

Birdy Bones

“I love you birdy bones.”

In our embrace I feel each of her delicate osteoporotic ribs press against mine and realize as I wrap my arms around her that they could encircle her quarter-way round once more. In her frailty she is like the smallest of birds. This term of endearment makes her smile. I ease her back into her lounge chair, kiss her gently on the forehead and leave after another visit. Another visit marked by both betrayal and celebration.

This was a good visit. All are not always so. Although mom hasn't called me by name in months, she was generally present. Responsive to my questions and ever repetitive in hers. Today she was fully ambulatory, somewhat unsteady on her feet but unassisted by either walker or wheelchair.

She was in good spirits but never is she otherwise. Mom is pleasant, always quietly pleasant even in the midst of confusion, apprehension, and paranoia. Always and ever thus so damned pleasant. She has shrouded herself in pleasantness, a tightly-woven, impenetrable, black cloak behind which she has hidden so that I have never come to know her.

It is now and only now as I am losing her to her frailties and dementia that I am finding her. There are occasional glimpses behind the dark fabric of niceness of a woman I have never known. The shroud is thread-bare in places and it is through these unravelled threads that I am discovering the essence of her. It is a painful process and reliant on her dependence on me. I wish it wasn't so but am thankful for this gift of getting to know her if even just a little, even if so late in our relationship.

“Your mother has never said a bad word about anyone,” my dad said to me innumerable times. An admirable quality to be sure but truth be told mom rarely

said a word about anyone or anything other than statements about the obvious. Monosyllabic comments on the weather, a television show, and the like.

An excruciatingly private person totally devoted to the physical care of husband, five children, and household, mom simply existed in the background preparing meals, cleaning, washing, and ironing. An almost invisible domestic performing these duties as if by rote.

She was never given to open expressions of affection. I remember but a few half-hearted hugs and kisses on the cheek. No sitting-on-her-lap cuddle time. No being read to. No confidences shared. No problems discussed. No advice given. No questions asked. No voices raised. No laughter shared. No tears. What was most present to me was her absence.

I have never known what her interests are; what she is fearful of; what angers her; what she is passionate about; what makes her sad or what gives her joy. I have never known her to have a friend, a hobby, a life outside the duties of wife and mother. All I know is that I have loved her and she has loved me. I don't know how I know this but I simply do.

In caring for her, the physical closeness is so painfully personal, such an invasion of her privacy that I feel I am committing the worst betrayal possible. Simply doing up a button on her blouse or pulling up a zipper on her sweater is the most intimate of acts.

"Mom can I have a look?" I pull down her slacks to her ankles and lower the waistband of her underwear to just below her buttocks.

"No mom I don't see any bruises, redness or swelling and I don't feel any hotness around you tailbone. Is it okay if I have the charge nurse come in to check this out?"

Often mom will tell me where she feels pain or discomfort rather than letting the staff know. Although mom demurs without embarrassment to my request to investigate, for me the intimacy of these encounters is staggering.

I remember the first time I saw her naked body. Shortly after my father died I took mom to the Gwendolyn Lingerie Shop in Oakville to be fitted for new bras and panties. It took many attempts to persuade her to come with me. So busy caring for my father she had neglected the most basic necessities for herself ... properly fitting underwear.

I don't know when she last purchased bras or panties but clearly the ones she was wearing are now too large. I try to grant her as much privacy as possible during the fitting session discreetly asking her permission to come into the change room as she tries on one bra after another and a multitude of various underpants.

"Is it comfortable mom? What about the straps, the elastic? Do you like the style, the material, the colour?"

Focusing on the logistics of this process I try desperately to down-play the shock of seeing my mother's naked body for the first time in my 58 years

as her daughter. Her privacy was the only thing she had been able to claim as her own in all of the years I have known her. My sense of invading it felt like treason.

As I slip the bra straps over her hunched shoulders her small breasts drop into the 32A sized-cups. I help her step into the full-brief nylon panties and gently pull them up her blue-veined, waif-thin legs and over her round belly and hips.

“Look at this pot!” she says not disguising her disgust. “I have to lose some weight. I’d like to take this weight and put a handful of it on each breast,” she declares as she surveys her 88-pound, 86-year-old body in the full-length mirror. She feels her breasts are too small and her belly too big. “And just look at these legs. I always wanted to get these varicose veins removed. They’re disgusting.”

I am speechless as she openly reveals how she feels about her body. I never knew. The body I have just seen is beautiful. Her skin so soft and smooth, so flawless, the colour of the moon. The glorious rounded Buddha belly which gave me life and life to four others as well. Not a stretch mark on it, so perfect. Just a magnificent round orb. The legs that carried the weight of five gestating babies. I marvel at what her body accomplished.

She chooses four padded bras and five pair of white nylon full-brief panties size small but still large enough on her to hold an incontinence pad for those moments when she has difficulty voiding her bladder completely. Mom seems both relieved that the process is over and pleased with her purchases.

I now realize why I have never ever seen her in a pair of shorts and only seen her in a bathing suit once in all the years I have known her.

The summer of 1959 at a rented cottage on Lake Rosseau. I was supposed to be in the boat on the way to the marina with my father, two brothers and two sisters but I had decided at the last minute to stay on the island. I took my book to the top of the hill overlooking the bay and it was from this vantage point that I discover her. I watch as she makes her way bare foot along the path at the base of the hill and onto the dock. She unties the towel from around her waist and lets it fall to the dock. Standing there in the sun she pauses. She stretches luxuriating in the warmth of the sun. I am in awe. Short in stature, slim in figure, I see a fit and confident woman. She is beautiful in her serenity, in the joy of her privacy. This is my mother as I have never known her. She dives silently into the cool water. I watch her gliding across the bay ... long, languid side-strokes. Her movements so smooth and seamless that hardly a ripple breaks the surface. I quickly crouch behind the copse of pine trees high above. I am a voyeur.

Even as a ten-year-old I sense the magic, grace, and beauty of this moment. I love *this* woman. I love *this* mother fiercely. This is her moment but it has become mine as well. This is the first and sadly the last moment I will see her as perhaps she once was ... vibrant, strong, in possession of herself in

the sheer bliss of doing what she so obviously loves to do, simply swim. In peace. In quiet. Alone.

I sense that this was a woman, my mother, before marriage and the birth of five children in nine years; before the self-consciousness of what birthing five had wrought upon her body; before the struggles of raising these children in the all-too-frequent absences of her travelling-salesman husband; before the financial worries; before the doubts, anxieties; before devoting every single waking moment to husband and children; before the exhaustion; before her loss of self.

Before she discovers that I have been watching her I race back to the cottage and throw myself on the couch with my book. I hear her steps on the cottage porch as she returns from her swim. I immerse myself in my novel. As the screen porch door closes behind her she glances over at me obviously surprised to see me. She sighs almost inaudibly but says nothing. Nor do I. We will never speak of this moment. She goes into the bathroom to change out of her bathing suit and back into her summer pants and blouse to become once again the mother as I know her.

“I guess I should make lunch for you all. The others will be back soon,” she says wearily.

I cherish the exhilaration of that unspoken moment to this very day. I will never know that woman but my caring for her has brought a new dimension of her into my life.

“That is a man without a good head on his shoulders. He should be wearing a hat.” This statement made by a woman who never says a bad word about anyone. A statement made about a bald-headed man on a frigid February day who passes by the restaurant window as she and I are having lunch.

“Just look at that brilliant blue, cloudless sky. What a beautiful day. And the air is so fresh. The breeze feels so wonderful on my face.” She is in a state of rapture on this day as we walk arm and arm in a nearby park. A declaration made with an exuberance I have never heard from her before.

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember your name,” she whispers to me as she attempts to introduce me to her tablemate (whose name also eludes her) in the dining room of the nursing home. She is actually initiating a conversation, this woman, my mother who had no friends while at home raising her family ... a woman who rarely spoke unless spoken to.

“I wouldn’t want to be coming home after a night of drinking and try to find my house amongst all these identical homes,” she chuckles as we pass by the new housing development where every house is a replica of every other. This from my mother, who never socialized, never drank, and who only left her house to grocery shop.

My heart sings as I hear her joyfully hum along to a song on the car radio as we drive along the highway on another outing. Often we engage in a teasing,

light-hearted banter in our time together. I am privy to wonderful flashes of her wit and wry humour. She is fascinated by babies, toddlers and animals. On our walks she does not hesitate to stop and ask a perfect stranger the name and age of their child or pet and comment on how beautiful or cute they are.

I love the stories she tells me about her younger days as a single working woman; the clothes she wore, all tailored made by her seamstress-aunt, so well made that mom said that she could almost wear them inside out; how she carefully manicured her nails and applied fire-engine red nail polish in preparation for a day at work; how the smell of English lavender lingered in her hair after a day of working as a secretary at Yardley's, the fragrance distributor of British perfumes in downtown Toronto.

There is both a sense of betrayal and celebration in the new relationship between my mother and me. In her dementia she has shared herself with me but is unaware of doing so. I feel a sense of guilt. I am like the ten-year-old I once was in 1959, a voyeur, watching her through a one-way mirror. I celebrate what I have discovered about her. None of this would be possible if I was not so intimately connected to her through the care I am giving her.

I pull into the parking lot after a recent outing and carefully help mom from the car. She clutches her purse and purchases in one hand and I take her arm. Slowly we proceed up the walk to the door. I key in the code of entry. We take the elevator up to her second-floor room. I remove the purchases and purse from her hand and lay them on the bed. I turn to her and wrap my arms around her. She returns my embrace with an enormous strength that belies her frailty. Kissing me fully on the lips she thanks me for a wonderful afternoon.

I place my lips gently on her ear and whisper, "I love you birdy bones."

My 28 year-old son asks me, "Aren't you upset that your mom doesn't remember your name?"

"No," I answer in all honesty.

I have gone beyond the need to be named. I know at some level mom knows exactly who I am. Through my touch, the sound of my voice, my engagement with and caring for her she knows that she is loved by me, her eldest daughter, "Tildy." Her affectionate hugs and kisses tell me this is so.