and dangling from the screws. The door itself, and the hinges, remained intact. But the frame on the knob side had splintered and cracked apart.

My mom turned away from me to face the gaping frame, and then walked out, her feet shuffling, the jagged hem of her night gown unraveling behind.

Did I keep reading? Did I get up to shut the door? I don’t recall.

It remained possible to shut the door, though neither the frame nor the lock were ever repaired. By this time no one came to the house except my father and me, and my mother who rarely left. My much older brothers, in college and graduate school, no longer visited. We did not speak of the door or the incident.

My father did not make me leave until I was sixteen. For my own good. Home was no place for me. As it turned out, prep school wasn’t either. The other kids were

rich and their parents were famous. They vacationed in Nantucket or Gstaad. The guys wore wrinkled Lacoste shirts with the collars up. The girls wore fair-isle sweaters and tartan skirts. Everyone's shoes, even the teachers', featured tassels. In a bid to fit in, I jammed my belongings in my trunk under the bed of my dorm room and bought all new clothes at The Village Shoppe. Though I excelled in academics and was cast in plays, I failed to make a single friend. At Fairview High School I had been popular. At Andover I was invisible. There ensued a time of leaving one place I was not wanted to go to another. Mix. Repeat. Mix. Repeat.

Many years later, when I was a young adult, my dad told me that I had been sent to Andover because of my mother's diagnosis. "Her brain will continue to deteriorate," the specialists at Johns Hopkins Medical Center had explained to my father, with my troubled but fully compos mentis mother seated at his side, "along with her ability to control her bodily functions. She will die a vegetable in a year or two. Three at the outside." My parents' trip to Baltimore, a year or so before my father kicked the door in, had been a costly expedition born of desperation to find a cure. Early-onset Alzheimer's was unheard of in the sixties. "They talked right over her head as if she wasn't there," my father said with the only bitterness that ever crossed his lips in relation to his "poor Lois."

Back in Dayton, my mother did not die. She just lived as dead, for nearly forty more years. In bed day after day, sleeping or moaning, "I didn't mean to hurt anybody. I didn't mean to hurt anybody." Her matted hair grew over the years into a rat's nest that hung off the side of her head like a deflated football. Her teeth yellowed until rot dissolved all but a few random molars she used to chew the Stouffer's Lean Cuisines my father microwaved for them night after night. "She refuses to go to out. I can't force her to see a dentist," my father said as if explaining the obvious, though her rages had diminished by that time. There was no point in contradicting my father, telling him that of course he could force her, in fact must force her. But when we had this conversation, her hair and teeth were not yet so bad.

My mother did not die, so what was my problem? Even now I cannot explain it. But during the decade which began when my mother got sick and I was about ten, I

never spoke of her to anyone. It was easier to change the subject than try to explain why my mother was no longer my mother. In college I fell into the care of a very nice therapist who gently and patiently asked me simple questions about my mother, to which I was able to respond with matter-of-fact answers. I have benefitted over the years from several nice therapists and am always surprised anew that trained professionals inevitably tear up when I tell them about my mother while I remain dry eyed. I always forget to ask if they are crying for her or for me.

My mother did not die. She just was dead for me. She died when I recalled a dream during my commute down Lake Shore Drive in the snow when I was twenty-three. My Chevy Citation had not yet been recalled for the anti-lock brakes that failed in such conditions. But I knew to be alert as the temperature dropped because my car had done a 360 the month before, spinning out across all three lanes and coming to rest atop the median strip and narrowly missing a tree. I had never felt so alive as I did then sitting in my warm car, the snow falling gently. I was able to back up, bumping and scaping across the curb, and trace in reverse the arc my tires had made in the snow until I was back on my way. So on this morning, the morning after my dream, as the dream replayed in my mind's eye, I was going slowly and keeping plenty of distance from other cars. My mother appeared before me just as she had done the day my father kicked the door in. She wore the same tattered night gown, the same sad expression. We looked at one another as we had done. But in the dream I spoke, "It would be better if you go." She nodded sadly. Turned. Walked away, the lace hem dragging behind her in my dream, as it had done a decade before. And I was freed as if gravity no longer applied, my hand steady on the wheel as if steering into a skid.

My mother did not die, and so, "You have to meet my mother" was the second thing I said to my future husband after he proposed. I was twenty-eight when we went to Dayton for a visit after our engagement and before our wedding. We returned together twice a few years after the birth of each child to show them to my mother. I expected the kids to be horrified by sight of her, afraid. But they just played with the toys we spread out in front of her wheelchair and sipped the juice boxes we had purchased from the vending machine. By this time my mother was well-tended in a nursing home and wore floral perma-press house coats that snapped up the front with sensible three-quarter

sleeves that stayed out of the way. My father in his grey suit, blue tie, and white shirt medium starch—he was from that generation—hovered around “LoLo” as he called her in the baby voice he had assumed when trying to quell her furies and used again while visiting her each day, stroking her hand and talking about what had been eaten for lunch or dinner. My mother was preternaturally calm during this era—whether naturally or chemically was not my concern. She was clean, she was fed, and my father was nearby in a one-bedroom apartment that was filling up with papers but was not yet unnavigable.

My mother did not die, and in the thirty-five or so years between when my mother became ill and their move to Bethany Village my father was “doing the best I can.” His deterioration was so slow and subtle I did not notice until the home care agency that looked in on my mom when my dad was out of town threatened to alert the state if the family did not take action. The house had filled over the decades with stacks of papers until there was only a narrow path from the bedroom to the bath to the kitchen and to the side door; stacks my father had to hastily shore-up after the occasional avalanche. “Don’t you touch anything, Mary. There are important papers in there. I know where everything is.” In fact, my father did manage to keep the utilities on, though my occasional inspection of the piles when he wasn’t looking unearthed bills, checks, and the occasional stock certificate deep among the junk mail, scientific and engineering periodicals all stratified by time and dating back to the year my mother got sick, the same year as the best-by stamp on the food in the cupboards. My parents ate from a jumbled stash on the kitchen counter that my father replenished on weekly trips to the supermarket. I emptied the expired condiments in the fridge on every visit—it was the least I could do. Dust and spider webs had accumulated. Surely there were mice, but too much stuff along the floor boards didn’t allow me to know for sure.

My mother did not die, and if my father died first, “We are fucked,” I said to my brothers who are seven and ten years older and had not, as far as I could remember, been to Dayton since my mother became ill. Whenever my father traveled on business or to visit me or my brothers, he left frozen dinners and called frequently to be sure my mother was okay. “Lois can take care of herself for a few days,” said my father. Later he arranged for a home health care agency to send someone to check on her daily

whenever he was gone. Still, in the years before Bethany, the “situation at home,” as my brothers and I called it, was “hanging by a thread” and our discussions hovered around what we would do when the thread snapped. “I can pay for whatever you need, but I can’t handle anything else,” said my oldest brother, who had his own problems having been hospitalized every decade or so for mania or depression. But by the time of my father’s heart attack this brother had lost his fancy corporate job, his money, and his wife. “I can’t help with money but I’ll help you with everything else,” said my other brother. But shortly after my father’s heart attack this brother became engaged to a woman in the throes of her own breakdown. “She has to be my priority now,” he said holding his future wife’s hand when I first met her during what I mistakenly thought was a meeting to discuss how my brother and I would share the load of helping with my mother.

My mother did not die, and so “Don’t you dare bite me,” was what I hissed in her ear, my hand clamped over her mouth so my mom would not spit at the doctor to whom I had taken her to be evaluated. I hoped the doctor would deem her medically suitable for the lovely skilled nursing facility where I hoped to place her, the one just steps away from the lovely independent living apartments where I hoped to place my dad once he was released from the lovely cardiac facility where he was rehabbing from his heart attack. We all—the doctors, quacks, administrators, regulators, agency workers, and caregivers in our healthcare spider web—understood without needing to say it that “medically suitable” was a euphemism, in my mother’s case, for “not violent,” which I had assured them she was not unless you count a tendency to spit at, bite, kick or shove outsiders that had included some waitresses, most medical professionals, and my former sister-in-law. “You just lie, Mary, You just lie through your teeth,” recommended my childhood friend’s mother who minded my two-year-old daughter who I had to bring on my weekly trips to Dayton while juggling a full time job and desperately trying to place my parents together before the home health care agency made good on its threat to seize her from the bosom of her family and make her a ward of the state, which I assumed meant that she would be committed to the Ohio Valley equivalent of Bedlam. “Of course she’s not violent,” I explained to the admissions team at Bethany Village, who wanted a doctor to opine due to a few well publicized cases wherein frail

old biddies had murdered their roommates in similarly lovely facilities. Perhaps all my hard work was for naught—trimming off the mass of matted hair, bandaging her bleeding nail beds, sponging her down, and exchanging her nightgown with the only thing that fit from her closet still brimming with the pretty dresses and aromas I knew from over thirty years before when she had still been my mother. Perhaps I had been imprudent to pre-emptively clamp my hand over my mother’s mouth just as the doctor sat down and stage whisper words to the effect that she’d better not sink the rotted stubs of her teeth into my delicate flesh.

My mother did not die, and my father went all King Lear on me after his heart attack, threatening to disown me, screaming from his rehab room that he was perfectly capable of taking care of my mother, that I was a monster to want to tear her from their beautiful home and lock her up while he was too ill to stop me. Their “beautiful home” now featured walls covered with smears of my mother’s feces, along with the dust and the cobwebs, the piles of papers, the expired canned goods, and all of my childhood mementos. I thought of the house as my dapper father’s Dorian Gray portrait. I thought of my mother as Miss Havisham in a disintegrating nightie instead of wedding gown. When pressed about my childhood I leave Shakespeare, Wilde, and Dickens out of it and go full Bronte. “Gothic” I say, “Crazy lady in the attic gothic” which shuts people up.

My mother did not die, and it took an acute kidney stone attack to end my standoff with Bethany Village. My mother, writhing in pain in the middle of the night, was rushed by ambulance to the hospital where they know how to mix just the right cocktail of pharmaceuticals for folks like my mom, meds that remove the part that spits, bites, and shoves, the vestiges of personality and self-agency that made my mother unsuitable for Bethany Village. After several days of “successful hospitalization” Bethany was delighted to welcome my mother poste-haste via direct patient transfer as soon as we wired the chunk of change she had inherited from my grandfather that my parents had been saving for a sojourn in Paris during their golden years.

My mother did not die, and even the harshest critic would not dispute that the time my parents spent at Bethany were happier than any they had spent since my mother became sick. A year or so after they moved in, my father and I were sitting on a bench in the sun on a grassy knoll by the community garden not far from my mother’s

room and he said “I was terrible to you. They don’t tell you that depression is a side effect of heart attacks. I’m sorry. I was not myself.” I was sorry too. Later that year, sitting on the same bench, my father said to me, “I’m lucky. So many men here have lost their wives.” Lucky was not the word that came to mind when I thought of my father.

By the time my mother died in her late eighties, my father was the toast of Bethany Village: editor of the monthly newsletter, resident pro bono tech consultant and computer repairman, coveted dinner tablemate, raconteur of amusing anecdotes, and revered as a “model of love and Christian charity for your selfless devotion to your wife” according to the Director and CEO of Bethany (who never minded that my parents were Jewish) in a condolence note to my father.

My father died in his early nineties, a few years after my mother. As I packed for Dayton to tend to his final affairs I pondered, yet again, my father’s devotion to my mother and the myriad ways he had failed her over the decades, and the ways he had failed me as a child, when all I had in the world was him. “At least he didn’t just run off and play golf,” said my husband who was on his way to play a round and would never, even in our darkest hours, pat my hand in a baby voice and say “poor Mare Mare.” Are you a bad person if doing all you can is not good enough? This question troubled me then and troubles me still. But who am I to judge?

I have precious few memories of my mother before she became ill and most all of them are happy. I remember giggling over jokes and cuddling before bedtime. At home I’d sit beside my mother as she graded papers for the classes she taught, or while she devised menu guidelines for the city prison and the “poorhouse” as they called the homeless shelter in those days. “See!” she’d command, gesturing to a grainy black and white photo of a forlorn bow-legged figure in a textbook. “Scurvy! That’s what you’ll get if you don’t drink your orange juice in the morning.” If I asked for a third helping of her homemade brownies or freshly baked cherry pie she’d warn, “You’ll get sugar diabetes!” or “Your teeth will rot out of your head!” while giving me just one more slice.

My mother appeared every few months on the original “Phil Donahue Show” espousing food that was low fat and made-from-scratch before the terms “cholesterol”

and “unprocessed” were used by anyone outside the field. Once I joined her on the show to prove that even little kids can make their own healthy snacks. “Delicious and nutritious!” she exclaimed while we added raisins to grated carrots and smeared a mix of honey and peanut butter into celery stalks, just like we did at home, except not in our best clothes.

“She was so brave,” my dad said when describing how he fell in love. He was referring to her leg as much as her accomplishments. People like her were called “crippled” back then even though she hid her limp and gutted leg so cleverly and could run circles around the men who employed her at the Department of Public Health and the University. “He was tall and handsome,” said my mom about their courtship. “And a Harvard man.” My mom had gone to Smith, a self-described “ugly duckling.” My dad checked all the boxes on her road to swan. I was their caboose, the “love child” as my mom said with a wink I was too young to understand. But her plans for me were clear: I was to have lots of boyfriends, go to Radcliffe, win the Miss America contest, and work at least two years before I got married.

My memories of my dad back then are happy too. On weekends he drove me to the classes my mom signed me up to take: tap, ballet, and hula at Miss Dickens’ Dance Studio; astronomy at the Natural History Museum; painting at the Art Institute. He’d wait for me to finish, passing the time by calculating in his head the digits of pi after the decimal point and entering them in neat rows on the index cards he kept in his breast pocket.

My father designed radios as a civilian engineer at the Air Force Base, and when I’d ask what he did at work he’d say, “That’s classified.” But he was happy to talk about anything else. He’d prowl the public library researching nautical knots, or Genghis Kahn, or Ada Lovelace, or animal migration in sub-Saharan Africa, or killer bees. He’d exclaim “Yo ho” when he came across an amusing fact and read it aloud to me whether or not I was interested.

He learned to sail from a book and bought a Sunfish to use on the muddy bottom man-made lake where our family vacationed for a week each August. I was first mate. “Prepare to jibe!” he’d yell and I’d duck beneath the boom and scramble to the other side of the boat lest we capsize into the drink.

My kids would love my dad—he passed away when they were still quite young. He would love them too. And Google. He'd love Google. He'd burrow with them in Wikipedia to retrieve the historical and scientific arcana they so love and text to me whether or not I am interested. I miss my dad. I don't know what to do with my mom.

Shortly after my father died, I turned fifty and did not go mad as my mother had done at that age. I have not gone mad since, nor am I likely to, despite the aptness of the birthday card I received this year from my niece picturing a rampaging stallion and captioned, "Crazy does not just run in our family, it gallops!" In addition to those on the bipolar spectrum, we have had a paranoid psychotic, a narcissistic sociopath, and god only knows what my mother and father were. We are an eccentric but lovable lot—quirky, prone to excessive enthusiasms and funks even among the sane ones of whom I count myself, my children, my nieces and nephews, and often even my brothers. "Am I the crazy one here or are they" I must ask myself in any significant interaction with my kin. I have come to understand that the line between sanity and insanity is permeable as I cling to the blessed side I inhabit even on my most neurotic days. Still, I consider each sane year after fifty to be a bonus.

I don't believe the past is prologue. I do believe in the neuroplasticity of the brain and the ability of the traumatized to heal and flourish. But mental illness is a family disease affecting even the unafflicted. I ended up with a husband (now my ex) who was in fact off playing golf during all of the difficult days of a twenty-seven-year marriage that had few difficult days, and even those few were unimportant; no serious illness or disability, no premature deaths, no poverty or disgrace, just a few health scares and the usual bumps on the road of child-rearing. Lacking role models, I turned to books on parenting and sacrificed more than was necessary of my career and leisure to be sure that I was there for my kids no matter what, that I kept my problems on my side of the ledger, and that if the best I could do was not good enough I did more. Despite all that they turned out okay.

"I was raised by wolves," I sometimes say when people ask about my childhood. Sometimes I think of myself as a mental health miracle. Usually, I think of myself as just another schmo. A part of me is still afraid I will end up as the crazy women in the attic.

But my affairs are in good order and my darling children know there will be ample funds to lock me up in someplace nice if need be. I have my health, my family, my friends, and my work. I would like to find love again, to marry even. Wary of smothering and accustomed to neglect, simple kindnesses move me to tears.

“You’re making fun of me,” my mother said to me one day when I was maybe six and had stiffened my right leg to take few limping steps. But I wasn’t making fun. I wanted to feel what it felt like to be her. “Your legs are perfect, just like a grownup’s legs,” my mother said while touching my calf one day when I was maybe seven. Did she want to feel what it felt like to be me?

I’d like to hear my mother’s voice, to see her face. Periodically I query archives on the whereabouts of the recordings of pre-syndication “Phil Donahue Show” episodes. I am certain these tapes exist somewhere in an obsolete format on a dusty shelf.

My mother has not appeared in my dreams since that snowy night over forty years ago. If ever she does, her hair will be curled, she will be wearing a pretty dress, and both her legs will be perfect.



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