

Maura McIntyre

On Daughters, Dissertations and Dementia

On the block where I grew up I had the only mother who worked outside the home. Like the other fathers on the street, on weekday mornings my mother drove away in her big black car and didn't return until evening. She always took off her suit when she came home and put her bags down in the same place, ready for morning. Lined up on the long radiator cover beside my parents bed were my mothers matching sets of purses and pumps: brown for fall, black for winter, navy for spring and white for summer. The contents: lipsticks and face powder, cigarettes, balled up wads of Kleenex, wallet and keys, moved from purse to purse as the seasons changed. Her black leather briefcase held files and papers and books, and a day timer stuffed with extra slips of paper held in place with paper clips then bound with an elastic band.

More than work, my mother always had a career that I could name. In school I remember putting up my hand and asking the teacher where to put "mother's occupation" on the form. My friends didn't talk about their mothers in those terms, their mothers were simply their mothers; it was their *fathers* who were something else too. Other Moms worked at home and were there at lunch time and when we came home from school and watched the Flintstones; other Moms did the grocery shopping and cleaned the house. Maria was paid to clean our house, and my father did the grocery shopping when he remembered. We frequently met for dinner in restaurants or ate instant boxed or frozen meals. Homemade food was occasionally produced to coincide with some culturally prescribed holiday for which my Mom felt obliged to cook or bake.

When we went to our house for lunch Bernadette with the cleavage and beehive ("are-you-sure-it-is-real?") hair taught us how to play poker in her thick French accent. My Baba ("she's confused") sat on the couch and smoked, and Mrs. Lepidis ("she keeps Baba company") sat beside her. My other

grandmother, who seemed normal by comparison (she could be trusted not to put the radishes in the freezer), lived with us when she wasn't in Ireland. For many years young men and often their girlfriends or wives came to stay at a moment's notice. They stayed for weeks, months and years, Vietnam draft dodgers who were "getting their lives in order."

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My mother defended her doctoral dissertation when I was 18 and she was 48. It took her ten years to complete. Ten years, in which she worked full time, lost both parents, raised two children, separated from and divorced my father. Waiting for what feels like hours outside the tightly closed door of the room in which she is conducting her defense, a huge bouquet of daisies at the ready, I strain to hear the muffled sounds of my mother's voice.

I remember sitting in the kitchen and hearing the sound of her feet pacing overhead in the study.

I remember climbing the stairs late at night on my way to bed and seeing her sitting at her desk.

I remember hearing her voice as I fell asleep, muffled between rooms, speaking into her Dictaphone.

When asked why she was speaking, rather than writing her dissertation my mother explained that, for her generation, if a woman learned how to type she was at risk of being asked to do typing for men, or of becoming a secretary. She had found it prudent not to learn how to type.

August 27, 1995

Walking down the overly sterile hospital corridor wishing that I had grabbed a shower before coming, I notice my nails look particularly dirty in this environment. Checking in at the desk the evening nurse says the doctor is on the floor. She wants to speak to me.

"Wait just a minute, I'll page her," he says, touching my arm.

Almost as fast as I hear his voice over the loudspeaker, there she is, the red headed Dr. Turpie and she's smiling—click, click, click—as she approaches me, and in one motion she is opening a door and saying,

"Why don't we just step into the conference room?"

Too friendly tone, too bright eyed, I know that there is something up. I stand, and then sit on the arm of a dark green leather couch, pale green painted walls, framed floral prints—at least someone was trying to make up for no windows, I think. This must be the room where they take the family to talk about the terminal cancer diagnosis. "Stop smiling at me," I think, "Why am I here?"

And in less than five minutes I'm checking my nails again, still dirty, as I approach her room, stomach balled up. My shoes are so soft soled and quiet she doesn't look up, perched on the edge of her bed, feet dangling down, not quite reaching the floor, engrossed in reading a book propped up in the middle of the tray, dangerously close to the coleslaw. Chewing, she hasn't heard me or felt my

presence yet, standing there looping potential sentences through my head.

Looking up she begins to smile, but her expression shifts before it has even fully formed,

“What is it darling?”

She knows something is up before I have even opened my mouth, knows even though I don’t think my face is giving anything away.

“Well, hi,” I say, thinking that I can slow the moment down.

Looking straight at me,

“What do you mean “hi”? “What is it? You look so troubled.”

She puts down the chicken drumstick she has been gnawing—Friday night, Mount Sinai Hospital, chicken. I leave her curious, worried brown eyes looking for relief from the intensity growing in my stomach, from the tightness in my throat. Moving out the window, the bright sunshine seems strange—its dinner time, but then, its late August; it’s the 5:00 dinner that’s early.

“Maura...?”

I take a step closer to the bed and move a pile of files and loose papers lively with yellow stickys and highlighter pen aside. Sitting down, I scan the papers, “3216 F Social Policy and ...” I start to read. A course syllabus.

“I just saw Dr. Turpie, Mom ... she caught me on my way in from the elevator...,” I begin slowly, looking into her anxious face.

“And?” she says, and immediately I can see the shift from worry to relief to anger flash across her face as she understands that its not me, or the kids, its only to do with her... and she knows she’s fine.

“Mom, Dr. Turpie has all the tests back. The ECG... the other scan they did last week and the scores from the tests the psychologist did,” I begin. “They’re saying that there’s an impairment, Mom. They think it’s from the coma. They’re saying...” I’m looking straight at her but now she’s shifting her pile of papers, standing up and moving toward the window ledge, not looking at me.

“Mom they’re saying that they think you shouldn’t teach, at least not this fall, till they know ... till they see how you do ... it would be a leave, a medical leave....”

She interrupts me,

“They are *so* full of shit. My courses are ready to go, classes start in five days, I’m ready to leave this place,” turning to the bed she gestures with anger at her papers and books. “It’s wasting my time being here.... And what do they do, they send *you* here as their messenger? Who do they think they are, those *bastards*, putting this on you?” Her voice is rising, “What do they think I will do? Are they scared of me?” Now her eyes are flashing.

June 2, 1997

I explain that I am moving them out of respect. Grant applications to SSHRC, student papers, research reports, journal articles, her curriculum vitae. Box after box—and yes, I really did already take nine blue boxes to the curb.

And yes, I will be the one to figure out where to put them in our too small house. I have already donated over a hundred books to the faculty. For sure she was an academic before computers and the vast majority of these papers are junk, but they are her papers, her remains, all that remains of her magnificent career.

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When the kids come to our house for lunch Ezra with the waist length (“are-you-sure-they-are-real?”) red dreadlocks teaches them how to play pick-me-up. Their Baba (“she’s confused”) sits on the couch (but smokes outside), while Ezra (“he keeps Baba company”) kicks the soccer ball. Their other grandparents, who seem normal by comparison (they can be trusted not to put the radishes in the freezer), stay with us when they are visiting from out west.

October 1, 1999

It has taken longer than usual to assemble my audience, and still the lady with the blue eyes is restless and keeps wandering off. Clearing my throat I decide that I will begin today with my methodology chapter, the section on data collection methods that I want to enliven. Eleanor has taken the corner of her afghan, a brown, beige and orange affair and is slowly wrapping it around the leg of her chair. Mildred is fully asleep. Vincenzo has pulled up with his walker, turned it around while holding onto the wall bar, and is now sitting on it backwards, looking at me expectantly. My mother is following my every move with her bright brown eyes.

“The section of my dissertation that I’m going to read today I’m finding kind of dull. I’m looking for ways to make the writing more interesting,” I begin.

Mildred has opened her eyes and is smiling and nodding. I feel encouraged and forge ahead.

“In the qualitative research methodology literature there is agreement that the most important factor in the interview is the quality of the relationship between the researcher and research participant...”

“Yes!” my mother suddenly blurts out, “yes!”

These are the first words she has uttered in weeks.

Monday January 8, 2000

The ultrasound technician has said that she can’t tell me anything, but lying there flat on my back I know the answer by the look on her face. There is no heart beat. Twins. Heartless twins. Tears well up in my eyes. Sitting up slowly, numb with resignation, I swing my feet to the floor.

And then I hear my mother’s voice in my mind’s ear: “The best dissertation is a done dissertation.”

Wednesday June 14, 2000

My final committee meeting is today at 2:00p.m. Tight for time I decide I can still squeeze in a brief visit with Mom. Seeing her will ground me and bring me good luck.

Locking my bike in the regular spot I notice a wide deep hole in the grass directly in front of the main entrance. Wet brown earth is piled neatly beside the hole and close beside is a tall silver birch tree, leaning precariously over to one side, root ball wrapped in burlap. I push the code buttons to enter, noticing that there are no residents sitting outside. Inside, the lobby is buzzing with activity. It turns out that today is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the nursing home. A ceremonial tree is to be planted and a giant slab cake will be cut by the homes oldest resident, who, by sheer coincidence, happens to live on the same floor as Mom.

Getting off the elevator my eyes instinctively scan to Mom's place at her table, but the furniture has been rearranged for the cake cutting and Mom isn't anywhere to be seen. A small cluster of residents is anchored near the TV and there is a commotion—something is clearly not right—at the nursing station. I catch a glimpse of Stephanie, the RPN from Newfoundland, leaning up against the door jam of the staff washroom, face in hands. She is stifling sobs, no, she is *laughing*—she is laughing hysterically. She has come completely undone and is laughing so hard that she is snorting and tears are running down her cheeks. “Oh, Maura,” she says, gesturing for me to come over. “She said she didn't want to cut the cake. But we cajoled and coaxed and finally she agreed. But ... she had the last laugh. I just went to get her, and Maura, Mrs. Kendall, she had the last laugh. She *died*.”

“She *what*?” I ask, closing the door of the staff bathroom behind me.

“She stopped breathing. It must have been about fifteen minutes ago. She looks as pretty as a picture sitting in her wheelchair all dressed up ready to cut the cake. *But she's dead*.”

Wiping her face with the back of her hand Stephanie has moved over to the mirror above the sink and is dabbing at her mascara with her baby finger.

Turning back toward me she takes my arm. “Oh my gosh, I know its not funny, but sometimes ... hey, do you think your mother would cut it? The cake? If you helped her? She's not that old, but she's an important person too, being a professor and all.”

Friday September 22, 2000

I have been a Doctor of Education for three hours. Wined and dined and laden with flowers we wheel Mom outside to enjoy the September sun. Settling in a corner of the patio outside the nursing home I begin to tell her about the day: about the questions my committee members asked, about the dignity of my external examiner, about my beloved supervisor, about Cecelia waiting with roses. Peter drags my dissertation out of my canvas bag, sets it on Mom's lap, opens it, and starts turning pages and reading sections aloud. But it is the sleepy after lunch time of the day and the September sun is such a warm caress on our cheeks that soon we are dozing, heads on each others shoulders, the red wine from lunch drifting through us like fallen leaves.

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I defended my doctoral dissertation when I was 39 and my mother was 70. It took me five years to complete. Five years, in which I worked part time, raised two children, cared for my mother in her home, in our home, and in a nursing home, and celebrated the twentieth anniversary of being still not married to the same man.

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Sometimes when I walk into the cafeteria quickly, when I am distracted and preoccupied with a piece of writing and I really need a cup of tea, I hear her voice from across the room—deep, authoritative, a touch pedantic. I hear the click, click, click of her pumps moving across the floor toward me. And then I turn, disappointed, and decide to go downstairs to get a breath of fresh air. I will pick up the syllabus for my new course at the printer, I decide. I leave by the west door so that I can look at the back entrance to the faculty. I see her there again. It is 1971, she is wearing a red crochet beret, red, red, lipstick and is leaning up against the wall, laughing and smoking with a group of students. Was she really a teacher in the academe? Am I?