

The Skirts and Blouses are Hatched

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My mother had been failing for several years, slowly, but minimized the signs. We, her five grown children, were not to worry or be diverted from our lives. When it came, the time of her dying seemed to open of its own accord, its span neither too short nor too long. We had several weeks to talk, to tie up loose ends before the illness closed in and became a kind of weather we could no longer work around. On December 14, 1997 she died at home in the company of her children and grandchildren. Snow was falling in Keene Valley, the small town in the Adirondack Mountains where she had lived for thirty-five years.

Emily Neville, my mother, was a well-known writer for young adults, and my relationship with her, as the oldest, a daughter, and also a writer, is complicated. Sometimes it seems like a difficult poem I have memorized but don't yet understand. During her lifetime I was wary of such a strong, capable figure so close to me. My Aunt Mary, the sibling closest to my mother in age, once remarked, "As a child there was no point in doing anything—Emily could always do it better." But she was a gentle person with no heavy-handed ways an oldest child could legitimately dispute, though I did resist her increasingly as I entered my teens. Since she was almost universally liked and respected my opposition put me at odds, not only with my mother, but with everyone I knew.

In the weeks before her death, my unease dissolved. My love for her rose to the surface and stayed, simple at last. It was a pleasure to talk and laugh with her, to feed her, or just to wash her face.

The immediate cause of her death was acute leukemia but the name and disease seem irrelevant. Like the early pioneers who went west "to spend and be spent," she died of giving herself fully. After she died, following a Buddhist practice, we laid her out in the dining room, unheated in winter. We, her children and grandchildren, made a fire in the fireplace, wrapped ourselves in coats and blankets and sat around the table, saying our last goodbyes. One of my mother's oldest friends said, "We were friends for thirty years and it was always peaceable." I lifted her dog, Nikki, up to lick her and put a balsam bough over her folded hands. The two undertakers arrived to drive her to the crematorium.

My brother went with her and came back with the canister of ashes and her wedding ring contained in a small red bag. The following summer we buried her ashes under a big oak tree in the field.

When my daughter Anna was born, it was June in Indiana and my mother had come out to help, arriving several days early. My first pregnancy had ended with the child stillborn, but during this one the signs had been good, and we were all excited, expectant and hopeful. There was an air of celebration even before my daughter was born.

One night my mother grilled lamb chops for us outside and we sat and ate under the big shade maple by the hollyhocks. I went into labor about ten o'clock that night and Anna was born at nine the next morning.

When I came home from the hospital the house seemed completely changed, enlivened by this child. But who was this infant of long silences who stared for hours at the white wall in the dining room, lost, remote, as though longing for a former life? It was frightening, having lost one child, to realize how tenuous her hold was on this life, how easily it could be broken. I was anxious, tense, not sleeping. But my mother was there, calm and glad with her new grandchild, her sixth. She sat in the rocker, laid Anna belly-up on her knees, cradling her gently, smiling and talking to her. She seemed to know her while I was mystified, confounded by this creature.

My mother's happiness for me during that visit was expressed in many ways. One day in that first week she made us lunch. I remember sitting down to it gingerly on the rubber ring the hospital had given me. Lunch was a platter of deviled eggs, sliced cheese and vegetables. There were flowers on it, nasturtiums with their green leaves from the garden.

One afternoon she covered me with a blanket as I lay on my side trying to nap while Anna slept. She did this from the back and I remember my surprise when the blanket first touched my shoulder—for my mother this was such an uncharacteristic gesture, physical and personal.

One morning at breakfast we talked about my grandmother, who died before I was born. My mother told me of her own mother's emotional remoteness, and we spoke of the masked quality of her face in one of the family photographs. My Uncle Tim put the photo in a drawer, saying he couldn't look at it, the expression so distant it was painful.

I would never describe my mother as absent or withdrawn, but she too could be emotionally closed, relentlessly self-reliant. She never expressed dependence or wanted anyone else to do for her. Ten days before she died I arrived to find her outside in five-degree weather, shoveling snow and clearing off the car

so I could take her to the doctor. She remarked, “In times of crisis it is not clear who is caring for whom.”

A few weeks before she died, I was coming down the stairs of her house on a gray December day. She was sitting on the couch, no longer able to read and said, “We are all rather bored and disconsolate.” Yet her tone implied her ease with that state, surely one of the grayest, and in a way, most undramatic passages of her life.

Even here her attention was purposeful, moving forward, intent on where she was going. “Well, that’s what you’re doing,” she replied once when I complained about the tedium of child rearing. All the obstacles people put up between themselves and what they need to do—fatigue, boredom, panic, guilt, thinking too much—under all these fences my mother slipped quietly to the task at hand.

If a child appeared she might ask, “And how have you improved the shining hour?” in a bemused tone the child did not quite understand but trusted. Behind her remark lay a knowledge of how dull many hours of life are, but still they can sometimes be spun into gold. She herself was focused, though never obsessive or rigid. She was ready for any interruption that came along, a grandchild who couldn’t find a shoe or needed to be taken to the river to swim.

My own childhood was divided between the Adirondacks and New York City. At about age twelve I began taking long walks through its theatrical streets, awash in the variety and breadth of the world around me. During these first giddy spells of freedom my mind would sometimes turn lovingly to my family. Passing a store window my eye would light on some knick-knack that I thought my mother would like. Having little pocket money, I often wrestled with the purchase. In the end I would buy the gift, thinking of my mother’s pleasure in receiving it.

But when I got home my mood changed. I was sorry I had spent all my allowance. In the moments before giving the gift, a storm of feelings would come over me—guilt, anger, doubt—and in the end I held it out to my mother reluctantly, without a smile.

Only now, at age sixty-eight, do I understand why I was so conflicted, but at the time I was bewildered and shaken by this sudden barrage of feelings. As I got older these grew to include envy, scorn, hate. Her Newbery Award-winning book was published in ten languages. She was invited and went to visit library groups in countries as far away as China and Australia. I wanted her stature and scope but what I really wanted was my own stature and scope. I countered my confusion by crouching under the hood of my roll-top desk, devising* poems

in secret.

My mother was a beauty at twenty. My sisters and I look at her college graduation photograph and are dazzled—blond hair, a finely formed face, high forehead, right proportions at every point, eyes, nose and mouth, and a look, curious and penetrating.

After she died, walking through her house, I noticed there were no mirrors. On looking closer (you had to look to find them) I found two, one in a little passageway with a low ceiling, an old mirror with metallic streaks bleeding in from the back. The other was in the corner of the dark bathroom, so dim I could barely see my teeth in it. I realized that, in the twenty-five years my mother lived in her own house, she probably never looked in the mirror.

In the beginning of November she began to mention aches in her legs. Now walking was only pleasant if she took Tylenol first, and not even then sometimes. Increasingly I found her in what she called her “nest,” dozing at home next to the wood stove, a book in her lap. She liked being roused, and we had tea several times in the late afternoon. She seemed happy, content not to do much, and more receptive than I had ever known her. I would tell her about a book I was reading or what we were having for dinner and she would sit, pleased just to be listening to whatever news I brought. She told me she had discovered herself reading with her eyes closed, and sometimes writing that way too. Her state seemed a matter of bemusement to her, not threatening. A week later the pain became more serious, not always under control. My husband and I ate dinner with her during that time and she said, “I feel like I’m standing on a platform, waiting for the train, but I don’t know when it will come.” Though my mother was not one to dream about the comforts of an afterlife (her position was closer to Thoreau’s “One world at a time”), the image of a train with its promise of continuation meant something to me and seemed out of the same cloth as my mother’s basic faith, her notable lack of anxiety.

When death came she was glad at last to confront it directly and have it out of the dark corners where it had been lolling for several years. Here was something to tackle. Even through the haze of pain and medication, she took it as an adventure, a new path she was glad to go down, gentle and calm, as always protecting those she was leaving behind from alarm. (My brother did feel hurt. “How could she leave us so blithely?” he asked.)

At times dying was a game. She was playful in her going, with a kid’s let-out-of-school-for-the-summer joy, ready to say goodbye, to pass her many responsibilities on. (A line comes into my head from somewhere—“Here world

I pass you, like an orange to a child.”) At other times I could see how much energy and patience it takes to die. My sister said, “It’s like labor—you don’t just skip out of this life.”

But funny questions and aphorisms would come out of her mouth. Though some of them stemmed from delusions caused by pain and morphine, many of them held to an enchanting line between confusion and clarity. Talking to my mother during this time didn’t feel to us like talking to a crazy person. We attended and tried to follow. Emily’s “sayings” hewed to their own logic, and given time and attention I felt that I could know it too.

Here are some of them:

“The skirts and blouses are hatched and the people can pour their tea.”

“‘Posada,’ Marcy, what does ‘Posada’ mean?”

“Inn. It means inn.”

“We’re in Honduras? I want to go home. I’m ready to go home now.”

“We are home, Mom.”

“Well, let’s go then. Let’s go home now. Why aren’t you punks letting me go home? The management here is terrible.”

“We are home, there’s nowhere to go.”

“You mean we just have to stay here until we croak?”

“There’s no way people can understand their personal griefs.”

“Did I tell you about my triumph on the west branch of the river? Three six-inch fish were caught in my name.”

Though these “sayings” seemed random, there were days when a certain theme would reoccur. The organization of a giant book sale would loom up and my mother talked about which books to sell, which to keep and who should decide. Then came the organization of a great meal of some kind, an outdoor wedding in the summer or a Fourth of July picnic. She kept asking us—“Tam, where are the tablecloths? Are the carrots ready? Marcy, where are the pies?”

Last, and certainly as intriguing as the “sayings,” were her hand motions in the air. It was easy to recognize some of them—writing in space with a pen and toward the end, a lot of typing in the air. A plucking motion, as of picking pills off a sweater. Other gestures were more mysterious—following a rope up into the air, hand over hand, or a motion that was like picking up seeds or like

Cinderella picking lentils out of the ashes. Once I asked her what she was doing and she said, “Oh, I’m just doing what I’m doing, just going along.”

I think of my mother outside, in summer, in shorts. I see her bending over a weed or a flower or cutting brush with a scythe at the rocky end of the meadow. Hiking on the trail my daughter Anna was astounded that she, at seventeen, could not keep pace with her grandmother’s thin wiry legs, no matter that they were wrinkled and ringed with sagging skin.

One hot August day, several years before she died, my two sisters and my mother and I went hiking in the woods where it was cool. An hour in we came to a clear brook with several bath-sized holes in it. The four of us stripped down and jumped in up to our necks. We’d all inherited from my mother a love of cold mountain water.

When we were done we set out again, my two sisters and I still bare to the waist. My mother only went as far as her undershirt, which was grayish and worn, without shape. I was walking behind her and something about the slope of her shoulders and the looseness of her shirt made me want to be done with her. I wanted her to be gone, to pass on and leave the world free for me.

These were blasphemous thoughts and I was shocked by the vehemence of my feeling. I continued on, the trail getting steeper and all of us slowing down. Soon I was breathing hard enough that thinking faded away. But the moment remains vivid in my mind.

At age fifty-three my mother went back to school and became a lawyer. She practiced for the last twenty years of her life. In the months before she died she had been quietly making the rounds of all of her clients, to ask if there were any documents they wanted returned. Still, after her death, boxes and boxes of old files remained in the mudroom at the back of the house, along with the firewood and tools. My sister and I brought them into the living room, sorted through them, and then began to feed them to the wood stove. The damper was wide open and the fire grew quickly. As we added paper, the flames began to beat, creating a pulsing sound as of wings beating. It was frightening and transfixing. The act of destroying my mother’s files so quickly was exhilarating, but for safety reasons, we backed off and fed the fire more slowly.

Looking through these papers, I was struck again by my mother’s importance to others, her capabilities. As a high school senior I had applied to her alma mater, Bryn Mawr College, setting my heart on it, the way seventeen-year-old girls do. It was early spring, the time for admission letters to arrive, and I knew my father would be bringing them on the train from the city. My mother,

sister and I greeted him excitedly and I immediately asked for the letters. When he produced them, there it was on the top, a thin letter from Bryn Mawr. I knew instantly that I had not been accepted. On the long ride back, the four of us packed into our small car, there was no place to hide. I wanted to disappear, taking my sense of failure with me.

I went to another college, a good one but not good enough. My writing teachers were glad to have someone who could write and they treated me with kid gloves. They seemed afraid to push or challenge me and I was allowed to continue riding on work that came easily. At home too, any realistic picture of who I was as a writer disappeared in the melee of a family of seven living in a crowded city apartment. At fourteen, after I had written a particularly good poem, my mother suggested I send it to *The New Yorker*. Even then I knew this idea was far-fetched. Neither at home nor in college was I given any accurate sense of how to find my place in the world. I knew who I wasn't but who was I? It took me a long time to arrive at an estimation of myself that rang true to me.

It was hard to look at my mother's eyes—gray and lightless, like rocks or pebbles, indifferent to whatever current washed over them, be it clear or murky. I remember them as flat and inexpressive, and she was not personally warm. But reading her books, to my surprise I found a world of human warmth, realistic but positive. In her daily life, feelings were expressed in action, so much freely given with never an eye towards being favorably viewed by others. Among other things, she brought Meals-on-Wheels to the town's shut-ins. When she was done she thought nothing of returning to a particular house to help draft a letter or set out medication. At her funeral the church was packed with people overflowing into the street.

I think of her muffins, baked in the regular oven, then tipped half out of their tins to cool on the wood stove in summer. These muffins were made without much oil or butter, delicious when eaten within the hour but tough later on. Sometimes they were dry in texture, the lack of excess in the ingredients in contrast to the open generosity of the person, the way she gave of her time and energy as though she would never run out.

She loved bread and potatoes. Often there was half a day-old muffin laid by her plate to end lunch with. Never hurried, everything was eaten slowly, especially the last crust. Let it sit a while on the edge of the empty plate. I notice my brothers and sisters do this too.

After she died I found my mother's paring knife by the window where she

always left it. This was the knife with which she sliced lemons for tea and left unwashed between times until the juice ate the metal into lace and even pitted the flat side of the blade. I carried it home carefully. It was still alive.

She preferred worn sweaters and shorts. The old sneakers, the mittens I found after her death, the right thumb of each patched, one with duct tape, one with a scrap—everything was left with the dirt and sweat in it as part of the weave. The style of her rooms was a lived-in style, everything printed with use.

We didn't know it was my mother's last night on earth and my sister and I broke the big pain pill, determined that she must have it. But it would not mash, its raw pink edges jutting up from the applesauce on the spoon. We poked it past her dry papery lips but these bits would not go down. She choked on them but with not enough strength to cough them back up. I imagine they stayed lodged in her dry throat for a long time.

On that night snow fell all around, a thick snow that accumulated on the trees and houses even though there was a slight wind. We were hungry for its comfort and balm. There must be something to do to help with dying, but it was nothing we knew, not the lullabies we pulled up from childhood and sang, or the warm cloths we washed her spent body with.

I went back to my cousin's house to get some sleep. At three a.m. the call came to come quickly. My husband and I arrived, walking through the snow to my mother's door. She had died minutes before. My sister Marcy sat by her side, my nephew Ethan was at the foot of the bed.

Her face was not her own, as though a shriveled mask of animal skin had formed over her forehead, nose and mouth. The hair was blown back, the mouth open, not gaping but as if caught between shock and surprise. It was no one I ever knew, as though another skin was needed to pass between worlds.