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She and I

By Linda Frazee Baker

It is simply life, and an expression of life
can always evade us. We can never tell
life, one to another, although sometimes
we think we can.

--Stephen Crane, *War Memories*

All daughters have difficulties with their mothers and all mothers with their daughters, but the central fact of my life is that I did not, and could not, love my mother.

I cannot describe the effect of her anger on me, so oft and so unpredictably expressed, always and only “within the family”—that is, when she and I were alone or if just my father were present. Like a flamethrower, it would come without warning, then disappear into air, leaving nothing behind. A spontaneous combustion no sooner begun than ended. Yet to everyone else she was wonderful. My father, my cousins, her friends, my husband—all of them loved her, all found her admirable.

Once, towards end of her life, we drove a day to see her, my husband and I, as we so often did, to see if she was all right, or as all right as she could be. She had by then a heart problem; osteoporosis; glaucoma; the beginnings of dementia; and a cancer she had decided to ignore but had not yet bothered to mention. She was fine,

she said, just fine. She didn't need anything. Why had I come? I was just being—another one of my deficiencies—a *worrywart*.

My eye fell on some crewelwork she had done and hung over the ancient couch. Some white and pink flowers against a gray background, done to a printed pattern like the paint-by-numbers picture opposite it: a crudely drawn sailboat in a garish harbor. All *kitsch* to me; to her, achievements in a life where achievement was now hard to come by.

Along the length of the frame, I noticed a line of dust. *Dust!* I had never seen dust in her house before, not in any of her houses: a visible sign of the decay within. I was deeply shaken. An emptiness opened up in front of me. What would the world be like without the fixed banks of her stubbornness, her independence, her anger?

I mumbled something stupid and incoherent about the crewelwork, the frame, *dust*.

Her features contorted into a sneer.

"You're a fine one to talk," she said. "What did *you* ever do for me anyway?"

"I saw it coming," said my husband, who up to that moment had loved her "I tried to warn you, but there was no time. It was awful that I couldn't warn you."

We had left the house and were sitting on a wooden bench in a deserted little park. It was a pale spring day; the bare branches were twitching in the breeze. A chaos roiled inside my brain. I could not form a thought or break through to a feeling.

"I understand now why people do hard drugs," I said. "I never did before. If someone gave me heroin right now, I'd shoot up."

Often I have wondered: in myth and literature, fathers and sons often want to kill one another. Why should mothers and daughters be any different?

Yesterday afternoon I went sailing on Sheepshead Bay.

For almost three hours I and my husband and a friend of his and three people we did not know bobbed and heeled over a cadmium sea. A hot summer's day, calm and splendiferous. Overhead, only a few fluffy white clouds scudding by. With the easy camaraderie of yachties and New Yorkers generally, the couple who owned the yacht seemed happy enough to have two strangers along with them on their elegant boat, complete with a state-of-the-art navigation system and a GPS good enough to take us to Asia. Six strangers with nothing more in common than wanting to have a good time and be part of the City where I was born and still love more than any other.

We sailed swiftly past the new condos at Brighton Beach; past the Ferris wheel at Coney Island, bigger than the one I loved to ride with my father; then westwards, towards Sea Gate. Behind, in the far distance, were the beaches at Rockaway. I had gone there once, when I was sixteen, on an August day no less beautiful than this. It was on that day that, for reasons I did not understand, I rejected a boy I loved then and had very much hoped to marry.

Later on that afternoon, we went to a barbecue in the back yard of an old Brooklyn townhouse. Holding my paper plate laden with the ritual foods of summer, I found myself next to another stranger. To make small talk, I said

something about how I liked to come to New York for opera. It turned out he had followed opera all his life the way people in other parts of the country people follow football. The back yard was long and narrow, like the back yard in the house my grandmother had owned in Queens, and the thin grass was just as scruffy. There was even a row of the light green bushes my grandmother called “ever-lives” because they somehow managed to survive her lack of gardening skills.

And all the while I was wondering, not for the first time, what my life would have been like had I not left when I was so young, in panicked flight from my mother.

How many places I have lived in, how many places I have seen. When she was very old, I would send her long, descriptive e-mails when I traveled because these were sure to forestall her anger.

She liked it best when the e-mails came from far-off places surrounded by water—Barcelona, San Sebastian, Cabo San Lucas, Sicily, Fiji, Tonga, Northern Sulawesi. She would have liked the e-mail I would have written about the sailing, for she too loved the sea.

Or should I say “I too”?

She was the second of three: a middle child. The “good” one; the one without a temper. The brother was, his parents told him, “an accident.” The older sister was “wild.” Both were hellions. On weekend drives to the beach at Bayville on the north shore, she would be put on the back seat between them to keep them apart—an

impossible task. Her name, they told her, meant “peacemaker.” Dorothy:
Wednesday’s child, full of grace.

A photograph from the early 1920s shows all three of them in someone’s back yard wearing tank top bathing suits; a garden hose lies nearby on the ground. She is eight or perhaps nine. Holding her brother’s hand, she stands closer to him than to the sister, protective. Both look gentle and a bit withdrawn. The sister, the only one to wear a bathing cap, laughs boldly as she looks directly into the camera.

She was the father’s favorite. An orphan raised by his oldest sister in the Irish tenements, he had succeeded by being willing to do anything and by having a sunny disposition that endeared him to strangers. In his twenties he got a job in a fish market, where he was soon able to buy the owner out. At thirty, over his sister’s shrieks, he married the young German Protestant woman he had gotten pregnant. He hated the Church—the priests always warm in the winter, always well fed. Every morning at four a.m. he left the house for the long subway ride into the City carrying a cosh—a piece of metal inside a sock—and returned late for dinner. He feared no one; he was never ill.

To Dorothy, alone of the three children, he was unfailing indulgent. When she asked him for money for dancing lessons or a new dress, he would answer only “How much?” and reach for his wallet. That she did well in school, was even skipped a grade, pleased him greatly. He gave her a photograph of himself, bald and bespectacled, in formal dress. On the reverse side, he wrote in a clear and elegant hand, “To Dearest Dottie, With love from Daddy.”

Cheerful at all times, he was never heard to complain, not even when he lost his store in the Depression and had to take a job as a manual laborer on Staten Island, a two hour commute each way. She imitated his optimistic manner; she understood that made people liked you better.

At eighty, still working, he died from a series of small strokes he thought was what people called “a cold.” She seemed surprised; later on, she rarely spoke of him and then not at length.

“I never thought Pop would die,” she said once in wonder.

She looked down on the older sister, who was the mother’s favorite, yet was close to the sister too.

In her twenties, the older sister took up with one man after another, all artists of one kind or another who lived in “the Village,” wholly unsuitable for marriage. She went riding in Central Park; got standing room tickets for *Parsifal* and *La Traviata*, learned to play the violin, and joined a quartet. When she fell in love with a man who lived next door, twenty years older and divorced, the mother forbade the marriage.

“He’s too old for you,” said the mother. “You’ll have to find somebody else.”

After that, she loved only women. Soon she began to drink to excess and to affect a mannish style: tailored suits with a single gold or silver pin near the throat. Soon she bore no resemblance to the luminous young woman in the photograph atop the cabinet with the sheet music for the violin she had once loved to play.

The sisters kept a fine distance from each other, leading separate lives. In old age, they lived near each other in the retirement developments of south-central New Jersey and quarreled ceaselessly.

“If she would just stop the drinking,” Dorothy would say. “Everything would be all right if she would just stop the drinking.”

Always Dorothy was closer to the brother, who did not get along with the father and felt unfairly treated. By high school, he was spending most of his time outside the house, getting into fights in bars. After he married, he moved out on “the island”—an unknown continent. He appeared only at family functions with his wife and two daughters, where everyone drank heavily. He was rarely spoken of. For the rest of their lives, Dorothy continued to call him at least once a week and fancied herself his intimate confidante. Once, at Christmas, his wife gave Dorothy a gift of black lingerie.

“I thought you knew I only wear white,” Dorothy said as she handed it back.

She had dreamed early of becoming a tap dancer, of going to college, but these dreams, like the dreams of so many others, were ended by the Depression. Somehow the money was found to send her—not the brother, not the older sister—to the Katherine Gibbs Secretarial School. After graduating, she found a job with a company that made payday loans, often to schoolteachers. Through hard work and a secret affair with her married boss, she was promoted, then promoted again. Soon she was the first woman manager in the New York region. A photograph shows her at her desk, her face barely visible over the huge standard Remington manual typewriter. Her face is small, pale, perfectly made-up, entirely happy.

And pretty. Her full lips colored by lipstick of the darkest red she could find, nails and toenails polished in the same shade. Clothes from Lord and Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Saks: a black clutch bag embroidered with seed pearls; a pair of white three-quarter length leather gloves; amethyst drop earrings; black patent leather heels, some pairs with bows. Her elegance and sophistication intimidated and provoked envy.

In the early 1940s, at her brother's wedding, his best friend asked her out to the movies. She hesitated, then agreed. Meanwhile, the secret affair with the boss continued, afternoon taxis ferrying her to and from Manhattan hotel rooms. Always, the promised divorce from his wife was delayed. Always there was the fear of pregnancy, of a need for abortion.

The brother's best friend was good-looking, frail and elegant in dark blue pinstriped suits. Raised by his widowed mother, he came from a family that had once had money. He liked making romantic gestures: perfume, gardenia corsages. Soon they had a favorite French restaurant. Despite repeated importuning, she refused to sleep with him. Each week he gave her money to keep for them, savings their future. She was almost thirty now. The war was coming. People said they had "the spark." They made a "striking" couple.

After they married, she moved out of her parents' house to a studio apartment with a Murphy bed two subway stops away. She was unhappy and cried every day; then he was drafted.

When he returned, she was thirty-two, mad to have a child. Although his salary was far less than before the war, she agreed to his demand that she stop working once the child was born. In the postwar housing shortage, they had to live with her parents and the sister. She understood that it was a matter of pride for him that *his* wife would not have to work.

When for almost a year, nothing happened, she got an application for adoption. Then, one night, she felt it. She was pregnant, she told her husband in the dark. He had always thought she was smarter than he, with better manners—and now this! That she could know such a thing! He was afraid of her; he was sure she was a witch.

The pregnancy was uneventful, the birth not particularly difficult. When she came home from the hospital, something had changed. She seemed different. There was “something wrong” in her attitude toward the baby, her mother and sister thought. After some discussion, they discussed concluded that they would have to take a much larger part in the child’s upbringing than they had expected.

Forty years later, she said with an undimmed resentment, “They just hand you the baby when you leave the hospital. They show you how to give the baby a bath, how to diaper it, then you’re on your own.”

It has calmed me greatly to write this, but it explains nothing. So much has been left out, and how much of what they told me is true? The pretense of a neutral

point of view hides nothing. Anyone can tell I loved and pitied my aunt, and why have I said so little about my grandmother?

This is the history of my clan, passed down to me and made into a narrative that I can pass down to no one.

What I remember best are the appurtenances of her beauty, so mysterious to me when I was a child. Her perfumes, those dark liquids in cut glass bottles whose heavy musk scents both overwhelmed and repelled me. How she would turn the bottle upside down, then anoint herself with the liquid on the stopper: economy at the vanity table. How I loved when she would let me try on her black “fashion plate” hats with their broad, stiff brims. The sweet smell of her face powder, her Maybelline lipstick, wet rouge. The black lamb’s wool coat of black lamb’s wool with its small, tight, symmetrical knots: an emblem of her personality. White silk blouses with frills falling down each side of the throat like curls. All these were hers alone, beyond my childish understanding. I could only watch from afar in the moments when she would let me.

After I left home, she liked, as always to make rules, but they collapsed one after another. In California, I was to call every Sunday at exactly eleven. In Europe, I was to write once a week and return without fail at Christmas. One year, when her birthday card was late again, she called to reprove me. I shrieked at her, hung up, then quaked for hours awaiting some unnamed, unnamable retribution. But nothing happened.

After that, we had a *détente* that lasted until she was very old and I began to take care of her. Until then, we met four or five times a year, spoke once a week on the phone, and never discussed anything important.

In some ways, my life has been very simple: its goal was to be as unlike her as possible. Little by little, this became a set of principles. The first was that I should never get my way by my anger, nor give in to others who did. Then, to return good for evil wherever possible. And not to display anger, which elided into a different and more dangerous goal: not to feel anger, not to allow it to enter my consciousness, to discomfit my soul.

The decision not to have a child was less a decision than a fear that the child would bring out some anger in me I would not be able to control. Was this not what had happened to her? After all, was she not tremendous in all other areas of life? A good wife to my father, a thoughtful mother-in-law to my husband, a perfect housekeeper, competent church secretary, Sunday School teacher.

But wasn't the goal *not to be in any way like her* merely a variant of the more normal and ordinary goal any woman might have of being like one's mother? Wasn't a negative imitation, in its own way, still an imitation? Did this goal really keep me any less inside the wingspan of her shadow?

Her shadow. In my childhood, every night the same, under that shadow. My father coming home tired and listless under the weight of his own sense of failure. The three of us around the gray formica kitchen table with its tiny hooded lamp and me, first trying to eat, then losing interest. I who in restaurants enjoyed only fresh hard rolls with shaved butter curls and glasses of ice water.

Eat. Eat. What's wrong with you, that you never want to eat? Charlie, for heaven's sakes, do something. She has to eat.

Oh come on now, leave her alone. Just leave her alone. She'll eat when she's hungry.

Did a glance of commiseration flit from him to me? An instant of solidarity, the two of us allied against her?

I rather think so now.

The tears flowing down her cheeks, the catch in her throat, a final parting barb as she rose from the table, something like "*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.*" Something like that.

As she ran out of the kitchen and down the corridor, I could hear her heels on the threadbare carpet; the slamming of the bedroom door and its glass panes quivered; her sobbing, muffled now but just as unbearable as if we were all still in the same room.

"Please," said my father from the other side of the little gray formica table.

"Go tell her you're sorry. I can't stand to hear her cry like that. *Please.*"

The lights in the kitchen, a bubble overhead light and the little shaded lamp on the table. Cheap bright yellow paint on the ridged walls we had put on ourselves

with rollers, its color a cross between Gulden's Mustard and my yellow and white swiss polka dot pinafore. In winter, the heat hissing from the noisy radiator. In summer, an occasional breeze would make its way through the thick mesh of the screen over the window while outside, an ancient, blowzy rose-of-Sharon stood two stories high, its imperfect pink and scarlet flowers ugly and untended. I would sit there, silent, with my father and his pure desperation, his helplessness, his soft blue-and-white checked cashmere sweater that held all the good smells of him and his aftershave.

I don't remember the walk down the corridor, only standing in front of the closed door behind which the sobbing continued, unchanged. Waiting for the reprieve I knew was not going to come.

I remember raising my hand to knock for permission to enter; I remember knocking.

By age eight or nine, I had learned to take long walks and spend afternoons at my grandmother's, playing the old converted player piano with yellowed keys that no one else had ever played. Saturday mornings, in the reading room of the public library: *Amaryllis*, *Nancy Drew Girl Detective*, *Judy Bolton Girl Nurse*.

After I turned ten, I was allowed go into the City by myself on the Flushing line, "the elevated." Saturday mornings I would go to the great, free museum and stand for hours in front of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, mesmerized by the swirls of paint standing up from the canvas in silent rebellion. These visions of unsteady, ceaseless motion comforted as nothing else. Only before them did I feel not alone.

But at home nothing changed. The list of my sins was long, and the list was heavy. Worst of all was that I was not, like her, friendly and outgoing, as indeed she was.

“What’s wrong with you that you can’t you be a little Pollyanna?” she would say. “Look at Judy Rapaport—she’s always cheerful and friendly to everybody.”

Judy Rapaport, with whom I waited every morning on the corner for the Q22 bus to junior high school. Judy Rapaport with her fixed, cheery smile who took care of her twin brother Lester whom we all, with the cruelty of children, called a *re-tard*.

I must not leave out her sense of moral rightness which, like the ferocity of her intellect, I respected and admired.

Once, near the end, she told me that her mother had relatives who came to visit from Germany in the early 1930s. They had been Nazis, she said. Her mother had sent them away, and their names were never mentioned again. Indeed, I do not know their names now.

She shook her head and shuddered. It was terrible, just terrible what they said about the Jews. She had never heard anything so awful. It wasn’t *right*, what Hitler did to the Jews.

She looked at me then as if this was an opinion that no one else had ever expressed and she had come to all by herself, by thinking it through. An opinion it was important that I share and remember.

And I liked her then, I really liked her.

Another time as my father began to flirt with me in front of her and my husband, she reproved him and, to my surprise, he stopped at once.

She had only one political opinion that was not, like those of my father, hyper conservative. She believed that abortion should be left up to the woman. Politicians had no right to interfere. It was none of their business. What a woman did with her body should be up to her.

When a woman in Texas drowned all six of her children in the bathtub, she expressed an unwonted sympathy.

“What’s wrong with those people who want her executed?” she snapped. “Hasn’t that woman been punished enough already?”

Until I was about five, she let me watch her at her bath. Once, as she was getting out of the tub, I reached up and pulled at a nipple. Quickly she pulled a towel around her and pushed me away. I never saw her naked again until, dressing herself once to leave a hospital, she turned, and I could see the bloody mass where once her breast had been. But this is not the worst, the hardest to remember.

One Christmas I went into the back bedroom as I was leaving, to gather up the gifts. She was there, “straightening up” as she so often did, moving the presents from one shopping bag to another. On impulse I walked up to her and put my arms around her.

“I love you, Mother,” I said.

How many times had we said that to each other, with Judy Rapaport-like fake cheerfulness on both sides, because that was what people said.

This time was different.

“I love you too,” she said, very softly, as if she meant it. “You were always so good when you were little—you always held my hand.”

When I think of this, a pain bigger than I am begins to rise up within me, and almost immediately something equally painful cuts it short. Like a check, a barrier I cannot cross.

And this is the worst, this is the most painful, that it was possible for a moment and no longer.

In the weeks after she died, I began to dream every night, long complicated dreams like the Technicolor movies of my childhood we had all watched together at the Colony Theater on 82d Street. *Walk East on Beacon, Windjammer, Gunfight at the OK Corral, Run for the Sun, Gone with the Wind, Shane*. When I woke, the dreams drifted off and could not be recalled. They were without residue.

One day I was cleaning out the back bedroom where, in old age, my father would go and pretend to sleep as a way to escape her anger. Against the faded wallpaper I noticed a small black-and-white photograph I had never seen before: a fresh-faced young girl, well-dressed, with eyes that struggled to look outward.

At first I thought it was a photograph of me taken when I was in junior high school. The expression was the same as in my graduation photograph. You can pick me out easily enough in the first row on the right. I am the prepubescent child with the frilly, overly formal white blouse. Tight, ugly curls; vacant eyes; a dulled

expression. The same expression as in the photograph I found in the back bedroom, but not the same young girl.

A friend said: "You know, before your parents died, I always thought you looked like your Dad with your blue eyes and blonde hair, but now I see you really look like your Mom."

In the days after she died, I would now and then have the sensation that I had *become* her. I don't mean that I *felt* like her, or like what I thought she felt like. No: for five, six seconds I had the sensation that I had literally *turned into her*. I no longer existed; only she did.

At several points in my life, I sought out medical opinions about my mother in hopes that greater understanding could help. But these merely raised new questions, created new confusions.

One psychiatrist thought my mother was psychotic. In his reading of my childhood, my father was a man much to be pitied. He had drawn close to me out of his loneliness, his despair at having married my mother. To be sure, my father would be one moment flirtatious and loving only to abandon me the next. Still, they had both loved me, really loved me, as best they could.

A second psychiatrist refused to diagnose my mother since he had never interviewed her. In his interpretation, my father bore much of the blame for my mother's rages, as did I. These were provoked by my father's narcissism and my own unacknowledged efforts to displace her in his affections. Both of them, to be

sure, were “a fine pair of narcissists.” But my mother’s life needed to be seen in the context of her generation. Unlike her own mother, she had been able to have a career, but unlike me, she had not been allowed to pursue it.

I resisted this notion. I was not willing to believe my mother so ordinary, or so natural, that she could be explained in such a way. In support of this belief I cited her reaction to the death of my grandmother, whom I had greatly loved.

“I hated Nana,” my mother had said. “I’m glad she’s dead.”

“That was very honest,” said the psychiatrist. “Unusually so. Don’t you think it was rather admirable for her to tell you? Courageous even?”

Social workers who met my mother near the end made simpler judgments. One said observed that her judgments were extreme; they represented a disorder called “splitting.” Everything was *wonderful* or *awful*. She was incapable of nuance. Another social worker believed my mother was a borderline personality—an untreatable disorder common in serial killers. A third was so foolish as to believe my mother had accepted her suggestion that we bring in a health aide. Shortly before my mother fired this social worker, I tried to explain that my mother was a master of hiding her real feelings, including from herself.

Her last physician, a soft-spoken Chinese named Dr. L. with no special expertise in mental health, thought she was “depressed.” Once, when she was in a nursing home with a broken hip, Dr. L. ordered mandatory anti-depressants. For the first time in my knowing her, she became entirely tractable, even gentle, *sweet*. Every night at sunset I would call her as she waited for her dinner to be brought. It was springtime then, the time of the year the leaves are just coming out and every

day the world feels more hopeful. As I dialed her number, I would be filled with a calm, even happy anticipation, certain for the first time in my life that she would not be angry with me.

“How are you, darling?” she would ask sweetly as I hung upon each word.
“Did you have a good day today?”

Upon arriving home, she immediately threw away all the little plastic bottles containing the drugs she had been given.

“Pills! Pills!” she said. “That’s all those doctors know, pills!”

On the last night I was alone with my parents in their house, my mother sat in her usual armchair after dinner while my father and I sat on the couch. In the morning, over their fierce objections, what was to be the first of many health aides was to arrive. I would be able to go home, temporarily, to my husband. My mother sat steely and quiet; my father, morose and disconsolate at my impending departure, tried to keep up conversation. For the first time in weeks, I allowed myself to relax. I remember saying something comforting, even affectionate, to him. No sooner had I finished the sentence than I realized my mistake.

She was still denouncing me, eyes flashing, as I rose from my chair. I removed my coat from the closet crammed with coats I would soon have to throw out or give away, and announced, as on so many other occasions, that I was going for a walk.

Outside, a light snow had just begun to fall. The streetlights were little dots of light in the dark, empty street. In only a few houses could I discern a faint glow of

electric lamps within: most of the inhabitants of the little development, aged as my parents, were long since gone to bed.

The silence; the cold; the snow falling against my face—all were welcome. I was filled with disgust for myself. Why was I still here? What was wrong with me that in full adulthood, I continued to play the role I had been playing since childhood?

I rounded the irregular block of the little suburban development and began down the upper half of the hill. At the T-junction I saw with relief that a truck was clearing the snow. In only a few hours, the aide would arrive. If another ambulance was needed, it too would find its way.

As I re-entered the tiny, overheated house I felt to my own repulsion a pleasure at being warm again, even a pleasure at being among people again, even these people. As I put my coat back in the closet among all the coats, my mother began to speak, this time very quietly.

“You’ve come back,” she said. “We weren’t sure you would.”

I approached them as they sat, fixed in their places. Then I said, to my own surprise, “You know, I don’t think I’ve done anything to deserve being treated like this. I’ve taken care of you for a long time now.”

My mother rose from her chair, agitated, filled with some strong feeling I did not understand. Then her face collapsed, and she began to cry.

She was crying not as an adult cries, but as a very small child cries, a child who cannot see beyond the moment and who does yet not know how to comfort

itself. Was this the same kind of crying as when I had been small? I had never seen such terrible crying.

Yet I recognized it, for I myself had cried like that sometimes.

“Oh baby,” she said. “I’ve hurt your feelings. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, baby. Why did I do that? Why? Oh baby, please forgive me. Please please forgive me. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Why did I do that?”

And I saw that she really, as I had said so often and so casually, *was* crazy, crazy in the sense that she was not in control of her actions. She had ruined this part of her life that had to do with me, this so very important part, without meaning to, and she did not understand, any more than I did, why.

I led her into the bedroom and helped her get into bed. I told her I forgave her, but it did no good. No matter how many times I said it, she kept on crying. Finally she was exhausted. When she asked for her bed jacket, I put it around her shoulders.

“Bring me my jewelry box,” she said. “I want you to take the pieces you want.”

I demurred.

“No, bring it,” she said. “Everything I have is yours now.”

I took out a pair of earrings, a bracelet, some more earrings, hardly looking at any of them.

“You know, your father and I can never thank you enough for what you have done for us,” she said.

In the morning, she sat in her chair glaring at me and at the new hospice nurse, a plain woman in her sixties with a large silver cross around her neck who was trying to draw blood.

“Goddamn it who do you think you are,” said my mother as the needle pierced the skin. “Stop it, goddamn you. You’re *hurting* me.”

“It’s been twenty years since I couldn’t get a line in,” said the nurse to no one in particular. She looked away as she put her instruments back in the little black case.

When next I saw her, it was Christmas. The giving of presents was surreal, a parody of the annual ritual in which now no one knew what to say.

To be in that small, close room with her, like this; to be staring at the mystery that is inside every human being. To grasp that a person dying is merely a person like any other, a person like you or me, on any ordinary day. There was nothing mystical about dying; it did not make us different; it gave us no special insight. We remained ourselves to the very last, and yet we were dying too.

I got up and announced that it was time for me and my husband to go.

“This was the *worst* Christmas of my life,” she said. “It’s all your fault. How dare you go? Sit down. You just got here.”

She glared at me one last time with her basilisk gaze.

I moved backward towards the door; I struggled to absorb the blow.