

The White Rock Raspberry Soda Angel
(On Health and Hypochondria)

By Linda Frazee Baker ©

My mother was a person of dark, implacable angers, ferocious and unpredictable as the katabatic winds of Antarctica. These winds have their origin in ice-chilled air that falls off the Antarctic plateau of its own density, rushes over the mountains, and down the sea below. Once there, it churns the waters ceaselessly in one direction, generating waves so huge that mariners unfortunate enough to sail these seas call them “a place without God.”

My mother’s angers are harder to describe and, even at this distance of more than half a century, far less susceptible of explanation. I confess even now I cannot understand them. I can, however, recall in precise detail how her smooth face, so carefully made up with base foundation and cake rouge massaged into her cheeks and dusted with sweet-smelling powder would suddenly and unexpectedly tighten, how her perfectly plucked dark brows, so different from my childish blonde straggly ones, would form perfect half-circles above her eyes as if pulled by two invisible strings. As her lips, so different from my own in their bold, thick vertical lines and fearlessness of speech, would begin to darken as much from strong feeling as from the Revlon lipstick she liked best, called Certainly Red, I would begin to tremble. I recognized as these signals of the approaching storm.

Then like rain after summer lightning would come the litany of my many sins, the Homeric catalogue of my hopeless failings. How ridiculous, how trivial they seem to me now! My little attic room not picked up; my bed not made; the rubber band on one of my two neat, hated braids come undone; a ritualistic thank-you note for a neighbor’s gift still unwritten two days after the fact. At such moments, nothing I did was right. How could it be? I was selfish, lazy, careless—but most importantly and worst of all, ungrateful. Yes, ungrateful for all she had done, and did, for me. I could feel only a glimmer of relief when I heard the dread voice approaching its familiar peroration.

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth”—and here her eyes would look out into a far distant future, into that space where I would no longer trouble her life—“it is to have a thankless child.”

She would look at me then with that cold, basilisk gaze that even more than her words impressed upon me a sense of my utter worthlessness. I was terrified all the more because she was so beautiful. Beautiful with that exquisitely arranged face, the still jet-black hair arranged a single, soft coil around the nape of her neck, a silver filigree earring in the shape of a question mark dangling below each ear.

On such occasions, I would retreat into myself like a snail poked with a stick. I would clatter down the stairs of our apartment, not stopping until I reached the little strip of concrete some blocks away that we who lived in Elmhurst, Queens, called a *park*. For the next few hours, I would take a swing back and forth in ever-more-dangerous arcs, or gyrate with clumsy inelegance around the metal bars we called a *Jungle Gym*, as if seeking to add physical injury to my psychic plight.

Only when the dinner hour was nigh (how many hours had I spent holed up, solitary in my little attic room, reading poems that made me think in words like *nigh!*) would I walk slowly back to the little house on Judge Street of which we rented the top two floors. I would go up the stairs with great trepidation, filled with anxiety as to whether the tongue-lashing would continue or whether—equally possible—my mother would have forgotten it entirely and be cheerful again as she always demanded I be, a happy “Pollyanna” self. There was no way to know which of her faces would greet me as I jiggled my key in the ancient door.

But at some very early point in childhood, I cannot remember when, I understood that I had the power to end these rages. It was easy: all I had to do was get sick. Not pretend to be sick, but be really, demonstrably ill. Anything would do—a snuffle, an upset stomach, an ear pain, one of the mysterious and short-lived gastric disturbances that punctuated my childhood and have continued, alas, throughout my life.

At once I would be put to bed, not in my own attic room with its sloping roof, its threadbare, once navy wall-to-wall carpet, its radiator that clanked and hissed all winter long, making the space unbearably hot. No—as soon as I had announced the nature of my malady, my mother would put me in the bed where she and my father slept, down on the second floor nearer the kitchen and the bath, the cooler air and windows of the living room. There I would rest, deliciously peaceful no matter how high my fever or how troubled my bowels.

Once having settled me in, my mother would begin the process of taking charge and doing, as she did in all the ways that did not involve feeling, “the right thing.” This consisted first and foremost of calling the family doctor and demanding he make what in those days was known as “a house call.”

“Dr. Read?” she would say, the black dial-up telephone receiver in one hand.

I noted that a tiny tremor and seductiveness had come into her voice. I thought my mother had a crush on him; he had softer manners and was almost as good-looking as my father.

“Dr. Read, can you come this afternoon?” she went on. “Linda is sick again.”

By early afternoon his black Cadillac would be double-parked outside on our quiet leafy 1950s street—a visible sign that my illness was real and serious, a

rupture in our everyday, untroubled life. As the clang of the doorbell downstairs announced his arrival, my mother would fuss a bit at her hair and glance briefly at the mirror in a final lipstick check. Always she would be in an unwontedly good mood. And I, too, would be happy even if Dr. Read put a shot of penicillin in what he delicately called my “sitter” or washed out a wax-filled ear with a steel tube that in my memory looks just like the aluminum cookie press my mother used to make *Spritz* cookies at Christmas. For I was safe now, I was invincible. For the foreseeable future, the storm had subsided.

As soon as Dr. Read had left, I would put in my order for Velveeta cheese—a favorite since I had as yet no acquaintance with real cheese—together with the Premium Saltine crackers that my mother and everyone else in our family mysteriously believed would “settle the stomach.” Most wonderful of all, my mother would fulfill my wish that she go out to Key Food and buy me some White Rock raspberry soda, a brand now defunct as the nearby Durkee Spice Factory on Corona Avenue I passed every day on my way to school. Every morning this industrial facility, so strangely moored in mid-central Queens, wafted a scent of cinnamon and nutmeg all over our quiet neighborhood. I loved this emanation just as much as I loved sipping glass after glass of the delectable soda, and the way my mother set no limits on how much I might have of the fuchsia-colored liquid she brought to me on a small wooden tray. In my memory White Rock Raspberry Soda tastes clear and sparkling as its bubbles, like a child’s version of the drink called *sparkling burgundy* my parents allowed themselves only once a year, on New Year’s Eve.

The White Rock Raspberry Soda label is an image of a water nymph of surprising grace, drawn carefully in thin black lines against a background of pale pink. Balancing herself delicately as she sits on a large rock, her large, insect-like wings held back behind her, she contemplates with angelic calm her own image in a reflecting pool. She echoed both my own unnatural peacefulness on such days—a state that when I was well, I believed was destined only for others—and a proud, contented femininity of the kind granted my mother but which, I believed, would forever be denied to me.

I do not know now whether I was able to bring on the minor afflictions that brought some respite in the ongoing guerrilla war between my mother and me, or if I was simply ill the way children often are. I only know that shortly after I turned eight, a new and chronic ailment appeared in my life over which I had no control. This my mother called “the asthma.”

Night after night I would climb the stairs slowly and dejectedly up to my little attic room. I would turn on the pale pink plastic night light by the side of the bed, plump the pillows behind me as high as I could, lean back against them, and close my eyes. Now and then I would open them only to see how the light cast irregular shadows on the worn dark blue carpet, on the sloping roof’s wings. Then I would wait for the asthma to arrive with the same trepidation I would feel if a goblin were

about to jump out of the locked closets under the eaves where our landlady kept her old, unused furniture.

Next to my bed, an ancient radiator clanked and hissed, sending a dry heat into the little attic room; the pink plastic nightlight I insisted on having next to the bed threw ghostly shadows over the worn, threadbare carpet; my desk covered over with papers and open books; a shelf of much-loved dolls. Half-convinced that goblins lurked in the closets under the eaves that the landlady had locked up and forbidden us to use, I would curl both legs up under me as far as I could and wished for morning.

And, eventually, before sleep intervened, it would. Air, of which I had never been conscious before, would travel down the passageway as it had always done but stop short, as if some obstacle now kept it from going all the way to the bottom. I would inhale again, I would try to breathe more deeply, watching my rib cage go farther in and out. No matter what I did, the air simply would not go all the way down. Soon every attempted breath ended in a wheeze, as if deep within my lungs was a violin on which someone kept playing a single note, over and over. This rasping grew louder and louder; soon I felt panic, as if I were drowning.

“The asthma,” Dr. Read explained, was in a different category of illness than upset stomachs and ear infections. The latter were ordinary and real. The asthma was either an allergy or else *psychosomatic*. Dr. Read recommended allergy tests followed by allergy shots if the tests were positive. The tests would take several weeks and might be a bit painful. For sure they would be expensive.

“But don’t worry, Linda,” he said, turning to me with what I recognized as his very best bedside manner. “The needles are very small.”

The dark curl around the nape of my mother’s neck trembled with fury. The brown eyes flashed. My mother pursed her lips. I could feel myself becoming nervous.

We didn’t need any expensive allergy testing. We didn’t have allergies. We were strong, from immigrant stock. Our ancestors had come over on the boat from Ireland and Germany. Allergy testing was for the children of doctors and lawyers, people who coddled themselves and went to doctors all the time when they weren’t really sick.

Dr. Read looked thoughtful. My mother looked at him being thoughtful. He looked back. Even at age eight, I could see he was a gorgeous in his blue pin-striped suit, starched white shirt, and gold cufflinks, all similar to the suits my father wore to his low-paying white collar job in the city. I could sense the chemistry between them, so similar to the chemistry between my mother and my father but less complicated. I watched them carefully, wishing I could some day be as beautiful as my mother and trying to understand the mysterious ways of adults.

Then Dr. Read took out his gold-tipped pen from an inner pocket and scribbled illegibly on his prescription pad.

“You can give her this when she has an attack, but try to not to use it any more than you have to,” he said.

“What is it?” my mother said, holding the prescription suspiciously.

“It’s cortisone,” Dr. Read answered.

The next time I had an attack, I thought my mother was unusually perturbed. Always before she had greeted my illnesses with a “take charge” attitude that bespoke her administrative competence, skills that before I was born and my father had insisted she quit had gotten her promoted from a secretarial job to being the first woman manager in the Household Finance Corporation. Strangely, the asthma had changed her. For the first time in our life together she didn’t seem to know what to do.

“It’s all in your head,” said my mother when next I had an attack.

She pointed to her own soft, impeccably curled dark hair.

“Stop being such a hypochondriac. You know what Dr. Read said. It’s *psychosomatic*.”

She tried out this new word experimentally, as if she was not sure what to think about this new development. Still, I recognized the tone of scorn.

“Just brush it off, baby,” she said sternly. “Just ignore it. That’s what I do.”

I felt crushed. “In my head” or not, I knew I couldn’t stop an attack once it started. But some part of me believed her, some part of me viewed asthma as another one of my deplorable failings, of which I had so many.

I was nine now and had already read so many books in the children’s section of the Elmhurst Public Library on Saturday afternoons, I was able to convince the librarian I should be allowed into the adult reference room where the encyclopedias were kept. I began with the entries for *asthma*. Asthma, I learned, was an inflammation of tiny sacs deep in the lungs known as *alveoli*. The alveoli lined the bronchial tubes through which air passed. In normal functioning, the alveoli absorbed the oxygen the body needed into the bloodstream and excreted carbon dioxide; in an attack, the alveoli would swell up with blood, blocking this normal flow.

Every night I lay propped up on pillows, bolt upright next to a little pink plastic nightlight that I insisted be kept on all night. As the attack began, I would remember the line drawings of the different phases of an attack I had pored over in the *Britannica*, the *Americana*, and *Collier’s Encyclopedia*. I would imagine the alveoli getting redder and

redder deep within my chest, increasingly constricting the life-nourishing flow between their permeable membranes and my blood vessels as if this could magically stop the attack.

I was convinced that if I could just understand the alveoli better, I could control them. Each night in that little attic room, I would try hard to stand it, to “brush off” the discomfort that inched, moment by moment, toward panic. But I never could. In the end I would reach out, half-lurching off the bed, for the prescription bottle, shake out a little white pill, and swallow it without bothering to go downstairs to get water.

In those days I thought my mother understood nothing about me, or illness. Yet about “the asthma,” my mother, whose stamina and analytic brilliance in a later era would have well suited her to be a CEO and who, I believe would have had far less trouble than I completing my several graduate degrees and would not have been so foolish as to do them in English—well, my mother was, in one way, actually right.

For the day I left home I learned what was needed to cure me: the knowledge that I was forever beyond reach of her harsh words, her view of me as an incurable failure. This knowledge proved permanently successful against the asthma.

Other ailments, alas—many and varied—followed.

In adulthood, plagued by unexplained gastric pain that felt like knives stabbing at the four corners of my large intestine, I consulted a specialist in psychogenic ailments.

Dr. A.—Brazilian and trained at Johns Hopkins—had a more global, and more intriguing, explanation than anything I had read about the alveoli. My illnesses, he said, were *psychogenic*. In me the membrane between the mind and the body was viscous. Sometimes one controlled, now the other. No one understood why this was true of some people and not of others.

Raising his hands in the air to mimic the pathways in my brain, Dr. A told me that in most people negative emotions--anger, fear--are generated in response to a stimulus and then expelled in speech, in a physical action, a thought or a dream. Not so with me. Here Dr. A's hand suddenly took a 90-degree turn.

"In you, *Leen-da*," he said, giving this the Spanish or perhaps Portuguese pronunciation, “the processing departs from the normal route and the emotion turns into illness.”

He put his hands down and I thought, absurdly, of a priest who had finished blessing the congregation, or raising the Host on high. This image, deriving perhaps from my knowledge that Dr. A. was a lapsed Catholic, reflected either my faith in his

ability to help me or a hope that he was engaged in some mystical ceremony from his native Brazil that might be longer lasting and have fewer side effects than a modern pill.

I was not sure which of these interpretations was correct but I did not care. Doctors had been both to me in different times, different places.

Put back the yogis; then how I always knew just before an attack of parapsoriasis and then while I couldn't stop it, I knew when it would stop, clearing the leprosy out of my body in a day or less.

Once he stopped a gastric attack in mid-force by interpreting a dream I had just told him. I was grateful. His interpretation and my ability to recognize its rightness had saved me several weeks of distress and considerable weight loss.

Once, Dr. A told me, Hopkins had brought some yogis over from India, and the psychiatrists had watched them raise and lower their heart beats and blood pressure on command. He was as excited as I ever saw him when he described this. Traditional Western medicine had no explanation for how this could happen, but he had seen that it did.

So at last I have an explanation of sorts.

Some people learned to work the membrane both ways although

"Can't you just re-wire my pathways?" I asked hopefully.

Dr. A. me looked sadly.

"Ah, *Leen-da*," he said in his soft Brazilian/unAmerican voice. "If I could just have gotten you when you were sixteen."

Always hoping for an explanation that would satisfy, I asked if there were any theories about why in people like me the boundary between the mind and the body as permeable, like the distance between water and wind.

My mother's leniency toward me in ordinary illnesses, he said, may have contributed to my learning early the idea that illness could protect me from her anger. At least, he added, that was one of the theories as to why some people had psychogenic illness and not others.

So in the end I got an explanation of sorts.

I accept that I am different.

I faced my *parapsoriasis*, appearing when I was in a particular mood and vanishing once I was not, covering my body overnight with red, itchy sores. I faced my irritating but not terribly painful ailment, *eosinophilic esophagitis*, an allergic inflammation known as “asthma of the esophagus.” I am mindful that other people have far worse things to contend with.

I learned that “the asthma” achieved not that reliable kindness I craved but instead a blinkered incomprehension from my mother. That did not stop me from generating ailment after ailment, as if the capacity to learn in this one respect had stopped in me at a very early age.

Yet that image of the loved, spoiled child I was for those brief moments stays with me. The quest for that calm seems simultaneously foolish and wrong-headed, understandable and inevitable.

Recently I googled the White Rock Raspberry Soda nymph. She was easy to find, and I stared at her for quite a while. I like to think that the White Rock Raspberry Soda nymph and my mother’s fussing over me when I had a cold—all these memories, so deep and ancient now, so etched on my psyche as to be unassailable—have given me some protection through the emotional chasms of adulthood, where all paths are uncertain and all outcomes, like those of medical treatments, are unknown. For the first time I wondered if the nymph was admiring her image in the still water or if she was seeking to understand that most unfathomable thing, the self.

END