

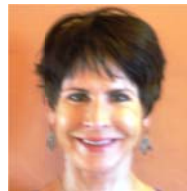
# About My Mother



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## Introduction—About My Mother Writing Contest



*by Denise Middlebrooks*

*for Aberdeen Bay Publishing*

Mother's Day, convention tells us, is about appreciation, a day to pay attention to someone special, to show we care. As with most "special" days, commercialism creeps into our busy lives and helps us out. For the swipe of a credit card, we can send our thoughts (often in the form of a greeting card's ready-made jingle) or we can go online and order that theme-specific bouquet to be sent just about anywhere in the world. Convenience is a good thing. It doesn't require too much effort and we can tell ourselves we've fulfilled an obligation, satisfied an expectation. In other words, we can substitute spending our money for spending our time. Don't get me wrong. It's wonderful to have these conveniences. But often, something gets lost in the ease and transferability of these transactions. Something goes missing. What is it? Perhaps the ten stories and essays in this collection will help to answer that question. Why? Because writing is an act of attention.

This year, Andy Zhang of Aberdeen Bay decided to add a distinctive twist to Mother's Day for ten authors and their mothers. He would take care of the flowers, provide the gift. He would take the authors off the hook in this respect. But these authors would have to do something in return, that is, produce up to 2,500 words in remembrance. In other words, they had to sit down in front of a blank

page and perform the alchemy that turns memory into words, sentences, paragraphs, and, in the end, the submissions in this collection of essays and stories. After all, Aberdeen Bay is about authors.

With this intent, Andy called me and said, “I want to promote a writing contest.” With typical “Andy” enthusiasm, he added, “this will make some authors and their mothers very happy.” Sound cliché? It’s not. Andy doesn’t speak in clichés. It’s not his nature. And, he understands the value of Mother’s Day. Having been born during the Cultural Revolution in China and bearing witness to the sacrifices his own parents made in the hope of providing him and his siblings with a better life, he is no stranger to the meaning of a day meant to honor one’s parent. Mother’s Day, to him, is heartfelt. So, with his typical “Andy” knack for persuasion, he convinced me that I should coordinate and promote the contest, read the submissions, evaluate the entries, and write something about my own experience in doing so. Of course I said yes. It’s hard to say no to Andy.

Since there wasn’t a lot of lead time, I got busy right away and by the time the contest’s deadline arrived, I had collected a stack of oversized envelopes bearing postmarks from different parts of the country—California, South Carolina, Oregon, to name a few—a good geographical mix. The submissions came in the form of stories and essays, and, as I read each one the first time, followed by a second and third, I wasn’t prepared for how they touched me. Each entry is imbued with a unique personal slant and extends an invitation to us all to take a moment to share in the author’s memories, and perhaps, be prompted to remember in return. Each of these authors in the first annual About My Mother writing contest have, with these stories and essays, imbued a special day, May 8, 2011, with extra-special meaning. Writing, for these authors, is an act of devotion.

The following stories and essays were evaluated on the particular nuance (often revealed in the unique turn of phrase or carefully chosen word) that produces an individual “voice,” as well as the author’s attention to style and craft that often comes after that first burst of creativity, the skills that come into play when the page is full, perhaps too full, and needs to be sculpted into a form that does justice to its subject. All the entries in this collection are unedited. They appear in the following order:

## First Place

“I Never Cried for My Mother” by Ken White begins at the Brew Pub. The author sits with his brother, working off some guilt. It would have been his mother’s birthday and he ponders the obligatory phone call he would have made, the greeting card he would have sent, and the feelings he should have had. In one paragraph, we get a sense of the author’s awareness that the constancy of everyday expectations is not necessarily replaced by special days and greeting cards, and that feelings and recognition often come in those instances, and, under circumstances, when perhaps it’s too late. This story’s ending (you have to read it) encompasses the story itself.

## Second Place

“The Nurse” by H. W. “Buzz” Bernard begins when his “human heat wave” of a mother is rushed to the hospital and treated with a new antibiotic drug called penicillin, which probably saved her life, but not that of her daughter, who died four days later. Recently, “Buzz” discovered that this story about his sister’s birth and death was incomplete, that there was a story within the story, recently revealed to him by his ninety-five-year-old mother. I won’t give anything away. It’s a mystery story.

## Third Place

“Up North With Mom” by Erica W. Jamieson is a story about the author’s “non-adventurous” mom, who takes her children on a weekend vacation, meant to be “cost-effective and familiar,” a singular family adventure. But this particular adventure has a twist. One of the family members is missing.

## Fourth Place

Nolan McDaniel tells not only a heartrending survival story, but also one that puts us in touch with domestic violence, in this case, the violence that touched a specific individual, Carolyn, his mother. Nolan tells us about this amazing woman’s spirit, her courage and perseverance as she overcomes the daunting circumstances of her youth and early adulthood. Nolan begins his story with authorial distance, telling us “she walks with her shoulders hunched, defeated,” “she was beaten,” “her name is Carolyn.” It is only near the end that this very real “Carolyn” becomes “my mother.”

### **Fifth Place**

Bob Maninger was certain he would be the next Wilt Chamberlain, destined to play in the NBA. His mother Vera never diminished what Bob calls his “silly dream.” Instead, she encouraged him in all his sports, including baseball. Years later, after Bob was grown and had a son of his own, he tells how he and his mother watched his teenage son play the “great game,” how she leaned over to him and said, “I wish you had enjoyed the high level of coaching the Clay has, there would be no telling how far you might have gone in baseball.” This is only one of the many memories Bob has shared about his mother, Vera Maninger.

### **Sixth Place**

“Angela” by Dana Verdino begins in a Cuban restaurant on her mother’s birthday with a discussion about “unconventional” parenting,” a topic that brings forth strong opinions during the meal. Dana goes on to recall her own childhood, the elaborate Sunday dinners her mother would prepare, leaning to make braciole, watching her mother cook in the kitchen. Set against the background of a birthday dinner and memories of childhood meals, Dana provides a snapshot of a vibrant woman, and, at the core of this snapshot are Dana’s reflections about herself.

### **Seventh Place**

“Blessed Are the Hands That Prepare the Food” by Jackie Gardner is a testament to the role food plays in memory. After all, it touches all our senses. Miss Charlotte, Jackie’s mother, was supposed to become a nurse because Jackie’s grandmother, a warden, was determined to “keep her African American daughter out of the kitchen.” But Miss Charlotte “preferred pots and pans to bedpans,” and, with “a tongue blessed with the Seasoning Spirit of Discernment,” turned cooking into an art form, using its metaphors to teach her daughter about life.

### **Eighth Place**

“About My Mother” by Tammy Holloway is about a mom (Mother is too formal) who loved to prepare big meals and say, “Help yourselves because if you don’t you’ll starve.” Once again, in this story, food is a player because it’s prepared with love. Dinner had its own ritual and was a time when the family sat

down together and had a conversation. Tammy's mom insisted on it. Tammy's dad, a former police officer, passed away in January. Tammy shares with us her mom's strength and ability to endure such loss after 52 years of marriage. Such qualities give hope to us all.

### **Ninth Place**

"My Mother, My Muse" by Karla Stover begins with "Pardon me, do you have any Grey Poupon?" Karla's eighty-six-year-old mother poses this question while riding in a gondola through the treetops of a rainforest in Costa Rica. Karla goes on to share several stories about this pithy lady who knows the value of a good time and the power of humor as an expression of love. While reading this entry, I got the sense that we all might be better off having spent a day with this lady.

### **Tenth Place**

"About My Mother, Now I Understand" by Betsy Jeffery begins with a look back in time, prompted by a photograph of Betsy's mother as a young woman. Betsy has become a caregiver, along with her siblings, to her aging mother. In this role, Betsy listens to her mother's stories, which reveal a trove of childhood memories supported by a value system composed of hard work and love. Alice, Betsy's mother is no longer with us, but I feel some of her essence lives on in this particular entry.

### **Final Thought**

This introduction would not be complete if I didn't take a moment to wish my own mother, Pauline Sena, a very special Mother's Day and to tell her that I love her. This contest has made for an easy Mother's Day gift. I'm getting her a Kindle so she can enjoy these stories and essays as much as I have.

## I Never Cried for My Mother

by

Ken White

"Just remember, we're all in this alone."

*Lily Tomlin*

We sat, sorta-watching "Giants Vision," and trying to talk above the noise at the Brew Pub. I was working through some more guilt and Roger was sounding the board.

It's her birthday. I would have sent a card by now. I would have phoned. By then, she would have had too many glasses of wine, but she would still have been happy to hear from her number one son. We would have made small talk. She would have repeated herself a number of times, told me things she had just told me last week or last minute. Timing was everything with these calls. If I caught her too late, it would not be a good conversation. I would get angry, trying to browbeat her long distance into taking better care of herself. She would get upset and the call would be over. And I could avoid the reality of what was happening for another week.

Then she was dead. And I could make the comment I had just made to Roger; a statement that was true, that I really didn't mean, but had said anyway. "I'm glad I don't have a Mother to have to worry about shopping for, or sending a card to." I realized that it didn't come out the way it was supposed to.

"That's not how you feel and you know it," he said.

"I meant I wish she was still here, but I'm glad we didn't make a big deal out of buying gifts."

"But she always expected one."

"And I always sent her a card. I think I was the only one in the whole family who never bought a gift on Father's Day, Mother's Day, or their birthdays. Just one more example of how I wasn't as much a part of the family as I thought. I was just never there for them. Especially at the end."

"Why do you keep beating yourself up? Why should you feel bad? She lived her life the way she wanted. Nobody was going to change that. Not even you."

"She was pretty stubborn."

"And none of us would have ever changed that. She died. You couldn't stop that. You can't stop time. You've got to keep moving. There are a lot more days ahead. So put your energy into making those good instead of worrying about what you didn't do and couldn't help."

For them both – my Mom and Sandy – I had become what the therapists call a "coalcoholic": the caretaker, the giver of hope, the ignorer of oppressive reality. I gave them a fix as deadly as their addiction. I satisfied their dependency; their need to be needed. I shot them up with blind faith and unquestioning support.

I wasn't there when she died. Typical. I hadn't spent much time with her or the rest of the family since Sandy and I got married and moved away. We went down for Thanksgiving and Christmas, then once every month or so. It was hard, but it was one of the compromises you make to sustain a marriage. So I really didn't know what was going on. I blamed it on Sandy, but I realize now it was a defense. If I ignored the problems—my Mother's drinking, her health, her behavior – it would go away. It did. About a week after she visited us. I told her she was drinking too much and refused to make her any more drinks. It was easy to be righteous when you didn't have to deal with it every day like my Dad and the rest of the family. I remember my sisters telling me stories about Dad passing out because he tried to drink all the booze in the

house so she wouldn't have any. It was the only way he could tell her no. He knew she was killing herself, but he just couldn't stop her. It wasn't in him. He loved her too much.

I begin to realize how much like him I really am. Easier to give in and ignore it than confront it. And that's why I really stayed away. When I just talked to them over the phone, I didn't have to see what was going on and didn't have to admit it. So I wasn't there when her heart stopped. I wasn't there sitting in the dining room with the rest of the family while she lay on the couch, waiting for the ambulance to take her away. I arrived later, after she was already gone. I had avoided it again. And I probably would have ducked out of the next few days of mourning if I could have.

I never cried for her. Roger did. The night of the wake. I heard him. And I, the practical, no-nonsense, always-in-control eldest son, thought he'd had too much beer and was just throwing up.

It wasn't until months later that I began to deal with some of the guilt and hurt. I did, as we usually do, in dreams. I was in the living room, sitting on the coffee table by the couch; the old, broken-down couch with the maple coffee and end-tables. At her feet was the black and white television. On one end-table was her Kleenex, her plastic glass of water, and all her medicine. It was here that she went each night to pass out. After she'd doused the emptiness with alcohol. I guess it might have been the night she died. She asked me what was happening to her. I had no answer. She looked at me as if she couldn't believe there was none. "Am I dying?" she asked. I could only sit there. I couldn't tell her. She was perspiring. Her thin, stringy hair was stuck to her forehead. Her eyes were frightened, near tears.

I couldn't stand it when she cried. It tore my heart out every time she and Dad would fight and she'd start. She didn't do it very often. Kept it bottled up. And it was usually over money.

She'd want to buy us something, maybe new Easter clothes. He'd say we didn't have any. She'd threaten to order it anyway. He'd say he would take her credit cards away. She'd come running into the family room, crying and blowing her nose with the Kleenex she always kept handy in the waist-band of her pedal pushers. She'd say she was only doing it for us kids. We were too young to know what was going on, so Dad was always the bad guy. He'd come into the dining room and our hard stares would chase him away.

As I sat there, she began to cry. I couldn't handle it. I started to leave. She touched my arm. She never did that.

"It's for the best, you know."

"No, you'll get better," I said. "It'll be okay."

"No, it won't. You don't understand. You have your friends. Your job. A wife. Your whole life. I don't have anything."

"You've got Dad. The cats." It sounded pretty empty.

"But I don't have you kids. When your brother finally moved out, that was it. You were all gone. Do you know how lonely that was?"

"But we were always around. We came to visit. We had Christmas and Easter."

"But you weren't here for me every day anymore. I couldn't take care of you. Couldn't watch out for you. That's what I lived for, you know. Now it's gone and I'm alone. I just don't want to live anymore."

"Come on, Mom. You can't just give up. You've got reasons to live. I know you do." It was weak, but it was the best I could offer.

"You just don't know how lonely it can be. You've always been independent, a loner. You can handle it. I can't. And I don't want to anymore."

There was nothing more I could say. And then she died. Just closed her eyes. And I left her, alone again.

I never had the dream again. But I would see her alone. Passed out, alone. Waking up, alone. Inside herself, alone. I couldn't understand it. She had a full life, I thought. Or convinced myself. There were always people around, even after she'd pissed them off. They loved her and cared deeply about her. Yet she was completely alone. And she died that way.

I guess it's really a lonely world. Someone once said you can die from loneliness as surely as you can die from heart disease. I remember a writer commenting that it was not possible for two people to truly know each other. No matter how close the husband and wife, the father and son, the lover and beloved, we are all locked inside ourselves, which says something horrible about our lack of knowledge, about our hopeless and terrible, and sadly permanent loneliness. And something about the loneliness of the individual trying to find meaning in their isolation.

I guess when all us kids moved away, she just gave up. She had no reason to live anymore. The coroner's report listed heart failure. But my Mom really died from the absoluteness of loneliness.

The Giants went on to lose in the ninth. And I lost it in the bar bathroom

## THE NURSE

by H. W. "Buzz" Bernard

My mother, fearing her coughing and thrashing would awaken my father, slipped from their bed and went downstairs to rest on a couch. Dad found her a short while later. "She was icy cold and had a gray color," he wrote in his memoir. "When I lifted her off the couch she seemed to weigh no more than 50 pounds." She not only was dangerously ill, she was eight months pregnant with my younger sister.

Dad, a lieutenant j. g. in the navy at the time (April 1944), rushed Mom to the nearest hospital, a tiny facility in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The doctors there quickly decided Mom needed better care than they could provide. They dispatched her via ambulance to a much larger hospital at Farragut Naval Training Station, a sprawling World War II facility about 30 miles north of Coeur d'Alene.

If you look on a map today, you won't find Farragut. All that's left of it is a state park nestled among ponderosa and tamarack pines on the south shore of Lake Pend Oreille, near the small town of Bayview. In 1944, Farragut was the largest town in Idaho, home to some 42,000 officers, sailors and civilians.

The hospital was staffed by doctors and nurses, many of them very experienced, from all parts of the country. But they were helpless when it came to diagnosing what was trying to kill my mother, and by extension, my unborn sister. Mom developed a volcanic fever that peaked at 106 degrees. She was, in essence, a human heat wave.

She recalls hearing the doctors discussing her case outside her room. They obviously were stumped, virtually devoid of ideas about how to treat her. She remembers one of them saying, almost in desperation, “Well, we could try it. I guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

They tried it. They strapped my mom’s arm to a board (which is how they did it in those days) and began an I.V. drip. Mom says she could feel whatever they were giving her coursing through her body, surging right down to her toes. The fever broke. Mom was better within a day.

“What was that stuff?” she asked the doctors later.

“A new antibiotic drug we’ve been experimenting with at military hospitals,” one of them told her. “It’s called penicillin.”

Despite teetering on death’s threshold, Mom gave birth, a little sooner than expected, to my sister, Barbara Nel. “She looked healthy,” mother recalls, “plump and rosy.” Here Mom will pause in her story, then continue, her voice small and far away. “I only held her once.”

Barbara Nel died four days later. “Congenital heart failure was what the doctors wrote on her death certificate,” Mom says. “But that could mean anything. I don’t think they really knew.”

That part of Mom’s story I have been familiar with for many years. She didn’t tell me the rest until recently.

It would have been enough, of course, to have been acutely ill for six weeks, fighting for your life against an undiagnosed assailant, but then to lose your daughter.... On the night my sister died, a nurse entered my mother’s room. “Would you like me to stay with you awhile?” the nurse asked.

Mother nodded. She remembers the nurse clearly: a young woman, tall, rather large, dark haired. “She was as real as you are now,” Mom said as we sat in her Arizona living room 60 years after the event. “She never mentioned her name, but she said she was from Pennsylvania.”

The nurse remained with my mother throughout that bleak night, kneeling by her bed, holding her hand, praying, offering encouragement and hope. In the morning, she was gone. When my father arrived, Mom asked him to find out who the nurse was.

When he inquired, he was informed no nurse on the staff fit the description he gave. Nor were any of them from Pennsylvania. “Besides,” he was told, “no nurse would have had the time to spend the entire night at your wife’s bedside.”

A strange story, I reflect. A nurse who never was. A naval base that no longer exists. A sister who never had a chance. Depressing on the surface. Uplifting if you peel away the skepticism and nihilism that seem to infuse our modern society, and instead prod the human spirit. Some people, I believe, and my mother is one, possess a soul that is more open to the spiritual events in our lives, more willing to embrace the transcendental.

Mom, always disposed to meet life’s circumstances pretty much head on, isn’t given to a great deal of philosophical reflection about things. Thus, she doesn’t dwell on alternative interpretations about what happened that night over a half century ago. To her, it was a simple reality. An angel came to her. Why not? The Bible is rife with such stories. But somehow, in an era marked by man’s ability to explain almost every phenomenon scientifically or mathematically, we swathe ourselves in a cocoon of rational thought--knowledge. Forgetting how limited our knowledge really is. Substituting it for the divine.

And therefore forever unable to hold hands with a dark-haired nurse from Pennsylvania.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

1. Although penicillin was discovered in 1928, it did not come into use until 1941.
2. Yes, the story is true.

## Up North With Mom

by Erica W. Jamieson

Before I begin to tell you about our trip *Up North*, you should know that my mother is not an adventure seeker. She has a deft fear of being lost. She is not keen for evening boat rides. She does not do retreats of any kind or girl's weekends away. She has never climbed a ropes course for bonding purposes or otherwise. But there is, ripped into our family stories, a weekend, years ago, when my mother took my brother and I on one singular family adventure.

My mother planned our long weekend away to Northern Michigan, *Up North*, to be cost effective and familiar. I was usually fond of going *Up North*. It's where I went to sleep away camp for eight years. It's where we went as a family skiing every winter. In summer, my father photographed the boats coming through the locks in Charlevoix, my mother shopped the art fairs. I knew every bend going north on I-75. I knew the rest stops with the cleanest bathrooms. I knew how many minutes it took to get *Up North* when my father drove. I knew that our last visit *Up North* predated my parents' divorce, my father's remarriage. Driving *Up North* with my mother at the helm of our new, smaller, incarnation of our family, I must admit I wasn't so sure about anything anymore.

From the beginning of the trip, everything felt oddly out of place. I had the backseat all to myself. My brother drove. My mother, although in her usual spot, left the knitting in the bag and instead had the map spread out across her lap.

My mother desperately navigated for three hours straight north on the same road. *Don't turn. Stay on I-75, where are we? Gaylord, okay, don't turn. Just stay north.* Shell shocked from the barrage of change we drove right into the epicenter of all my mother's worst

nightmares. *Would we lose our way? Would the car break down? Would one of us get hurt? Would she cry standing in the middle of a familiar restaurant where she had dined with my father?*

We had traveled since the divorce with my father and his insta-family, the mistress who was now the step-mom and her children, my step-siblings. With *them* we traveled to new places, Acapulco, Brazil, Hawaii. With *them* we shared no memories. With *them*, unlike traveling with Mom, there was no fear of meeting our former selves in ice cream shops or fudge stores.

As we turned onto Bridge street, that last mile into town, I couldn't help but wonder what post divorce ideology in her new role as head of household spoke to mother and said go, of all places, go *Up North?*

Once there we retreated to all the usual things simply out of force of habit. We bought our requisite box of chocolate fudge and two bags (one for now, one for home) of saltwater taffy from Murdocks. We had lunch at Topsides, pizza and cheeseburgers. We found that getting a table for three, mid-summer, was a tad easier than getting a table for four. This was decidedly in our favor.

Even as we walked in and out of familiar places, we all kept on guard for moments resurrected from the past. A store that might cause one of us to shout out *Oh, that's that place Dad bought the awful brass paper weight, remember?* Once remembered, we could see that paper weight sitting on his desk in the new house, his other house. I mean to say, *their* house.

You could see the danger camouflaged in possible flashback. It's difficult to be someplace that you had been before and not point out the obvious history. Sitting behind every store front window was a giant pink elephant that had to be evaded. So we stayed quiet and

oddly agreeable with each other, apprehension can do that to a family, sucker punch the fight and talk right out of you.

But like the rising humid air coming off of Lake Charlevoix, an impending storm undecided where to strike, we started to become giddy with tension. It was in a dress shop absent any history that the storm, without breaking passed on, and walking through the looking glass, my mother altered the course of our trip, and our memories, with her contagious and wonderful laughter.

With garments in hand, Mom and I shared the one dressing room. It was no bigger than an intimate closet cordoned off from the rest of the store with a heavy muslin cloth. My brother waited, *we'll be quick, promise*, just on the other side of the curtain.

Outside the skies had grayed and stilled the air, nothing moved. With the heat and the lack of air conditioning inside the store, we could barely breath behind the privacy curtain. Crowded into the impossible space of the dressing cubicle, my mother began to giggle. The curtain bulged with elbows and legs which only made the attempt at containing her laughter that much more difficult. It spread like wildfire. We were both under that spell of infectious laughter. Into this cacophony of giggles came a ripping sound. *We had heard a rip*. With my entire rump jammed—not into the skirt of a dress, as in *Mom, what do you think about this dress*—but rather into one leg of what turned out to be something akin to a pair of shorts with an attached top, we had heard a rip.

“Mom it’s way too tight,” I said choking on the precipice of unrestrained hysteria..

She gathered the loose folds of fabric to my side saying, “But what’s all this fabric?”

Culottes! A short jumper culotte *thing*.

We were hot. There were tears coating our faces and our laughter had now reached that pitch where sound had ceased and our bodies rocked with an all out effort not to pee in our (the shop's) pants.

The saleslady's question, *is everything all right?* just brought on another fit of breathless laughter as we looked wide-eyed at each other and wondered what had she heard. Did she hear the thing rip?

My brother outside the dressing room got nervous at the gasping moments of silence and whispered to the curtain, "We should leave."

With amazing grace, my mother took the discarded jumper culotte *thing*, straightening it on its hanger, and returned it to the saleswoman. I am sure the saleswoman kept her tongue only out of utter disbelief at the poise with which my mother said, "Thank you, it didn't work for us."

Down the street we ran still wiping the laughing tears from our eyes. My mother is not so callous to have ripped and ran. We did look for a hole without finding one. Perhaps we had just stretched the seams?

But the sound, that pulling of fiber scorched into the vaulted banks of family lore, and rang like glass breaking at a Jewish wedding. It foretold that sadness sometimes follows great joy, that love is fragile and must be cared for, that plans go awry, and life sometimes follows a course so unbelievable reckless it leaves you bleeding in an undecipherable heap. It beseeched us to laugh right in the eyes of things gone wrong. And as we laughed we felt the deep fissures of the last tumultuous years rancid with divorce slowly knit together.

My mother understood that our lives at home had blistered into a desperate boil that needed lancing. It was here, in familiar territory, *Up North*, that the making of new memories, visiting places that were meaningful both then and now, opened up the wound and let us find our

way out from under the pain. My mother, out of that crazy womb driven wisdom, knew we needed to go back in order to go forward. She, above all else, recognized our desperate need to vacation together. *Together.*

With laughter we took stock. We now had a moment of our own, totally belonging only to the three of us. We walked down the street catching our breath, talking all at once, *Did you see her face? What happened? Culottes! I had my whole butt in one leg! It ripped! No!*

We found our way to the beach sometime later that day. Tired from laughing and wielding our way back into each other's ease, we dug our heels deep into the sand and felt the tension ebb. To hell with infidelity and divorce. My mother had traveled husbandless and with two teenage children. She had held her fears at bay. Or perhaps, she had walked with them, tightly held to her chest, using their force to propel us north and inward. My mother brought us back together, just the three of us, re-introduced us as family, with one economy road trip and her infectious laugh.

# My Mother's Refuge

by Nolan McDaniel

She cries tears that have become her only refuge. They cradle her into sleep that comes fitfully, that comes with nightmares. She holds herself as if doing so might create some sort of stability. But it won't. She knows it won't. She has been beaten, placed in tubs of scalding water, locked in dark closets crawling with bugs, sexually abused, and screamed at as if it were normal conversation. Somehow she has survived it all. *This too*, she thinks, *shall pass*. That's the fairytale she has been clinging too for so long now. A fairy tale that grows more and more distant each and every day she lives.

Her name is Carolyn, and she is twelve years old wearing the pain of a century year old ghost that begs to cross over into another life. She walks with her shoulders hunched, defeated. Her big brown eyes are coated with a wall that deflects anyone who tries to see into her nightmare. Her curly black hair is in a pony tail, because she hopes it will conceal that she has been without a bath for almost a week now. Pride keeps her going. That and the inability to cry for help.

The funny thing about children is that they can be so strongly influenced. You can tell them something is right, and they will believe you. You can swear the moon is made of cheese, and they'll dream about it. You can convince them that clouds are really marshmallows that God put in the sky for the angels to sleep on, and they will reach up to try to grab a bite. However, there are some children that are "fire-touchers."

You can tell them a thousand times that the fire is hot and that it will burn them if they touch it, but they won't believe you until they're blistered and crying. That's how Carolyn knows that this life is not normal. It's how she knows that there has to be something more to life than living in hell. Because, no matter how many times she gets burned, she keeps reaching out to find something better.

She has been passed through the foster care system every time her mother gets put into a drug rehab center. *It's crazy, she thinks, that after so many times the state sends someone to rehab that they'll keep giving her children back to her.* The foster homes aren't much better. Some of the parents are in it to get the money the state gives them, and then they don't spend a dime of it on the actual child. But others are nice. However, no matter how nice they are she learns not to get attached. They aren't her home; she knows that. But then again, she doesn't have a home.

Her brother Pete committed suicide when he was seventeen. He was the only person that loved her. She remembers one Christmas Pete saved up all of his money and bought her a pure white winter coat. She had seen it several times in a store window, but she knew better than to ask her mother for something new. When she opened it she had cried. It was beautiful. It was a pure, clean white; a pure, clean that she could never be. After Pete died her mother had burned the jacket.

She still has one sibling: her sister Patsy. While her mother hurts Patsy too it isn't near as bad as what she does to Carolyn. Patsy is older and stronger, and a lot of times she can get away. But Carolyn is small. For years she has tried to figure out why she is hated so much more. Part of her thinks it is because she had a twin that died at birth,

and now her mother associates that pain with her. Or maybe it's because her dad died when she was two, and her mother got tired of raising her on her own. The sad thing is that she is trying to make excuses for the abuse at all, as if there are any.

They live in the projects of Louisville, Kentucky. Life is rough, but at least she is living. The days she wakes up alive again are blessings in and of themselves. She goes to a school where she is the only white girl. Once, her mother had come to her school and beat her in front of her class, because she found out she had a crush on a black boy. How can the people watching not see what is going on? Are they blind? Or do they just not care?

Right before she enters high school she is adopted by the daughter of one of her foster parents. The woman's name is Sally, and she is only about five years older than Carolyn. But it is the most incredible experience Carolyn could have ever dreamed of. She finally has someone who cares enough to ground her, and when she touches her it is to give affection instead of bruises. Carolyn is a varsity cheerleader all throughout high school. Her junior year, at a cheer camp, she receives an offer to cheer at the University of Kentucky on scholarship. She hadn't thought anything about college. She ignored the offer.

Her senior year she doesn't make the cheerleading team, and she thinks the world is ending. But as she knows all too well, time heals all wounds. Actually, it is a blessing in disguise. She is the only girl who had been on the cheerleading team that is put on the homecoming court.

In an advanced English class her senior year her teacher asks her what her college plans are. He has noticed her incredible talent for writing. When she tells him that she isn't planning on attending college he signs her up for the ACT, and he even pays the registration fee. She doesn't study for it, because she doesn't plan on going to school. She is only taking it to prove that she isn't good enough to go. She scores a thirty-two.

The next fall she is cheering at the University of Kentucky. However, there are nightmares that keep recurring, and she cannot understand why. After a year at Kentucky she transfers to an East-Tennessee private school, Carson Newman College. There are too many bad memories from home, and she thinks leaving will help.

At this point Carolyn knows she didn't have a good childhood. She knows her mother was abusive, and that she was removed from the home several times. What she doesn't know are the excruciating details that are now haunting her subconscious. Nightmares of bugs and hot water cause her to develop pathological fears of both.

She is a physical therapy major with a religion minor. One of her professors, after learning about the nightmares she has been having, suggests that she go visit a Christian hypnotist he knows. Hesitantly, she does. And her road to recovery begins. During the hypnosis session the doctor asks her questions about her childhood. After she is woken up he replays the recording of their session for her to hear. Listening to herself recount the memories that she had locked away is tough. But dealing with the shame, anger, and sorrow that come with the memories is far worse. She hears herself talking about nights when her mother would let men into her bedroom, a moment

when her mother sat her sister on a burning stove eye, and all those times she spent locked in a closet, or held down in a tub of scalding water. She relives every punch, every smack, every bruise, every tear, and every single heart break. But what she also learns is that those things do not define her anymore.

At thirty-three years of age Carolyn is married, has just given birth to her third child, and is teaching special education on the middle school level. Anyone who knew her when she was a girl would be shocked. Not shocked that she has her master's degree and is in a loving family, but shocked that she is alive.

She still has contact with Sally, and that's who she considers family. That's who she thanks every morning for saving her. She remembers when she held her first child, Tyler, and thinking *how could I ever hurt you?* She realizes, though, that no matter how many tears she cried because of her mother nothing can take away the joy she knows now. When she looks into the blue eyes of her son Tyler, touches the sun kissed skin of her middle child Nolan, or holds her new born daughter Peyton, she is not defined by her past, but only by the present that is a blissful fairytale.

She knows that her past will only make her a better mother. She knows what discipline is, and where that line lies between loving correction and invalidated punishment. She knows how vulnerable a child is, and how important love is in their lives. She knows that there is no such thing as loving your child too much, believing in your child too much, or supporting your child too much. She knows that a good mother

means everything. She knows these things, because just like darkness is the absence of light, her childhood was the absence of love.

It is November of 2010, and Carolyn is driving back to Louisville, Kentucky. She has been back several times before to see Sally and visit old friends, and she has even seen her mother who has long since fallen away to dementia and swore that Carolyn was always her favorite child. But this visit is different. This visit will be to stand by the casket of a woman that beat her, screamed at her, and gave her away to countless men's lustrous desires. This trip is to find closure to all of the hard feelings.

Less than three months ago she moved one of her children out of her house to college. Nolan now lives two and a half hours away. When she remembers leaving him on move-in day she still feels the pain in her stomach that lets her know that one segment of her life has come to a close. *How much my life has changed*, she thinks. She was so happy to leave her own home all those years ago, and now she has a son who never wanted to leave. If there's one thing she's learned it is that your child being homesick is a good thing. It means they left behind something they loved. Somewhere they were loved.

It is a strange thing, this trip. Even though Carolyn's mother never acted like her mother it is still as if an elemental part of her life is gone. *It's funny*, she thinks. Mothers are supposed to make their children strong, they are supposed to teach them how to live, and they are supposed to love them. Even Carolyn's mother was two for three. Every time she hurt her she made her stronger. She made her strong enough to push

through to another day, to dream of a better tomorrow, and to believe in something more than the present. Her mother taught her how to live. Or, you might say, she taught her how not to live. Everything Carolyn saw her mother do she knew was wrong. Because Carolyn had to watch this she became a better woman, a better wife, a better mother. But her mother never showed her love. Maybe that's why she gives so much. Because she knows what it's like to go without.

As she stands by the casket a tear falls down her face. It coasts down her cheek, and just before it gets to her chin it falls off her face. As if the world is in slow motion she watches it fall. Her hands are folded at her waist. The tear splashes against her hand, against a scar that even now she can't remember what is from. It could be from a cut she got chopping vegetables. It could be from picking up glass from a vase Peyton knocked off the dining room table. It could be from a man's fingernails that pinned her ten year old body against her bed. It could be from a scratch from a metal hanger inside those dark closets. But this much she knows is true. The scars may last for a lifetime, but they only make her a better mother. They remind her how important it is.

I write my mother's story for this purpose. She is living example that there is nothing too great to overcome: no heartbreak too painful, no abuse too violent, and no challenge impossible. She has shown that a mother's love can overcome all of the pain from twenty past lives. She has proved that love knows no bounds.

There is a flower called a bleeding-heart. It grows very well in the shade. I think that's neat. A flower that describes people when they are in pain and it grows in the

darkest of places. That's what my mother is: a bleeding heart. She woke up daily in dark situations, in places where there seemed to be no light, in a life that didn't appear worth living. But every day she fought back. For what? At the time, I don't think she knew. But now, I know exactly why.

There is an Irish proverb that says "A man loves his sweetheart the most, his wife the best, but his mother the longest." There is no truer statement. Everywhere I go my mother follows me. She showed me how to love and be loved. She showed me that nothing is more important than passing my love onto someone else. I know because of her everywhere I go there a prayer will be also, lifting me up and giving me wings. She is an inspiration. She is a new energy when I'm weak, a lullaby when sleep won't come, and a shield when the world gets the best of me.

My mother is living now with my sister and my dad as my brother and I have both moved out. We joke that World War III will break out in our house now, because it's just my mom and a teenage girl who has been spoiled rotten by all of us. I'm pretty sure my mom would win seeing as how she's already survived one war. The tears that used to be my mom's refuge haven't gone away. They are still here. Only now, they come when she looks at the three of us. And it is a refuge of complete and utter happiness.

## Vera

by Bob Maninger

I came into this world fifty years ago with a loud screaming voice. Good for my mother that this was so, because the immediate effect I had her was to leave her blind for several days. Actually, it wasn't me – it was the drugs they used on her during the birth process. I have often wondered if the trauma of that event left me an only child. With whatever result that came, at least she could hear me as she entered into motherhood, and she did eventually re-gain her sight.

Our lives together have spanned three states and multiple dwellings. Each house was a home, and spectacularly clean and neat. Vera is the tenth of ten children, the baby of sorts. In my lifetime the negative effects of that on her have been many funerals and final days with my mother at the side of an ill loved one. Through it all she is the caregiver for the family, a trusted soul that can be counted on in thick and thin. She is a rock solid creature that anyone in the family can turn to in time of need.

Loyal to me, to a fault, she has overlooked many misgivings on my part and chooses to love me anyway. She is not always the favorite of the masses, because she is opinionated and straight-forward. Many folks cannot take that. What she is in fact is approachable and wise. Her counsel, when sought, is valuable and true. Her advice, although not always taken, is unusually sound and secure.

She stands on her faith, and is according to many, one of the few that can actually walk-the-talk. In a world of hopelessness she is full of hope. Having lived a life built on traditional values she has struggled through many of the worlds changes to remain constant and mostly unchanged in her values.

When she began her career as a secretary she utilized the services of the “old-style” typewriter with the swinging arms that has letters affixed to the end. She could make that machine sing. By the time she “retired” she was the software manager and billing agent for a five-doctor pediatric clinic. She transitioned flawlessly through technological updates and hardware upgrades.

Life on the farm provided many fun activities while growing up, but not many opportunities to access technology. Electricity was something new and telephone conversations came in the form of the party line. Forced by her family to carry a cellular phone, she has now transitioned into the world of texting communications.

When one brother returned from The War, she was certain he was coming home to see her. Devastated that he had in fact come home to marry his home town sweetheart, Vera recovered to enjoy more than a half-century with them and their children and grandchildren. Change has been a constant in her life, some of it fun and easy, some of it not.

Very few people truly ‘get’ my mother, but one who does is my daughter Laura. I think they are a lot alike, maybe more-so than either would admit. They are both ardent caregivers and quite intuitive. The two of them teach each other many things while the rest of us admire.

When I was young, I was certain that I would be the next Wilt Chamberlin. Destined to play one day in the NBA, so I thought. She never diminished that silly dream of mine. I think her favorite youthful activity of mine was actually baseball. I was so-so as talent goes, but even as an old man she could still compliment me. One day as we watched my teenage son play the “great game” she leaned over and said to me, “I wish you had enjoyed the high level of coaching that Clay has, there is no telling how far you might have gone with baseball.” She enjoyed watching

me play, but I think she really enjoyed watching Clay and Laura play their respective sporting events. She never missed an opportunity to watch them play.

Vera is always watchful for an opportunity to travel, and involve her family members with her journeys. The Smoky Mountains, The Northwest Territory, or the Grand Canyon and many places in-between are likely destination points for this traveling woman. She has journeyed east, west, north, and south as far as one can go in this country, ventured into Mexico, and recently traveled to Africa. She will take me, her grandchildren, her sisters and brothers, her nieces and nephews, certainly whoever will best fit the destinations. Some of my favorite places in the world I have discovered as a direct result of traveling with my mother.

As a lifelong educator myself, I'm not certain that she realized at the time what a tremendous educational benefit she provided to me by simply traveling. My world has always been larger than most of my peers, because I knew more what was out there. She gave me a sense that I could be anything I wanted to be, and traveling was a huge component of that feeling. She was my first teacher, and she attended to her work diligently. She corrected my verbiage when I spoke. She entered me into adult conversations without hesitation. She started a life-long love of history for me that began with family history. She encouraged a love of mathematics that I still have today.

We have always had a very close family. I think that is true because of my mother's desire to not let me grow up alone, even though I was an only child. That sense of family has had many rescuing moments in my lifetime. I know that there are members of my family that will stand by me no matter what, and I have Vera to thank for that confidence.

I was not raised in a wealthy setting, but I was certainly not aware of needing anything. I know that my mom told me 'no' on occasion, but it is the times that she said 'yes' that have

stayed with me. Like the time she said yes to my having a chicken. I had gone to visit one of my adult aged cousins and his family who lived in Kansas City. My mom put me on the bus and sent me for two weeks. While there, living in a rural setting, I fell in love with Ricky's chickens. Fine, beautifully colored Rhode Island Reds that strode around the farmyard as though they owned it, and they did. I called my mom before my return trip on the bus and asked her if I could have one. Her reply was, "if you think you can get it home, I suppose you can." What Ricky, and now I, knew was that if you put a chicken in a cardboard box, poked little holes in the top, and then sealed it up tight – in the cover of that darkness the chicken would just go to sleep. So I mounted that bus with the 'chicken-in-a-box' on my shoulder, stowed her away in the over-head compartment racks and rode all the way back home to Oklahoma. The adventure made her laugh and the egg she got every day made her smile.

My mom is one of a subsiding breed. To me she represents a kind of Pioneer Woman – maybe because of the statue in my hometown, but there is more to it than just that. She is unafraid of hard work, she is loyal to a fault, she is spiritual to a depth few reach, and she is wise beyond her years from her life's experiences. I trust her and I love her. Vera Maninger is the best kind of mother to have and I am glad she is my mom.

## Angela

by Dana Verdino

We had gone to a Cuban restaurant for my mother's birthday. I ordered the roast chicken with rice and plantains. My poor mother was feeling sick so all she ordered was chicken soup. Turns out she doesn't much like the soup with its slimy chunks and bland broth, so she left her noodles floating in their brown water while nibbling on my plantains and Dad's black beans. For the second time, she said she likes my necklace. She is only fifty five but she repeats the same things from time to time. Getting old is hard on my mother but she doesn't take antidepressants or get botox. She is still beautiful though, with graying hair to her shoulders, a fit figure and olive-toned skin.

My mother's olive skin comes from Sicily. Her cooking comes from the area of Benevento, where my father is from. You see, my father's mother was a grand cook who was grand even in Benevento. So, my mother learned from her because my mother's mother was not a passionate (or very good) cook. Ninfina would make things like liver and onions, and overly-sweetened tomato sauce. She was not a very passionate mother either. As my mother puts it, "I don't know what she did all day. She would always forget to meet me at the bus stop. I think she drank her Scotch and hid in the bedroom." My mother can't even remember having a turkey on Thanksgiving.

When I was a baby, my mom would feed me (and my brother and sister) pastina with tomato sauce and mashed-up meatballs. Growing up, the smells of simmering tomato sauce and basil would pervade our home, and the sound of boiling water in the large pot would nearly put

me to sleep. We'd have all kinds of macaroni—cavatelli, ravioli, fusili, ziti, rigatoni, linguine, or spaghetti. Sunday dinners were the most elaborate. I'd watch my mother cook in the kitchen with her cigarettes and wine. There would be one of those kinds of pasta, along with lasagne, stuffed peppers, a warm loaf of bread, and a bowl of romano cheese that my mom would grate herself. Sometimes we'd have chicken parmigiana or eggplant parmigiana in place of the lasagne. On holidays like Christmas and Easter, we'd add an antipasto and a brasiole. My mother taught me how to make brasiole. “Pound the meat first,” she had said.

“What kind of meat?” I had heard her say the name of the meat before but like many things she said, I didn't listen until I needed to.

“Flank steak,” she said. “You pound it for a while, like ten minutes. Then you put the salami and provolone cheese into it.”

“What do you mean, *into* it? Do I cover the whole surface of the steak? Do I overlap the slices?”

“No. Leave about a half inch on the sides. Don't put too much, but enough. Then roll it up, nice and tight,” she said, mimicking the motions with her dainty hands. My hands are not dainty at all. “And you'll need to put toothpicks in it to keep it closed.”

So, I make my brasiole and it's delicious but it looks hideous. It always falls apart when I go to slice it, after it has cooked for four hours. My mother said to cook it slow, to brown it, not burn it. But it doesn't matter. It always falls apart.

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Back at *Taste of Havana*, we scooped up bits of our rice and beans and such, and we got to talking about unconventional parenting. I had watched a television show the day before about

parents who were letting their children bathe whenever they wanted to, and another set of parents who were home-schooling their children at museums.

“That's just ridiculous,” my mom said.

“Who knows?”

“You can't be for real,” she said.

“Well,” I went on. “Maybe these kids will grow up to be better adults than you and me. Or maybe these parents are making a big mistake. Who knows?”

“But how could you think that's going to help a child?” my mom insisted. “They need to go to school and interact with other kids, and they need to learn cleanliness.”

“We didn't have to learn cleanliness,” my sister said. “You cleaned everything for us.”

“That's how we taught,” my dad chimed in. “We modeled for you. And we may have spoiled you but every parent makes mistakes. Mom and I know our mistakes.”

“You all turned out to be compassionate, good-hearted people,” my mom said.

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Now that I have my own daughter, I find myself questioning all kinds of parenting techniques. There are things I want to do the same as my mother, like take my daughter on bike rides, feed the geese by the water, and make mud pies. There are also things I'd like to do different, like make my daughter peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that aren't soggy by lunchtime. When I was in elementary school, I'd sometimes sit in a bathroom stall eating the soggy peanut butter and jelly sandwich my mother packed for me. When I'd bite into the wet bread, I thought about my mom, and how she must love me too much to go cheap on the grape jelly. But there must be a better way.

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As our handsome Cuban waiter collected our plates, my mother sniffled and coughed. Before dinner, on the phone, I said to her, "Why don't you rest?" If it were me, that's what I would have done, stayed at home in bed. But my mother is a bit of a martyr. And she's neurotic. Scarlett picked up a napkin and rubbed it around her mouth, and my mother said, "Don't let her do that."

"She'll survive," I said. But I still took the napkin away and gave Scarlett a pacifier.

My husband didn't say anything, and I wished that he did. He rarely says anything against my mother.

Before I was married, my mother would tell me to marry someone with money so I could have all those things I want at the mall. "I just want to be in love," I'd said to her.

"You can love someone who is rich," she'd said, half-laughing, and half cocky.

Of course it didn't happen that way.

Then we presented our gifts on top of the white tablecloth splattered with crumbs of rice. A book and a candle from me, two Banana Republic tops from my sister, and a gold and diamond necklace in homemade newspaper wrapping from my father. "Beautiful," she said, over and over.

The waiter brought us our doggie bags and Mom said she was ready to go home to sleep but my Dad had a cake in the car. We argued about whether or not to bring it in or save it for the next weekend. Somehow my father thinks that if we don't have a cake or sing out loud, then it's not a happy birthday. I said, "I'm sorry. I'm still hungry."

"No, no," my mother said. "It's fine. Order dessert."

So we ordered dessert and decided to save the cake for Sunday. As usual, Mom didn't order a dessert. And as usual, she dug into our chocolate mousse and crème brûlée. She can

afford to have more than a few bites of a pastry but she is serious about wearing her size 27 *Citizens of Humanity* jeans. I think motherhood must have made her so disciplined and routine. Every day she wakes up, makes coffee, has a whole-grain english muffin, takes a walk, cleans the house, runs errands, makes dinner. She never drinks too much wine or spends too much money. And she always makes a good dinner. Maybe one day I will be like this.

## Blessed Are the Hands That Prepare the Food

by Jackie Gardner

Whenever I think of my mother, I see her in the kitchen. Food that is fortunate enough to pass through her hands is instantly transformed into something delectable and delightful. I used to beg, even pleaded, “Ma, you gotta open up your own restaurant.” But she always declined, preferring to do occasional, small catering jobs from her home. I believe her biggest satisfaction comes from her family declaring that what she has prepared is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, “The best we’ve ever tasted.” Neighbors and friends ask my mom to prepare food in lieu of birthday or Christmas gifts. Now that’s saying something!

Cooking was not supposed to be her destiny. Back in the day when your steps in life were largely dictated by your parents, my mother, locally known as Miss Charlotte, was supposed to be a nurse. My grandmother took the liberty of enrolling my mother in New York University’s nursing program. Mother faithfully left the house on time every day, but after one semester, dreading anatomy, biology, syringes and the like, she began detouring to the movie theaters. She preferred pots and pans to bedpans! The school eventually notified my grandmother about Miss Charlotte’s lack of attendance.

Back then, my grandmother was a warden. So when it was discovered mom was not going to nursing school, there was only one-sided yelling. (My mother wouldn’t dare argue with my grandmother.) After my grandmother calmed down, my mom simply expressed what she would prefer and my grandmother, unhappily, gave in to my mother’s desires.

I imagine my African American grandmother was trying to keep her daughter out of the kitchen. Although an excellent seamstress by trade, she also had cleaned people's houses, washed their laundry, and of course, cooking was part of the job. I can still see my late grandmother's double boiler melting the semi-sweet chocolate bars for her buttery chocolate layer cake. She probably thought nursing would afford her Charlotte a better life, and it would not be considered progress if she had to see her daughter *slaving* away in someone's kitchen, the way so many of our foremothers had to endure in order to survive.

However, Miss Charlotte was bound and determined to be a cook. She enrolled herself in and graduated from the New York Institute of Dietetics. From there, she cooked for many organizations, including daycare centers, senior citizen's centers, churches, schools; and more famously, in the executive kitchen of Atlantic Records.

I, myself, did not get bitten by the "cooking bug" until my late teens. Well, sort of.

I believe when God hands out talents and gifts, he infuses mothers with many attributes, including an honorary doctorate degree in psychology; the ever-knowing, all seeing invisible third eye; and expert marksmanship, so that when a shoe is thrown at you due to inappropriate behavior, it is able to turn corners and smack squarely into your behind.

So when my mother remarked, out of the blue, "All of the young men you bring home love to eat, so you probably won't ever get married 'cause you don't know how to cook," I was too naïve to recognize this as reverse psychology. Matter of fact, we didn't even have a dialogue about it or a debate. She just said it and moved on to a totally different subject, leaving me stunned with the reality that my dream wedding would likely never come to pass.

I distinctly remember marinating on her words for a few days. She was right. I couldn't tell the difference between a head of lettuce and a head of cabbage. Although I was conscripted to work with her on every catering job, I hadn't remembered one recipe.

After *secretly* agreeing with her – because God forbid a teenager admitted to their parents they're right – I decided I really needed to take advantage of the priceless asset that I had at my disposal: a walking, talking, cooking encyclopedia. And that's how I became my mother's apprentice. (Of course, the fear of always a bridesmaid, never a bride, played a big part in my decision.) I became a human sponge and absorbed all she had to offer. And now, years later, I've ventured into the catering business myself.

When I signed my first catering contract for 150 people, I envisioned mom and me, elbow to elbow, mixing it up in the kitchen. But due to an impending surgery, she was unavailable. I called her early that morning, a complete and utter mess. I felt like I couldn't jump from the fire into the frying pan without her by my side. Even though my friends had declared me an above average cook, and my cooking skills helped to snag my husband of now almost twenty-five years, my self-confidence and self-esteem had evaporated.

Amidst a puddle of tears, my mother reminded me that she had taught me well. She coaxed me back from despair, assuring me that everything would be perfectly fine. Her steadfast faith in my ability helped me to overcome my doubt that I couldn't possibly follow in her footsteps. And you know what? The event turned out to be a marvelous success.

I may be on my mother's heels, however, there are two of her many signature dishes I cannot master, nor have I met anyone else who can either. And that is Miss Charlotte's fried chicken and her coconut cake with fruit filling.

When I was young, during one of my mother's Pokeno parties, (famous in our neighborhood because of the smorgasbord of food, especially her fried chicken), I overheard an interesting conversation between mom and her cousin, Louise, about the chicken that was frying. Louise wanted to help mom and kept asking, "When will the chicken be ready?"

My mother said, "If you listen, it will tell you."

I was like, "What??? What did she just say? *The chicken talks?*" I was glad Louise asked her to explain. She was clearly just as perplexed as I was. My mother said, "When you first dip the chicken in the hot grease, it has a lot to say. It is loud... like firecrackers. When it's done, it gets quiet, like a whisper. That's when you know it's ready."

In truth, I should not have been surprised. I've always known my mother has a special relationship with food. For her, it's not just a slab of meat on a cutting board or a dirt speckled collard green leaf just plucked from the garden. She sees food as something she can shape, mold, and transform -- but not for herself. She does it for the pleasure of others. That is what is so beautiful about it.

My mother also has an incredible palette. Her tongue is blessed with the Seasoning Spirit of Discernment. She is able to pluck out a dish's ingredients deftly, or just as swiftly, what is missing. I have been on the latter end more times than I care to admit, but that's okay. I may have been salty at first, but always appreciative of her expertise.

And no matter how many times you do Miss Charlotte's recipes verbatim, even if you stand there and watch her, it is just not always going to taste like hers, because that *special something* is missing that she and other culinary artists possess. There is a saying in the culinary world: "Don't cook while you're angry or upset because it will affect the dish you're preparing."

If that's indeed the case, our own innate energy affects the foods we prepare. When my mother prepares food, it is always with unadulterated love. (And I believe the food knows it too.) So while you may believe that Aunt Lulu left out a key element of a recipe to preserve a family secret, the absent ingredient may actually be missing from your DNA.

Mom recently turned seventy-five. During the past five years, she has endured hip and knee replacement while managing rheumatoid arthritis. Most days, she hobbles down the stairs, greets her walker a fine *good morning*, and strolls over to her rolling chair in the kitchen. She then glides back and forth from refrigerator to cabinet to stove, whipping up goodies and treats to her family's delight. These days it's her six-year-old grandson who dons an apron, that fits more like cape, so he can assist his best friend, Nana.

After all of these years, her cakes are still in high demand. I've had many different coconut cakes, as my midsection can attest to, and none can even come close to mom's version. She may have never opened her own restaurant, but we all know where to go for some good ol' Southern food, and that will always be Miss Charlotte's.

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## **About My Mother**

**by Tammy Holloway**

She lay in the bed and cried. Not even 24 hours later and now the pillow beside her was empty. He was just there yesterday holding her hand. 52 years with the same man and now she was on her own. The love of her life was gone.

“My mom is a real live superwoman!” At least that’s how I describe her. Mom is a much more appropriate name for her. The word “mother” makes me think of someone who does not have a relationship with their own mom. Friends of ours even called her mom. It just came natural. “Help yourselves because if you don’t you’ll starve.” That was a famous phrase Mom spoke around our house. Mom meant it in the best way of course with a little humor thrown in. Mom has her moments of being funny. I can picture some of the faces she would make. She always has a comeback so be prepared. Our house was warm. Mom never sat down when we had company. She would prepare these big meals for everyone and not think twice about it. There were many years of having to feed a house full of people so I think she just never stopped. There has always been plenty of food no matter how big the crowd.

Dad was a meat and potatoes kind of guy. It was always something affordable though. No steak dinners for us. There was never any money in our family but for some reason we were rich. We were not rich like most people picture. We were rich in love. We had some of the most loving parents in the world. The meal on the table was good because it was always made with love. To this day, I am not too much of a steak eater and I always try to duplicate many of Mom’s great recipes. I remember the stuffed peppers. I loved the insides but never ate the pepper. All that hard work Mom did but never said anything to me and Dad would always take

my pepper and eat it himself. Dinner time was always a great memory. Mom would have us girls (there were 4 of us) set the table in a proper way. Fork on the left of the plate, knife and spoon on the right, with a folded napkin under the knife and spoon. Everyone had a designated seat also. Dinner was conversation. First we would say the Lord's Prayer together. We had to excuse ourselves after we were done eating but Mom never got angry, just kind of peered at us in such a way that we knew not to tread on that one. We always obeyed although she may say differently.

My dad was a police officer. I couldn't imagine being married to a police officer, especially in Detroit during the riots. Mom went through quite a bit back then. He retired from the police department after 27 years and moved the family to Florida. Maybe my mom thought the pain and worry would be over. Maybe Florida was retirement where they could have time to enjoy and relax. The next turn of events was even more traumatic. They say losing a child is the worst possible pain. Well, Mom didn't lose a child but I think it was just as bad because it dragged on and on for years. I remember Mom crying out of the blue. She would be thinking about my sister, Nancy.

Mom went through quite a bit when we were teenagers. One of my sisters ran away when we moved to Florida. She wasn't happy about the move since she was pulled from high school. That is a bad time for that age I guess. I didn't act out from the move but went down the wrong path and became quite the party animal. My hours were late and the friends I kept were not exactly what Mom wanted and I can see why now. Then there was Nancy. She caused Mom more grief than anyone could ever want but no fault of her own. She was held captive by her ex mother-in-law for 8 years. Mom struggled through years of pain wondering where Nancy was. Doctor's said she had only weeks to live when they found her. What a nightmare. Mom was relieved to have Nancy back but the pain remained. It was all over the news. Mom didn't care

about all the press. They avoided cameras and just wanted Nancy back. That is another story in itself. She was rehabilitated and moved down to Florida. Mom and Nancy have a strong bond and spend quite a bit of time together.

Family gatherings were always entertaining. If we attended a wedding, Mom would be right in the middle of the action. She loves to dance so she would always be the first one on the dance floor, pulling on anyone's arm to dance with her. Dad wasn't much on dancing, bless his heart, but he loved watching mom dance. She sure could move too. She would be shaking her hips and moving her feet faster than I could keep up. Her smile would light up the room as she danced. She attends line dancing classes every Wednesday and has for quite a few years now.

Dad just recently passed in January and this is a very difficult time for her. She stays busy but I am afraid the moment still hasn't hit her. They were inseparable. They volunteered together at Give Kids the World. Both were very heavily involved in the Catholic Church. Mom & Dad were Eucharistic ministers and ushers during church. In the Catholic religion, Eucharistic ministers help hand out communion to the congregation. I went to church a couple of times while I was visiting. I really enjoyed watching Mom and Dad working side by side. It was so heartwarming that it would bring tears to my eyes. Mom was also involved in many of the other activities after church too like the bake sale, the rummage sale and the angel tree program. Of course the activities were all set aside while Mom was caring for Dad when he was sick.

Once again, Mom's strength was to be tested. The last days were very difficult. We were all there. Mom would lay with Dad and hold his hand when he could no longer get out of bed. Mom would share Dad's hand with us. She would say; "You girls can hold his hand during the day. I get to hold his hand all night" and she did...up until the very last breath he took at 4:01 in

the morning. That is a moment we will all remember forever. Mom was lost. She was religious so she knew he was with God but it was still hard letting go. Her face did not lie. Her life partner was gone. She smiled briefly at the thought of Dad passing on the date that he did. Dad was always one for noticing things like 1/11/11. We told Mom we were surprised he didn't go at 1:11. It gave her a moment of Dad's humor which seemed to comfort her in some way.

I received a call from her just the other day. She sounded the best she has in a long time. The excitement in her voice was that of a teenager getting ready to go to a concert. Her best friend for years has been her next door neighbor, Lorraine. She called Mom to go out and dress up as if they were back in the fifties again. Mom said they all were pregnant back then and suggested they all dress up as pregnant women from the fifties! I couldn't believe my mom suggested that, but she did and I thought that was great. She had it all planned out. There were four of them and one woman still had a husband. He was going to wear a sign that said "Expecting quads".....The smile and laughter coming out of me puzzled my husband because he knew I was talking to my mom. This wasn't a normal response. I loved hearing her laugh and talk it up like she used to do before everything hit her. After I hung up with her, she called back shortly after and said the event was cancelled. My heart was broken because I knew what it meant to her. The same as the teenager getting ready to go to the concert and finding out it got cancelled. Lorraine immediately asked her to join them for a trip to Lakeland for a whole day of fun which included lunch and dinner. Mom didn't hesitate, she replied "I'm in!" and that is exactly how she told me.

I realize Mom is keeping herself busy to keep her mind off the loss of her husband. I lost my husband several years ago in a car crash. I can feel some of what she is going through because of the loss of my husband. I did not have 52 years with him but the pain was very real. I

can completely understand the schedule she is making for herself if she feels any of that pain. I was still there when the first card had to be filled out. It was my nephews' birthday. He turned 21 the day after my dad's funeral. She was leaning down to write in the card and stopped. She looked at me with a tear of sadness in her eyes and said; "I almost wrote Love Grandma and Grandpa".

If I had the opportunity to become a mother I would do things exactly the same as she did. I feel the way I was raised was the best example of how to raise your kids I have ever seen. We had ups, we had downs, we had sadness and we had joy. Most importantly, we had love.

# My Mother, My Muse

by Karla Stover

“Pardon me. Do you have any Grey Poupon?”

The question was asked by a lady, leaning out of an aerial gondola that was traversing the treetops of Costa Rica’s Braulio Carrillo National Forest. She was directing her question to a group of people in a gondola below. After a pause, during which mouths dropped open, those who understood English laughed, and the lady continued on her way, a happy camper.

That’s my 86 year old mom—the funnest person I know.

Mom has a zest for life that all my friends love. “Bring you’re mom,” they’re always saying, if I’m asked to some social function. So just recently, we’ve attended a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party, a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party, a vintage fashion show, and an egg roll-making class put on by ladies of the local Cambodian-Episcopal Church. The egg roll-making class was proof-positive that lack of a common language is no barrier to communication when Mom’s involved. Mom and I left with many invitations to come back and just visit.

One thing I envy is that Mom takes no prisoners, and does things we all want to do. Once, when looking for something in a one-stop-shopping store and unable to find a clerk, she had my dad step away (he wigs out when she does these things), and shouted, “Is there a clerk anywhere in the store?” Needless to say, she got the help she needed. Another time, (my personal favorite), when a checkout clerk had been paging unsuccessfully for the perennial price check, Mom decided to help out. “Price check on register four!” she shouted. “Way to go lady,” said the man in line behind her.

The thing is, Mom only wants the courtesy and respect we're all due, and her time is as important to her as it is for all of us. On occasion she's even left the doctor's office without seeing the doctor, telling the receptionist that she was on time for her appointment and that since the doctor couldn't be on time also, that she'd reschedule.

Of course, she gets me into trouble, too. A few years ago, when we were at the end of a string of traffic and trying to get out of a little town called Tahuya, I rolled down the window and shouted, "My mother's pregnant and has gone into labor. I've got to get out of here!" Mom and I were in stitches, laughing. The Deputy Sheriff, directing traffic came running up, took a look at Mom, and had to laugh himself. It's my claim and I'm sticking to it that Mom put me up to it. It's Mom's claim that the Sheriff only laughed because her dye job needed a touchup.

Mom is also one of the kindest people I know. For years an elderly, childless couple lived across the street from us. Mom was the only one in the neighborhood who would go over and visit. Her reward was to find out that the gentleman had lived a fascinating life, traveling through South America in his youth, and that he was highly gifted. Once, he took her down to his basement and showed her the murals he'd painted on all cement the walls. He was also a potter, and gave her a small arts-and-crafts teapot he'd made.

Next door to this couple is a Viet Nam vet—no family to speak of—and, as a result of the war, not really able to have any kind of normal relationship. He and Mom are good buddies, though. Mom sends him snacks when she bakes, and he carries in my parents' garbage can every week.

Once a month, Mom and Dad have brunch with some of their old high school friends—class of '41 and '43, respectively. They all meet after church, (which Mom refers to as "Boning for my finals.") However, for those folks she can't visit with in person or by phone, she falls back

on old-fashioned ink-on-paper correspondence. She types her letters on a vintage, Royal, manual typewriter. When 1999 became 2000, she put a label on it that said “Y 2K Compliant.

When I was thirteen, and had to take cooking in school, I felt insulted that our first project was how to broil a grapefruit. Mom had taught me to cook two years previously when I was eleven, and she had to go to work. I baked cakes and cookies, and helped get dinner started, because in our family, in spite of my brother’s perennial sports practices, we always ate dinner together.

Mom was and is a good cook, but sometimes her patience was sorely tried. While my brother and I were growing up my dad loved to take us all camping, and we often took off for a campground in Mt Rainier on Friday afternoons. This meant Mom had to cook ahead and freeze meals for the weekend. Since we live in Washington State, we often got caught in rain. I have a vivid memory of huddling in an old tent in a torrential downpour while Mom tried to chip a ball of frozen spaghetti into a frying pan in order to heat it on our little Coleman stove. To this day, my brother shudders over the memory of “fried spaghetti.” My opinion is (no doubt from a woman’s point of view) what a heck of a good sport she was.

I have a thousand wonderful memories of things—such as Mom’s making matching mother and daughter and Shirley Temple doll dresses for the three of us, of Mom as a Day Camp counselor and learning to hate the song *Found a Peanut* but singing it anyway, of helping me with a sewing project after she got home from work and had cooked dinner and done the dishes, of sharing her books and her clothes and most of all, her time with me. And when I hear Helen Reddy sing *You and Me Against the World*, I always cry.

I saw a tee-shirt once that said, “I can’t write a memoir. My childhood was normal!” I agree. My mom has always been my hero and my best friend.



## ABOUT MY MOTHER: NOW I UNDERSTAND

by Betsy Jeffery

My earliest memories of my mother are her quiet nature, her smile and warm hugs, and her grey, eventually soft, beautiful white hair, a change that occurred in her early thirties. A year or so ago, however, my niece resurrected a picture taken of both my parents before their engagement. Sitting on the lawn outside her family home is a beautiful young woman with brown hair and a gentle smile caressed in the arms of a handsome young man who very visibly adores her. This picture transformed my definition of my mother and prompted me to look at her - personality, character, life - from a new perspective.

Alice was a stay-at-home mom in the very best meaning of that title. She was always available as a support system for my siblings and me, a gift extended to grandchildren and great-grandchildren in later years. She seldom was angry, but when she was - Watch out! My most specific memory of this phenomenon is a hair brush hurled across the room with enough force to break in half when my "It hurts!" shrieks as she brushed my hair pushed her too far. More characteristic of her nature, she patiently taught me to sew, correcting all my mistakes when I became totally frustrated. My knitting lessons and projects followed the same pattern. But she stuck with me. She would drive us to school, and by us I mean a carful of neighborhood kids. She was that integral part of daily life that supports and loves without seeking recognition or attention.

It was her quiet dependability that led me to take her for granted without a thought about her emotions and situation. Or maybe I just didn't possess the insight and empathy then that I have gained as an adult and a mother myself. For whatever reason, I missed my mother's strength. She was mom, plain and simple, taking care of business and all of us.

Years after moving away from my hometown, I was asked to describe the strongest person I knew. My spontaneous answer was “My mother!”. Not only had she dedicated her life to supporting her family, but she had withstood personal disappointments and tragedies with grace, always caring for the people around her. She lost her second child, a baby girl, at birth. My father passed away in 1989, my brother in 1991. These events shattered the quiet stability of her life. And yet she kept going, maintaining her home until 2005 when the stairs and the daily upkeep were too much for her increasing age and diminishing health. She did not, however, relinquish her independence readily. My sister recognized a couple of years prior to her move that her driving was becoming a danger. But Mom, of course, didn’t agree. Priscilla ultimately had to disable her car to prevent her from driving. When it came time to go to live with my sister and her husband, she would continuously ask to go home.

After she moved in with Priscilla, my visits with Mom took on a deeper texture. I would fly back to stay with her when my sister was on vacation. I became the caregiver, the one in control of the daily routine. The role reversal was strange at first, but we would settle into it each visit. Much of the time we would sit and talk. She was now more forgetful and repeated the same stories, yet each retelling added depth to her life and personality. Her strongest memories were of her own childhood and youth: falling and breaking her nose, playing with her siblings around their Manchester home, learning to drive. The people of that time came back to life for her. Through her stories, I saw clearly the foundations of her personal belief system: Love your family and work as hard as you can to support them. Complaints and self-pity are a waste of time and energy. Accept what is and build on it. Enjoy your life. Have fun.

In January 2010, days away from her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday, my mother passed away. In her last days, we were able to do for her what she had done for all of us for years - love her, support her,

share some laughter with her. My sister, my nieces and their spouses, my nephew, and I spent a day sitting with her, reminiscing and laughing at our great adventures with her. We also allowed ourselves to feel sadness at losing her, an emotion she would not have indulged in herself, but one she would understand in us. Although only semi-conscious, Mom was an active participant. She felt the family presence and deep, deep love.

Even in her last hours, Mom's strength was observable. She was in a different realm then, but she was clearly experiencing the change actively. Her eyes were closed, yet I was sure she was seeing something, greeting someone. The medication was working and she was resting, but her legs were moving like she was walking. She reached out her hand to grasp something, or someone. She motioned "Come here. Come closer. I see you. I want to touch you." I couldn't help but speculate about that moment for her. Does she see Dad? My brother Tom? Her parents or siblings? Or maybe her first lost little girl Susan? What is this transitional time like? Is it the same for everyone or sculpted individually by the life lived? What form and age has she taken on? I know my chosen answers to these questions. My mom is being embraced by every one of those people and countless more friends and family. The transition is quiet, comforting, and joyous because that is how she lived her life. And she is once again that beautiful young woman in the picture - back in the loving arms of her handsome young man.

