

For My Mother

These three pieces of creative nonfiction attempt to capture the relationship between a mother who was ingenious, dramatic, and subversive and her daughter who found her inspiring, perilous, and furtive. The daughter discovers that it is through the stories she tells herself about her mother and through the act of storytelling itself that their relationship is both revealed and redeemed. These stories are for my mother.

Girl in the Snowsuit

I only have a few photographs from when I was a baby and then a toddler. I am not sure when I came to possess them. I must have pinched some from the family album one Christmas when I was home from college. I am intrigued, in particular, by one photograph. It is like the other photographs in that it is a black-and-white image and the edges of the photograph are scalloped. In the other photographs, however, I am always flanked by some, if not all, of my seven siblings. In this image, I am standing alone. It is winter, and according to the date, I am 20 months old. I am wide-eyed, smiling, with a full set of baby teeth, and looking directly at the camera.

What I actually find so striking is not so much that I am all alone, but that I am all bundled up, snug in a snowsuit with a hood fastened about my head, snow boots on my feet, and mittens on my hands. I recall a conversation I had with my Aunt Jerry when I was twelve and on home-leave from the Philippines. In an effort to remind me of the few years when I lived in the U.S., my aunt (the wife of my father's best friend, actually, but we always called her Aunt Jerry) told me about when we were little and lived in Washington state. "In the middle of winter, your mother would just let all of you wander outside without a stocking cap or mittens or scarf. And, sometimes," she added bitingly, "you



wouldn't even have your coats on." It was the look she had on her face, rather than her words, that really stung me. She had that disapproving look I would see on other people's faces when they looked my mother up and down and then turned to scrutinize each of us children, trying to discern whether or not we were aware that some type of damage was being done to us.

I first remember seeing that expression on Aunt Jerry's face eight years before when she greeted us upon our arrival at the Seattle airport. For the trip, my mother had harnesses made for each of the first four children (the other four would follow much later). At the time, Joyce was seven, John five and a half, I was four, and Jimmy was almost three. My Aunt Jerry spotted us as my mother walked through the airport with four leashes held in her right hand and her purse clasped in her left. The four of us preceded her. Joyce and John pulled to get ahead while Jimmy and I, tending to get distracted, toddled off—one to the right and one to the left. To complete her entourage, an airport porter with a cart brimming with ten pieces of luggage—all in mottled black leather with studded, brown leather borders—followed close behind. Her chin high, the point heels of her shoes tapping a determined rhythm, my mother gave no indication that she saw that pointed look my Aunt, or others, gave her. I don't imagine she actually was unaware of the looks. Harnessed to one of the leashes, I clearly saw how taken aback Aunt Jerry looked when she caught sight of us.

That look was there too when she spoke of my mother's indifference to sending us out into the elements without being fully winterized. Aunt Jerry regarded motherhood as serious. She had seven children and put their needs first. When the dentist told her that she would need extensive dental work done, work that would markedly cut into the family's savings, Aunt Jerry told him to pull all of her teeth and to make her a set of false teeth with slight imperfections so that no one would know they were false. When she told me about her teeth, she added, proudly, that no one ever had seen her without her dentures in place. Now as she remarked on my mother's skills, she appeared to reconsider what she was saying, adding that, "I should say you children never had colds in the winter. Mine always were battling coughs and fever no matter what care I took to dress them properly." Her tone became more conciliatory, but the look was still there.

I learned quickly how to respond to those judgmental looks and remarks. I no longer was the wide-eyed child in the photograph. By twelve I was skilled at disarming my opponents. I saw my Aunt's biting comment as a knife that could cut quickly and deep. To deflect the cutting words and look, I told her the story of how my mother bought us all matador and toreador outfits when we were in Spain.

My mother had a love for fashion that was dramatic. My father appreciated her flair, but refused to wear the matador outfit she had purchased for him. However, the rest of us paraded around Barcelona in our outfits—the girls in black capes with white shirts, black skirts, and black felt matador hats; the boys in gold-braided toreador jackets and tight black pants; my mother resplendent in high black heels, a black dress, matador hat, and a cape she could make snap as she draped or undraped it from around her shoulders. The concierge of the Ritz adored us in our attire and insisted upon giving us the table reserved for one of Barcelona's older families in the rococo dining room filled with large, ancient plants and paintings and mirrors in gilded frames. My mother was in her element as the wait staff fawned over her, amused at the whimsy of her gesture.

With a twelve-year-old's incipient guile, I confided to my aunt, "when I was in that matador outfit, I felt as if we all really were the Von Trapp family on a grand adventure. I imagined there were Nazis lurking about in the shadowy corners of the hotel." I saw Aunt Jerry's face soften—just a bit.

The Von Trapps sang *Edelweiss* to entertain, and thereby distract, their enemies; I learned to tell amusing stories. Even then, however, I wasn't sure whom I wanted to protect more—myself or my mother.

"Girl Scout Troop 61"

In the black and white, 5 x 7 photograph, three dozen girls—most of them white—are gathered together outdoors, in a tropical garden, and all of them are bandaged with gauze. One group clustered together in the foreground



appears to have suffered head injuries; gauze has been wound round and round the crown of their heads. In addition, a few have their arms in slings. Another set of girls, gathered under some palm fronds, have modest splints on their fingers and bandages around their ankles. The photograph is labeled: Girl Scout Troops 35 and 61.

It is a school photo. As the label indicates, the group of girls belongs to two different troops of Girl Scouts. We were assembled in the garden behind Mrs. Burton's house for a photo shoot with the school photographer. We had been learning bandaging techniques in our individual troops and had gathered together to demonstrate our ability with dressing various wounds. The girls with the bandaged heads and their arms in slings were from my troop. The girls with more modest splints were from Mrs. Burton's.

I remember Mrs. Burton well. She was head of the Girl Scouts in the Philippines. The four Burton children were sturdy girls. The two older girls, Carol and Pat, were pretty and efficient; they were cheerleaders and Class Secretary for their respective grades. Of the two younger girls, Kim was athletic and Jenny was smart. Kim always anchored the relay team in swim meets—no matter what stroke. Jenny was the one you wanted as a lab partner in Science class.

My mother turned to me when Joyce showed no interest in Girl Scouts. And as Joyce developed a keen interest in boys, my mother made vague threats about all-girls' schools and convents. In turn, Joyce became secretive. So my mother turned to me, and together we entered Mrs. Burton's wholesome world of knots, badges, teepee fires, camp songs, jungle hikes, splints, bandages, and one-pan meals over open fires. When I decided to join the Girl Scouts, I was surprised when my mother enthusiastically joined along with me. My mother didn't own a pair of tennis shoes much less a pair of shorts and I wondered

if she fully understood that we would be learning how to become skilled in surviving outdoors. I mentioned something about how she might be asked to go hiking with the troop, and my mother responded, with confidence, she was sure we always would be able to follow the trails.

She attended a meeting of the women who wanted to be leaders. The meeting was hosted by Mrs. Burton. My mother came home with a binder filled with instructions Mrs. Burton had outlined for all of the leaders. The instructions were meticulous, detailed, single-spaced on purple mimeograph. My mother didn't appear to be at all daunted by either meeting with Mrs. Burton or the materials she had brought home. Along with her instructions, my mother had the list of girls Mrs. Burton had assigned to her.

According to the instructions in the binder, our troop was to meet on a weekly basis. A variety of lessons accompanied each meeting. After the first week, some extra girls joined because they heard my mother served an array of snacks and didn't test the girls on the day's lessons at the end of the meeting.

While other troops learned about the way one should treat the flag of the Philippines ("a national flag worn out through wear and tear, should not be thrown away; it should be reverently burned to avoid misuse or desecration") and how to tie fisherman, sheep bend, clove hitch and square knots, we merely pasted our lesson sheets into the scrapbooks my mother had given each girl. Rather than being tested on the day's lesson at the close of the meeting, we ate coconut ice cream and peanut brittle while braiding one another's hair and telling my mother stories about school that amused her. Janet Carter would mimic the art teacher who, when lost in thought, would wind the Venetian chord around her neck as she explained the brush strokes required for sumi-e painting. June Yoon would imitate our physical education teacher who lined us up on Tuesdays to sing out—"We must, we must, we must improve our busts. The bigger, the better, the tighter the sweater. We must. We must. We must"; as the teacher sang, we pumped our arms back and forth and flexed our flat chests. Chris Easton and Cindy Graham would divulge secrets about boys they liked. Chris rhapsodized about Henry Cole's curly brown hair while Cindy recounted, in detail, every conversation she had with Mike Heller. I watched with pleasure as my mother listened to each of the girls intently, making appreciative comments at just the right point.

While I read the binder Mrs. Burton had given her, my mother rarely referred to it. The only time she tested us was when she gave us the list of "Rules of Health for a Fifth Grader." The list wasn't in the binder, but my mother offered it to us as if it were official. This was a list Troop Number 61 paid close attention to because my mother said, "These are the rules that will matter to you throughout your lives." We reverently copied them into our "GS Scrapbook":

Rules of Health for a Fifth-Grader

1. Wash face and hands before breakfast and before bedtime.

2. Bathe.
3. Wash your hair once a week.
4. Brush teeth as your dentist recommends.
5. Brush hair 50 times to make it lovely.
6. Clean nails and keep in good condition.
7. Get ten or more hours of sleep each night.
8. Clean your closet, desk, and room each day.

We regarded each rule as a promise of adulthood, of womanhood. I never learned how to tie a clove hitch, and I often failed to brush my hair 50 times each night. As I was about to fall off to sleep, I sometimes would recall the fifth rule for fifth graders, but I failed to understand how brushing one's hair was included in "Rules of Health," so I never bothered to get out of bed to find my hairbrush. The other rules, per my mother's instructions, I observed diligently.

All would have been well if we had stayed by ourselves, meeting weekly for gossip and snacks. However, at the end of the year, all the troops—five in total—were expected to go to Alligator Lake where the Scouts would gather at an official Girl Scout Jamboree. There were rustic cabins and picnic tables sheltered by thatched roofs. Prior to our departure, Mrs. Burton sent our instructions, including all of the items we were to bring—from bedrolls to insect repellent.

We were to spend the whole weekend at the camp cooking over an open fire, using our knotting skills to properly hoist the flag, creating competing Troop skits, and singing camp songs. As we prepared to leave I was nervous because I knew that my mother rarely had referred to the binder. I had liked the fact that the other girls looked forward to spending time confiding in my mother, but I worried that Mrs. Burton would soon discover that my mother really hadn't drilled us in the scouting ways.

The camp may have been rustic, but within half-an-hour of our arrival, with the help of our driver, Ricardo, my mother had our eating area festooned with linen tablecloths, candelabra, classical music on tape, an array of hors d'oeuvres, and chilled drinks. While girls from the other troops swept the cement floor of their dining shelter, we drank ice-cold Sarsaparilla and my mother drank a chilled Manhattan.

Across the way, Mrs. Burton took note. Later as we went to our cabin to make up our beds, I saw her come over to the dining area to speak with my mother. I quickly returned to the shelter and pretended to be busy tidying up the empty Sarsaparilla bottles. My mother turned to Mrs. Burton, "Gail, would you care for a Manhattan? I just fixed a batch?" (My mother actually should have said "another batch," but she believed that when referring to alcohol consumption, one should never indicate quantity. Thus, whenever she asked a guest if they would care for a cocktail, she always asked as if it were their first.)

In spite of the fact that it truly would have been her first of the evening,

Mrs. Burton responded firmly, “No thank you Terry.”

“Well then, would you care for some toasted cheese sticks or lumpia?” my mother inquired.

Again Mrs. Burton refused, adding, “Terry, this isn’t the usual Girl Scout fare.”

In response, my mother turned up her charm. Her hands flew about and jewels sparkled as she purred enthusiastically: “Oh, you should see Janet’s ability with the semaphore flag symbols and Cindy’s finesse with sheep’s hitch knots.”

Mrs. Burton’s look of displeasure turned to one of surprise. Before she could say anything, I interrupted, declaring that the girls needed my mother right away because they wanted her to supervise as they prepared the camp fire. I didn’t want her to say anything more about semaphore codes that were not part of the curriculum or misname the knots we were supposed to have learned.

Her attention diverted, Mrs. Burton remarked that she too needed to rejoin her troop in order to oversee the lighting of their fire. Yet, as she turned to go, she added, in the tones of a parent speaking to a naughty child, “I hope you brought your binder with you as it might be helpful if we review some of the curriculum together.”

My mother didn’t register she had heard Mrs. Burton. She was on her way to her girls. I ran after her and heard her confide in them, “Oh, you don’t need to worry about the fire my darlings. Ours will go up quickly. I have had the tinder soaking in kerosene all morning.” She gathered us around and told us that what we really needed to focus on was our skit. Each year there was a competition between the troops and my mother fully expected her troop to win. “No scatological humour. It might win you the giggles of other girls, but it won’t win the competition,” she warned. Chris asked what “scatological” meant, and my mother explained it was humour to do with urine and all things related to people’s bottoms.

The other girls still were trying to get their fires going while we ate prawns and vegetables on skewers that my mother had instructed the maids to prepare that morning. While we ate we tried to come up with a winning skit. The history of the Filipino flag? No. The history of the Girl Scouts? No. How to bandage injuries? No. How to build a fire? Absolutely not. The history of Jose Rizal? Yes, that we could sink our teeth into. We developed a script in which we covered the many vicissitudes of the national hero of the Philippines—from his many lovers (none of whom were native Filipinas which always caused a bit of a flutter—he was the national hero, after all) to his medical expertise to the torture he endured while imprisoned by the Spanish for his efforts to inspire an insurrection for Filipino independence.

Janet played Jose Rizal while the rest of us doubled as his many girlfriends and also his executioners. Our skit opened with Rizal as he completed his training in ophthalmology. He became an ophthalmologist, in part, to be able to

treat his mother, Dona Teodora, whom he saved from blindness. My mother lay across a bench, a grateful Dona Teodora, as Janet laboured over her, making wide gestures—with a fork in either hand—performing surgery.

Then came a parade of lovers. I was Gertrude Beckett, “the blue-eyed, buxom girl” he met while studying in London. June played O Sei San, the daughter of a Japanese samurai, who taught Rizal sume-i-e painting and Japanese. Chris played Suzanne Jacoby, one of two Jacoby sisters, both of whom fell in love with Rizal while he lived in Brussels.

When our turn came, each of us would slink onto the stage area to be wooed by Rizal. One by one, as Rizal finally rejected us, each would make a long exit, placing the back of her hand across our forehead in a gesture of despair while favouring Rizal with longing looks and languishing sighs. After each lover departed, Janet would shake her fist at the sky and, quite incongruously, would call out for the end of “Spain’s cruel rule over the gentle Filipino people.” Cindy, who played his last great love, Josephine Bracken, the “petite Irish girl,” reenacted Josephine’s final visit to her lover in his prison cell.

After her tearful departure, and as the skit came to an end, we all returned as his firing squad. We turned Janet so that her back was facing us, for Rizal was to be executed as a coward. As we finished singing out, “3, 2, 1,” Janet twisted around in order to take the volley of bullets into her chest like a true hero. As she fell to the ground, we turned to take our bows, and were met with raucous applause and cat calls.

The other troops’ skits included reenactments of Girl Scouts being trustworthy and kind. In one series of vignettes, the troop members demonstrated the Girl Scout readiness to rescue a cat from a tree or to put a splint on a broken finger. Jenny Burton played the part of the scout who rescued the cat. She climbed high up into a spindly tree, and came down again, pretending to cradle a cat in her arms. We politely applauded each skit.

When the skits were over, each troop stood to receive a second round of applause. It seemed the applause for us would never stop. Mrs. Burton finally stood and asked the next troop members to stand in order to receive their response. We were, without question, the winners. When we stood, one last time, to take a bow, my mother/Dona Teodora winked at me, and holding my hand tightly, made the deepest bow of all.

That night as my fellow scouts fell asleep, I pulled the binder from mother’s ample suitcase, and began studying the lessons in the binder for our activities the next day: “Campfire Cooking: One-pan Bacon, Eggs, and Toast” and “Reading Compasses.” My mother came in and saw me looking over the lesson and gestured for me to come outside, “Oh, just put away that binder darling,” she insisted. “There isn’t anything to worry about. Ricardo will set up all the pans and then wake us.”

Ricardo was tireless. He worked for us for twenty years. During that time, he would drive my mother, my father, and each of us children here and there from dawn till dusk and then find time to take care of errands my parents

needed done. He was devoted to both of them and did whatever he could to hide my mother's foibles or to warn against my father's ire on those rare days when it flared; "Sir is hot," he would caution us.

As my mother reassured me, I looked up, surprised to see Ricardo climb down from a tree. Before I could ask, my mother remarked, "We have just finished stringing scarves about. Ricardo figured out the compass points. In the morning, be sure to tell the girls that blue marks east, red west, white north, and green south. Tomorrow, we will, once again, all be terribly clever." And with that she kissed me on the cheeks and burrowed into the makeshift bed Ricardo had put together for her. Ricardo made his way out to the car where he would sleep on the back seat until it was time to set up our One-pan breakfasts. The next day we were, as my mother predicted, terribly clever, Mrs. Burton remained perplexed by each of our abilities to so unerringly identify the points on the compass. All the while my mother smiled beatifically.

"My Mad Bertha"

It was during my Junior year of high school that my mother grew so ill that she rarely left her room. That year I read *Jane Eyre* in English class and was drawn to Jane. I recognized Jane's sense of exile, her sense that she would never truly belong anywhere, never truly belong to anyone. I appreciated her desire to study and later to teach. I identified with her homeliness. I also felt that I too had my own Bertha. However, while Jane was inquisitive about the mad woman in the attic, I studiously avoided the one in my home.

During that final year of my mother's life, she spent her life split between being in the hospital or secluded in the master bedroom. By that time, my father had moved into the guest room, and thus she spent her days alone. The maids would check on her each day and bring her trays of food. I rarely saw her. And, unlike Jane, I was too fearful to be inquisitive. I knew that if I were to enter her room, I would find her in her nightdress, in bed, in a darkened room. Upon my entrance, I probably would catch sight of her furtively pushing something behind the bed-side table, as she tried to sit up and look innocently pleased to see me. And I would know that what she was hiding was a bottle.

At night, like mad Bertha, my mother would steal about the house, hoping to be unobserved. When my father was finally and firmly convinced by my mother's doctors that she should never drink again, he put chains and padlocks around the cabinets in the wet bar, a bar that equaled those bars that I would tend years later in Georgetown. It was during the night, in stealth, that my mother quietly and determinedly would pry open the doors of one of the cabinets and wedge her hand in or a broom handle, just so, in order to pull out another bottle.

In his long tradition of stockpiling, my father had filled cabinet after cabinet with gin, vodka, scotch, and bourbon. During his weekly or bi-monthly travels, he studiously had picked up the two bottles of duty-free liquor he was

allowed to bring back into the country. The day he locked the cabinets, they were filled with three hundred or more bottles of liquor. But there were no more parties where guests were offered cocktails. He worked late, very late, most nights, and thus was too tired for a cocktail when he returned home. As a result, he never disturbed the locks he believed were so securely safeguarding the supply in the cabinets.

Not only did she have access to all those bottles of liquor, she also had figured out ways to secure her own private stash. There were a few days, after she had been hospitalized and had a series of blood transfusions, when she would feel better. On those days, when we were off at school and my father was off at work, she made herself up with great care and drank just enough to stabilize her nerves. She then asked Ricardo to drive her to the homes of various women in the community: Connie Butler, Luce Luzuriaga, Carmen Gaspar. After exchanging pleasantries, she would come to the purpose of her visit. In her own beguiling way, she would reveal that my father was, once again, out of the country and that she didn't have spare cash, but out-of-town guests would be arriving and while all of the necessities had been purchased on credit for the meals, she hadn't been able to buy vodka, scotch, or gin for the cocktails on the black market, would it be possible to have a bottle or two and she would pay them back, in kind, as soon as my father returned?

The women were not fooled, but they also did not care to challenge my mother. No one was willing to take on her alcoholism.

She was so alone at the end of her life. I wonder if, as she prowled through the house, making her way to the wet bar, if she ever stopped, on the way, to quietly open the door to one of our bedrooms in order to look in on us, to check to see that we were okay.

It was toward the end of that year that my mother died. At the moment of her death, my brothers, sister, father, and I sat with the family priest and three of my mother's doctors in a conference room at the Makati General Hospital. My father had convened the meeting with Father O'Grady and doctors to decide whether my mother could, according to Catholic decree, and should, according to medical practice, be taken off life support.

My mother always had been the one to deal with the deaths in our family. There had been the deaths of unborn children. When my parents still were living in the States, my mother had miscarried a number of times. When I was twelve, she told me she could not bear that—according to Church law at the time—those fetuses would never bear names nor could she accept that they would be buried in unconsecrated ground. Each time she miscarried, she insisted that the doctor give her what remained of her fetus rather than dropping it into a medical slop bucket. She then secured formaldehyde, and placed her unborn in a large Mason jar filled with the chemical. She hid the bottles in the depths of a closet behind her numerous pairs of fashionable shoes. I learned from my Great Aunt Gaye, one summer when I visited her, that whenever someone in the family was ill all of the relatives speculated among themselves who would

be next as they all knew that if the family member died, my mother would come to the viewing with one of the bottles wrapped in a scarf or shawl. I could well imagine her in one of her more dramatic outfits, high-heeled black shoes, black stockings, a black hat with a veil, short black cotton gloves with sequins around the edge, a plain-yet-elegant black dress, and a big black bag with her child carefully wrapped in a much-loved shawl waiting to be buried. When it was her turn to view the body, she would lean in and tuck the bottle carefully into a corner of the casket.

Aunt Gaye grouched that she hoped my mother didn't have any more dead babies secreted away when it came my Aunt's time to die. I was surprised by her grumbling as I was proud of Mommy's ingenuity. My mother wanted her babies buried where they could rest in peace. This was the only way she knew how to get it done, and she got it done.

In later years, there had been the deaths of the family pets. She was the one who would go with Ricardo to the veterinarian to have the dog or cat put down. For days we all would have been saying that something needed to be done, that the cat or dog's suffering needed to be ended. My mother would do what needed to be done, and when we came home and learned of the pet's passing, we would clamour and scold: "Oh, why did you do it today?" "Why didn't you wait until we had a chance to say goodbye?"

So when we were gathered there in the conference room discussing whether to take her off life support, my father didn't know what to do. Dealing with death was my mother's job. Since she wasn't there to make the decision, he wanted us to. Unlike my mother, he wasn't going to wait till we were off at school to make the decision, to protect us from deciding her death. He compelled us to be party to the decision. He gave us that beseeching look, making it clear that he was not going to shoulder this burden alone.

My father wanted us to take a vote. Father O'Grady explained that according to Vatican II, my mother's soul would not be endangered if she were taken off of life support. Father O'Grady and the doctors were exempt, but each of us children were to raise our hands, yea or nay, to terminating the life support. It was clear we were to vote, yes, and I hated being compelled to do so. The moment we voted, the doctors were going to go to the room to shut off the machines. My father wanted us all to accompany them.

I had not seen my mother during this last stay at the hospital. I had had one fleeting image of her before she went to the hospital. The maids were in her room helping her to get up and showered. At some point she must have taken a very bad fall because her face was terribly bruised. I saw through the door that her forehead and left cheek were dark purple and blue with bruises, and then one of the maids closed the door. Later that day, an ambulance came and she was taken to the hospital. She had been at the hospital for four days. Joyce, John, and Jimmy had gone to see her on the second day she was in the hospital. Jimmy, who never showed any emotion, came home and made everyone promise that I was not to go see her. He wanted someone spared the memory

of seeing her as she lay there all bruised and barely conscious.

So when we all raised our hands, yea, acceding to my father's unspoken wishes, I was afraid as we left the conference room. We walked down the hall, grim and enforced conspirators afraid of what we were going to see. But when we arrived at the desk of the ICU, ready to file in to say our final goodbyes, the nurses at the desk stopped us. While we were in the conference room, my mother had her final heart attack and died alone, on her own.

Upon her death, I don't think any of us wanted to say, "Oh, why did you do it today?" "Why didn't you wait until we had a chance to say goodbye?" We were relieved, once again, of bearing the burden. En masse, we all turned and walked away, not one of us willing to go into the room to look upon her in death.

When we got home, people came by to pay their respects and my father took out the keys and opened the padlocked liquor cabinets, it was then we discovered that every single bottle was empty. I remember wanting to laugh, thinking there was a wry justice there as we stood looking, in surprise at all of those empty bottles, but I didn't laugh because I feared, on some level, they also were an elusive metaphor for something about our family, for an emptiness and stealth we all shared. At the end of her life, we had secreted her away, much as Rochester had done with his wife. We had become so ashamed of her, we were no longer able to see how central she always had been to our lives.