

My Darling Darling *Étude on Muriel's Body*

The zenith of the mother–daughter relationship can occur late in the mother's life when she is still healthy enough to be reasonably independent. During this time the middle-aged daughter, who has yearned for the idealized mother to finally arrive, can be dumbstruck to discover she never will, and that in her place is an old woman; perhaps widowed and medically fragile, perhaps lonely and in need. Further, that this woman, who appears to have less to offer than at any time in her life, mysteriously becomes the source of love once craved for. She becomes the cherished “Beloved” as the daughter herself moves into more complex roles as peer, friend, ally, advocate, spiritual companion, caregiver, teacher, husband–surrogate and mother. This re–jigging of roles and relationships to accommodate the changing circumstances and abilities of the mother, in the face of impending death, can lead to experiences of attachment and intimacy that are transformational and deeply satisfying. Such experiences are profound in reconfiguring this primary relationship, and may well result in the highest expression of reciprocal, or even mystical, love ever shared between these women. The following memoir explores this theme.

In the summer of 2007 I spent six weeks in a near marathon of intimate physical and emotional care for my ninety-one-year-old mother who is doing everything in her power to maintain her dignity and autonomy despite fragile health, a colostomy she insists on managing herself, chronic pain, and deteriorating faculties. We are separated by three thousand miles and, while I usually see her every four to six months, I was troubled to learn just how advanced some of her deficits had become.

I had flown to Ottawa to collect her so she would not have to fly alone to my home in Vancouver. But fifteen minutes before we boarded the plane, hell opened with the sudden discovery of a leak in her colostomy bag. “Oh

God, Catherine, smell me, I smell bad don't I?" This was followed by a frantic scum in a dimly lit handicap airport bathroom where I helped her change her "appliance" for the first time. "This is why I always have my supplies in my carry-on," she said, her hands trembling only slightly while we worked together. This inauspicious beginning, however, was merely a prelude. One hour before landing in Vancouver International, she looked at me with an expression of controlled terror and, not wanting to alarm me, quietly said, "I'm not feeling very well." In respiratory distress, panicked, and needing oxygen, she panted into the oxygen mask and laughed weakly at the forced antics of the flight attendant who tried to distract her with his buffoonery. I held her hands, smiled reassuringly, and prayed to the Gods for her life while teasing her in a stern voice. "You really are a pain in the ass you know Muriel. This is the last time I'm going anywhere with you. Count on it." That was the moment I was introduced to the cringing dread that dogged me throughout the rest of her visit.

It was a busier holiday than either of us had ever anticipated beginning with a case of cystitis that required two trips to a walk-in clinic, as she could not tolerate the first antibiotic prescribed for her. "They're horse pills Catherine. I simply can't swallow them." A few days later she suffered heart failure, spent twenty-four hours in hospital, and was discharged the night before a cruise to Alaska we had planned for months. Miraculously, the cruise was uneventful and she basked in the attention of the ship's staff, and our four travelling companions, who left her feeling more cosseted and venerated in those seven days than she had possibly ever been in her old age. "I'm happy," she said one night, her voice bright with wonder, her face flushed with joy as we headed out for another evening in the ship's disco. While I pushed her in the wheel chair around the dance floor, my women friends danced around us.

Twenty-four hours after our return she developed acute gastroenteritis, followed by an episode of delirium during which she became convinced I was withholding necessary medical care. In total, she racked up three trips to the hospital, two by ambulance; two appointments with a respiratory specialist; three trips to the lab for blood work; two major medication changes; and two trips to the drugstore for long and anguished discussions with the pharmacist regarding the unfamiliar colour coding of her Coumadin, a potentially lethal blood thinner.

Her body is preparing for its eventual leave-taking, and I now find myself sifting through the memories, gleaning what I can of the story we've shared. There is so little time. But it is her body I always come back to in memory, that little vessel from which I flowed over half a century ago. The story of my mother's body begins with its simple warmth. The memory is old and we reconstruct it together.

I am alone eating a bowl of cereal at an old kitchen table topped with black linoleum and finished with aluminum edging. This is her work-table; the place the

six of us sit down to every night, to food she has prepared that is always plentiful, always good. "Have some more, no you can't have dessert until it's finished. Fine, no dessert. Alright then, three more fork fulls." I rock while eating and hum a tune, something she has taught me, waiting until it's time.

The route is familiar. The linoleum on the kitchen floor changes to hardwood in the hall. I remember the difference in texture and temperature on the soles of my feet; the wood is stickier, colder. A subtle smell of varnish rises as I hold the ball of the newel post and turn onto the uncarpeted stairs. Pausing briefly at the top of the staircase, I survey the hall floor stretched out before me. I know where it creaks the loudest and tiptoe noiselessly past the shaving cream and toothpaste smells of the cool bathroom, past the closed door of my brothers' room to the one that sits ajar at the far end of the hall. Sunlight floods the open corner of this doorway and gleams halfway down the hall, golden as a buttercup. The door yields to the pressure of my small hand and then I am inside the sanctuary.

I watch for a moment, sober in the presence of my sleeping parents. My father lies on his side facing me, air breaks rhythmically through his slightly open mouth below the black bush of his moustache. Mother lies on the other side, closer to the window hung with chintz curtains printed with poinsettias and stylized leaves. I make my way around to her side of the bed.

Lifting the cover slowly in the middle, not at the top where she's holding onto it, I slip a foot backward onto the warm sheet and lie there on my side close to the edge of the mattress. I don't have to wait long. She stirs and sighs before rolling towards me. Her arm circles me, pulling me towards her while my feet reach back to the heat of her legs. She gasps. "You're frozen Cass, what have you been doing?" "Nothing." "But you're so cold, darling aren't you cold? Come here." Hiking her nightgown up over her hips, she then helps me pull off my pyjamas pants, and a moment later I lie spooned in the nest of her belly, feeling the tingle from the back of my knees up to my shoulder blades. It's so hot it feels like holding an ice cube. I'm melting. My father comes up through the fog, lifts his head off the pillow. "It's alright darling, go back to sleep," she says, reaching back a hand to pat him. "Lie still Cass, try to sleep." I settle into her arms, sealed against her like a second skin, and squint my eyes into the sunlight pouring through the half-opened curtains, wondering how much longer I'll have to wait. My gaze softens and I fix it on the curtains looking for faces hidden among the poinsettias and the greenery. I find them, lose them and find them again, until I float away.

To the last day of her visit this summer, Muriel was confronted by the full onslaught of life that reached its climax with the news that one of her sons, and his wife of twenty-five years, had just separated. The daughter-in-law called with this news while my sibling was on a plane to Vancouver to take my mother back to Ottawa. We spent the rest of the day waiting for his arrival and the moment of revelation when we would pre-empt his story. "Thank God your father isn't here to see this. Damn it, why did he leave me all alone to deal with this mess. My poor family. Three divorces in a family of four. Three! I couldn't

have been much of a mother if this is how it's all turned out." She lamented until he arrived but greeted him only with smiles and words of love. I was the one who took him outside to tell him privately about the morning's phone call. "I wouldn't dream of burdening him," she confided later. But I knew she would rather play dumb than risk the relationship. "He's a man Catherine, they're not the same," she had told me often enough.

My mother always said I could tell from five blocks away when she was having a bath because somehow, and she didn't know how, I always managed to get home whenever she was getting into or out of the tub. "It's true Catherine, it's true," she would say looking up from the water she was soaking in, shaking her head in frustration at my ability to invade her privacy with such accuracy. Nodding her head for emphasis she swears it's been so long since she's had an uninterrupted bath she can't even remember. Then I'd peel off whatever I was wearing and step in without asking permission. I didn't need to. The grudging tone of her voice was as good as an engraved invitation. "Oh all right then, wash my back first, will you? Do something around here to earn your keep. That's nice. That's good." "The water is too hot." "No, the water is not too hot, don't turn on the cold water; sit down. Oh my God, this tub is too small for the both us. Catherine, I'm getting out." "But I just got in." "Alright, five more minutes. That's it."

What did we talk about? How did we sit in the tub together? Did I lie back on her fragrant body and bask in the warm dew, or were our bathtub visits face to face events with me sitting in front of the faucet complaining about the cold metal on my back. I want to remember more. The only clear fragment I have of one of these times was a bath we shared in France, in the little French house with the spooky basement that had all those cement rooms with doors that locked. I am just home from school, she is in the bathtub already clucking about her lack of privacy and my radar, while I take my clothes off smiling with pleasure. We know our cues. "Catherine it's true, five blocks away." Without being asked but forcing a hefty sigh she sits up and bends her knees to make room for me.

Fresh losses awaited her on her arrival back to the assisted living facility in Ottawa she had moved into four years earlier, following my father's death. Peter, a resident she had recently come to know and love, died within days leaving her stricken. "It's a bastard Catherine. It's a real bastard. The moment you start to care about someone around here they die on you." A month later her next-door neighbour, Anne, died at the age of eighty-eight. They had shared pre-dinner drinks every night before dinner since my mother's arrival. I'd listened to her endless stories about Anne's childishness, her small-mindedness, her mulish resistance to common sense in following her doctor's orders. "But it doesn't matter any more now, does it, all the stuff that made you crazy?" I asked my mother in the hard days that followed Anne's funeral. "No, no it doesn't matter at all," she replied, the surprise barely audible in her voice. "I just miss her."

With six people in our family, the bathroom at 796 Quinlan Road was probably the most heavily trafficked room in our house besides the kitchen. The toilet and sink were against one wall, the tub against the other so I could sit on the edge of the tub and watch my father shaving.

I listen to the sound of the razor dragging over his face and we talk, catching each other's glance in the mirror until he tells me, "Go and get Mother." I've been waiting for this and leave my seat to go and wake her, or to find her already out of bed tying a housecoat around her waist. There is a quiver of pleasure in fulfilling this important function. On the trot I come back to the bathroom. "She's up," I say and resume my post on the edge of the bathtub, half-hidden behind the open door. My father smiles into the mirror while I wait and watch her arrival through his actions. "Well. Good morning!" The ring in his voice is exaggerated but true as he watches her step into the bathroom and moves towards her. I watch them kiss, her mouth slightly opened, his puckered to avoid smearing.

I'm hiding, no one tells, and then my father leaves the room. "Let me give you some privacy," he says. But I don't have to leave because it's just us. Closing the door she looks at me for the first time as she seats herself on the toilet. She didn't know I was here. Maybe she did, but it doesn't matter, it's just so good. Her face is undressed, her hair still un-brushed and I'm squirming with pleasure at being discovered. My job is done, my reward is here. I bathe for a second in the sunrise of her full-faced gaze and feel the heat in her smiling voice. "Hi darling, were you there all along?" "Yes, yes I was."

Then, after breakfast we go upstairs so she can get dressed, but first we go back into the bathroom. I must have been preschool age, no one else is home. Filling the sink with hot water she strips to the waist. I like how she looks, standing like a dancer before the mirror, washing one arm held in mid-air, then the other, her underarms and breasts, then her face and neck with a white face cloth. Sometimes the sink is emptied and filled a second time. I am hovering and talking and watching. "I want to be a ballerina and a nurse." "Two things? Do you think you'll have time to do both?" "Oh yes. Do you believe in purple cows?" "Certainly." "You do?" "Of course don't you?"

We have been apart, this woman and I, for almost thirty years. She has forgiven me, the youngest and only girl, for abandoning her and for leaving her alone in the company of men, her husband and three sons. I have forgiven her all her transgressions, real and imagined. How impossible it seems that she and I survived the eleven year exile I endured for finally speaking about being sexually abused by my youngest older brother. I remember to this day the long distance phone call fifteen years ago when I told her I could no longer carry the burden on my own. "I was seven, I was only seven," I said, protesting when it became evident that she could not, or would not, remember the unspeakable secret I had told her one night after a bath so many decades before. She, who put a stop to it that very night by threatening to kill him if he ever touched me again. "You were six," she finally whispered back into the receiver.

How did we recover from all that, my mother and I? How did we navigate that wasteland to this place where we now greet each other as women, with devotion and gratitude, both of us awed at the enormity of what we, and time, have forged together? There is nothing more to be said, no conflict to overcome, no inadequacy to be filled. Soon she will leave me, a fifty-four-year-old divorced woman without a partner, or children. Of course she will leave my three brothers as well. But I'm the one closest to her body. I'm the one who's had constant access to it, and that makes me special. How I love to believe it even now.

For years when I went back to Ottawa to visit my parents, my mother and I would need to see each other naked, at least once during my visit. It's an atavistic call, this homing back to shared earth, which has always followed the long absences between us.

One such time was ten years ago; I walked into her bedroom when she was dressing. Grabbing an article of clothing, she held it to her breasts to hide herself, her face coy and defiant. "I'm fat," she said levelly with a child's smile, not wanting me to go exactly, nor wanting me to stay. "No you're not, let me see." "No." "C'mon you're not fat let me see." She let out a long-suffering sigh and dropped the shield. Cocking her eyebrows she thrust out her chin and shifted her weight to one hip, a belligerent fist clenched to the other. "Satisfied?" She waits for my response while I take in her shape, texture, colour, height that are all familiar as the map of my hand. This is her profile, her stance, her delicate skin. The breasts are small and she has apologized more than once for passing them onto me through her genes. Hers now lie empty on the curve of a belly that has emerged only in the past fifteen years since the heart attack. She was always compact, reedy as a youngster and slim as an adult, from a life-long practice of carefully monitoring her food intake. She told me once her doctor had even made her diet through her pregnancies and she complied. "You're father says I'm fat and I don't care." She does, of course, but I like the pugnacity. This is a woman on strike against food deprivation, refusing to be bullied any more. Her belly is rippled and the dimpled weight wraps itself around to her back. My old tree is anchored to the same legs I see each time I look in a mirror. Mine are larger and longer, but identically cut. I've always thought hers had a quick grace that mine lacked. "You got great legs Ma." "Oh they're not, look at my varicose veins, my thick ankles." "No, I mean it." "Do you really think so?" Her voice relents with something approaching pleasure but she's humouring me. I approach her with fingers poised to pinch a nipple and she smacks my hand away. "Stop it. Leave me alone." "Ok." I turn to leave but she calls me back. "Give me a kiss first."

Her body was my hearth, how could it be otherwise? Even the silky skin of her hands on mine pleases me inordinately. At ninety-one my mother's hands still elicit my admiration with their softness and vigour. She lets me examine them closely, without embarrassment. The pads at the base of her

thumbs are plump and alive, and her almond shaped nails always look freshly filed. She tells me her nails look like hell, and that her hands are red from all the work she did with them when she was raising four kids. "Yours are the beautiful ones," she tells me, but I object. Mine were ruined by two decades of cortisone cream used to control childhood eczema. She doesn't mind the papery feel, the roughness. "I love your hands Catherine, I just love holding them. They're you."

The end of another brief Christmas visit to Ottawa has come. Tomorrow morning I fly home to Vancouver, and tonight I am packing my bags while she watches from her bed. The lamp fixture attached to the wall behind her is illuminated with an energy efficient bulb that glows in the darkened room. I have failed, once again, to go through the apartment and replace all these lights with 100-watt bulbs. "She's got macular degeneration, she's blind in one eye for Chrissake, and she's using light bulbs I couldn't read a menu by," I tell my brothers. They are good to her but some things get overlooked. I will revisit my remorse when I come back next time, if there is a next time, to find the bulbs still unchanged.

Everything must be organized tonight. The morning will be hurried, she will be exhausted from rising earlier than usual and slightly confused, fretting to make sure I have everything I need, especially lunch for the plane. It is so important for her to claim her role as my mother in these final moments, and to make sense of another departure that even I don't understand anymore. We will say goodbye, maybe forever. She will suffer, and I will feel like crying when I get on the plane.

I am on my knees by her bed, the way I used to kneel when my father taught me how to pray as a child. Tonight she is my prayer. I'm smiling at her, and put my arms under the pillow to draw her towards me. My face is inches from hers. "I adore you. How am I ever going to leave you tomorrow?" "You have to go, I know you have to go, you know you have to go. That's the way it is." "But do you know how much I love you? You don't. You couldn't possibly guess. You can't even imagine how adorable you are." I am close enough to feel her breath on my face. She is relaxed in my arms, smiling slightly into my eyes. "Nutsy Fagin," she says, dismissing my words. But there is nothing in her tone that makes me believe she wants me to stop. "I don't want you to worry about anything. If you decide to go before we see each other again, I can handle it. Go when you're ready, I'll be fine. We'll all be fine." "Are you rushing me? What if I'm not ready yet?" Her delivery is deadpan to force a laugh, and I comply. "Nutsy Fagin," she says again. "Go to bed, and don't watch TV half the night. Wake me up in the morning." "I will." "Promise." "I promise! Do you think I'd leave without saying goodbye?" "No, of course not. Goodnight my darling darling, sleep well." "Goodnight precious."

My mother and I have had many dialogues over the years about how the roles between child and parent seem to reverse. But now I wonder if they don't simply start to merge and transcend. I know it was some alchemy that transformed our relationship and my understanding this summer; we had never been

happier or more grateful in each other's company. She became my "Beloved," the embodied spirit, the mythic and mystical "Other" to whom I owe my very life and who, to my eternal gratitude, was still alive to receive my thanks and care. At the heart of this knowledge was a sense of fulfillment and belonging that were both fuelled and rewarded by my efforts to please and attend her. I had fallen in love with my own mother, and I was besotted. "When did I become the child?" she asked sadly one afternoon. "I don't know, is it all right?" My voice is tender, to comfort her. I wait for her response and permission to keep offering what she can no longer give herself. "Oh yes, darling I love it," she said, her voice breaking. "I love being cared for by you." But I could also see what this was costing her, and understood at last that her vulnerability was the real gift, and her acceptance of my care a sacrifice.

Author's note: My mother, Muriel Irene Racine, died March 12, 2008 in Ottawa Ontario. I had the great fortune to attend her closely in the two weeks leading up to her death, and was present in the last moments of her life.