New Tricks

by Sarah Louise

Sylvie, atteinte d'un cancer du sein, s'inquiète de sa relation avec sa fille adulte. Sa propre mère, elle-même atteinte d'un cancer du sein, est décédée lorsque Sylvie n'avait que treize ans. Parce que Sylvie n'a jamais vraiment connu sa mère, elle est résolue à vaincre ce cancer afin d'avoir la chance d'établir une relation substantielle avec sa fille avant qu'il ne soit trop tard.

I think I found the mother lode in my armpit tonight. The big C you know. Cancer. Just like my mother and her mother.

On the evening of her daughter's twenty-fifth birthday, Sylvie did two unusual things. First, she took a shower, which she hadn't done in years. When she was a kid the rule was baths twice a week, Wednesday and Saturday nights, in a white tub with feet, and Sylvie had never really got over the habit. Second, she looked at herself in the mirror after her shower, while she was still wet. She pretended she'd just emerged from a warm waterfall on a remote island in the South Pacific, with all the time in the world. Arms over her head, she turned a slow circle, keeping a close eye on the fine grain of her olive skin. The nuns who'd taught Sylvie to avoid the temptations of the flesh wouldn't have approved. At her left profile, Sylvie paused to study a spot under her arm. It looked puckered, like a badly sewn seam, or a pull in an otherwise smooth piece of silk. She put a curious finger to the spot and felt a small hard nugget. For a moment it occurred to her that she could mine herself for gold and stop worrying about the rent. Then she wrapped her favorite purple towel around herself and phoned Matilda. If I told Sister Agnes what just happened, Sylvie told herself as she listened to the phone ring, she'd say, "Serves you right for having impure thoughts about a temple of the Holy Ghost." Those nuns were unrelenting. They left an impression.

"Happy birthday, Tillie for short," said Sylvie. "How's the weather in that forsaken place you inhabit?"

"It's not forsaken, mother, it's Michigan."

"I lit a candle in your honour and stuck it in the chocolate side of a half moon." Tillie's favorite cookies were half moons, only she never ate the vanilla side. That was her mother's job. "Then I did a ritual carving and ate it for dinner. I hope you appreciate the role reversal."

"I miss you too, mother. It's pouring snow here."

"Tillie," said Sylvie, without missing a beat, "I'm going to tell you something which, if I tell you, will forever change the course of all your birthdays to come. So perhaps I should deliberate further or flip a coin, but you can't see the coin so that wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"Mother, have you been doing a little drinking in my honour? Anything I should know about?"

There's a lot of things you should know about, thought Sylvie, but most of them can probably wait till you're older and wiser, or maybe not so wise. "Listen," she said, "you're a doctor. I think I found the mother lode in my armpit tonight. The big C you know. Cancer. Just like my mother and her mother." Well, she'd said it. Be blunt or be quiet, when it comes to the hard stuff. "So much for health food," she finished off.

"So much for the four-minute mile and high moral fibre. So much for fiber of any kind."

After she hung up, having promised to get a professional to look at the lump, Sylvie felt like she'd perpetrated a melodrama on her unsuspecting birthday girl. She had the same sensation as when she used to go to confession, toting her mortal sins into the box with her and unloading them on the priest who gave her a penance and forgiveness in return. Only Tillie wasn't an emissary from God and didn't have the power to exchange Sylvie's lump for a blessing and a prayer. She didn't have any power at all under the circumstances. Sylvie opened a bottle of cheap Chardonnay and waited for alcohol induced grandiosity to settle over her. Maybe then she could redial Tillie and touch up her delivery. Maybe not.

Tillie's father, the one who introduced her to half moon cookies, Ferris wheels, and anatomically correct dolls, was long gone. He disappeared once Tillie started school, on the theory that her teachers could pick up where he'd left off. As far as Sylvie was concerned, he didn't seem to have a theory. They were never married, after all, and she could have had an abortion. She was a grown up and could pick up after herself, which is what she did. For years.

So this is nuts, thought Sylvie, well into the Chardonnay and gently massaging her underarm. Thinking about him is not what I had in mind. Not remotely. An out of mind experience is more like it. He used to say I was out of my mind, as though there was something wrong with that. For keeping Tillie, for calling her

Matilda just because all I could hear between contractions was "Waltzing Matilda" coming from somewhere outside the labour room. Wouldn't he be surprised, his own baby girl growing up to be a doctor, even though she was raised by a loony tune?

"O.K. stop," said Sylvie out loud. "I can see that far from feeling grand, the lachrymose phase of imbibing is fast approaching. If there's anything pitiful it's a teary drunk." Sylvie's mother, who died at fifty-two, could barely drink at all. One glass of rosé and she couldn't stop giggling. A shot of anisette and she was comatose in minutes. At least her reputation as the cheapest drunk in town came in handy the last week she was in the hospital. Somebody brought her a bottle of cognac which, spiked with a little morphine, was a dynamite combination. It kept her from getting too depressed and gave her an appetite for lemon meringue pie one of those long nights. Funny the things you remember, thought Sylvie, sipping her wine. That pie seemed to glow in the dark, the lemon was so yellow, the meringue so purely white, and the silver fork gleaming as it delivered tiny slivers of colour to her mother's mouth. That scene was as vivid to Sylvie as anything else that happened that week.

I can see it now: Phosphorescent Mom Survives Nuclear Blast Cancer Treatment Successful.

And her grandmother. Sylvie couldn't recall ever seeing her grandmother drink. She got off on raising white rabbits for stew, or public consumption, depending on who she was talking to. I wonder, thought Sylvie, whether anyone's investigated a possible connection between rabbits and cancer in humans. Or cats and cancer. Her grandmother was surrounded by rabbits and cats in great numbers and for most of her life. Which meant that Sylvie's mother had the same exposure. But what about Sylvie, who had never cohabited with an animal of any species other than homo sapiens? Could a person inherit such crossbred susceptibilities through the genes? Sylvie decided to postpone serious consideration of her situation for another day, one when she wasn't so distracted she found herself contemplating the transmission of malignancies between sexually incompatible mammals.

"One thing I know for sure," Sylvie said to Tillie while recovering at home from what she called her first excavation. "I don't want you losing any sleep over me. And I don't want you feeding me any radioactive meringue in the middle of the night."

Tillie didn't ask the meaning of the egg-white reference. Aware of what she considered her mother's bent sense of humour, she went for a logical but lighthearted response. "It's not the meringue that would be radioactive, mother. It's you. I can see it now: Phosphorescent Mom Survives Nuclear Blast Cancer Treatment Successful. If this were Britain, the tabloids would eat it up."

"Well it isn't," said Sylvie. "Maybe somebody should've thought of that before they invented baseball and the American flag." She was dutifully squeezing the rubber ball Tillie had contributed to her future well-being. It was supposed to help her get the strength back in her arm. It was supposed to be a focus for her energy. "Did you have to get red?" she asked Tillie, not as if she wanted an answer. "You know it's my worst colour. It makes me look malarial." A tear rolled down her cheek, in spite of her resolve to spare Tillie any such displays.

Sylvie's mother never cried after an operation, at least not that Sylvie knew of. First she lost her left breast and all the nodes under her arm. When she got home she made Sylvie look at the scar because the Cancer Society volunteer said not to leave it to her imagination. Sylvie had put on her best poker face and noted that, except for the scar and no nipple, that side of her mother was merely boyish instead of scary. The more she got into sports at school, the more Sylvie wished she was flat chested, a sentiment she never shared with her mother, who lost her right breast and then most of her glands not long after the first operation. When shadows began to appear in her lungs, Sylvie's mother decided to go off her meds and take her chances with God. Three months later she went to her eternal reward, taking with her, as thirteen year old Sylvie sometimes felt, the secrets of the universe.

Now Sylvie's Tillie was no teenager and had already seen more fleshly devastation than Sylvie herself but still, a mother worries about the kind of impression she leaves on her daughter. For sure, Sylvie didn't keep as tight a lid on her feelings as her own mother, who always said she was too old to learn new tricks. Mortality, however, was a whole other ball game. It came at her like a low blow from left field or a cheap shot from the heavens, if anybody was up there. Talking about it seemed declassé and depressing. Thinking about it seemed like a waste of precious time, but she couldn't help herself. For awhile she consulted the experts. She read *Death and Dying* by Kubler-Ross, who said it was o.k. to be angry, so she blamed her mother for bad genes and got mad when she saw the family poker face on Tillie, as though even that could be inherited. She watched Oprah and Donahue interview women with breast cancer on national T.V., in front of live audiences. Some of them cried. All of them took themselves and their situations seriously. Right there, Sylvie thought, watching those women as if they were from another planet, is a problem. Since she was not in the habit of taking herself seriously, it was hard to know where to start. She could think and read and watch T.V. till her lights went out and never come to any smart conclusions. Maybe she should just go back to basics, like church, and forget trying to make sense of the big period all humans eventually smack into. Who was *she*, anyway?

"Are you serious, mother? I wish you'd get serious," said Tillie, exhaling loudly. They were having one of their weekly long distance talks.

"Exactly," said Sylvie. "That *is* what I've had on my mind lately." She listened to the sounds on the line. "Are you smoking, Tillie?"

"Don't be crazy, mother, and don't change the subject. Remember how well the God option worked out for grandma, the one I never met?"

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, Sylvie almost said. Catch phrases are creepy. They seep into a person's brain and pop out whenever there's a failure of imagination. Depending on the company, they leave you embarrassed and looking for the door, or feeling like the good samaritan, a girl scout, superman, any of those save-the-day types. Sylvie had heard this particular phrase on the occasion of every family disaster she could think of, until she was forced to stop rolling her eyeballs at the sound of it to avoid useless wear and tear.

"Right," said Sylvie, "you're right. I don't want to indulge in any mindless family traditions. The trouble is I can't recall any other kind."

Tillie laughed, in spite of herself. "It's a good thing I'm not there. I'd be hyperventilating all over you and I've got an awful cold."

"Poor baby. Eat lots of papaya." Sylvie waited for Tillie to sneeze herself out. "Listen, we've caught each other at the tail end of one of my dumber ideas. It's called grasping at straws, or have I got my clichés crossed? Anyway, don't worry. The church is in no danger from me."

Sylvie was amazed and appalled by how quickly she changed her mind these days. Used to be, once she had an idea it was set in stone and the closest thing to a sin to go against. She worried about what Tillie would think of her. How could such a fickle person be anybody's mother?

"Tillie?"

"Sorry mother, sorry. My beeper's gone off. I'm on call tonight."

"What about your cold? Don't they know you're sick?"

"Don't worry, mother. We'll talk some more. I'm no philosopher, I guess. Just stay around, o.k.? Please?"

Sylvie made herself a cup of almond tea and sat on the floor with the shoe box she'd been looking through before the phone rang. It was full of testaments to her grammar school career at St. Brigid's. Most of her report cards, invitations to her first communion and her confirmation, clear glass rosary beads with a real silver crucifix, a pocket dictionary she had passed around the classroom one day in sixth grade. The kids had circled body parts, sexual proclivities, and other impolite words in red ink. Sixth grade was the worst as far as Sylvie's deportment was concerned. Sister Agnes kept calling Sylvie's mother to complain that Sylvie was boy-crazy and completely out of control. "I'll take care of it," Sylvie's mother would say, refusing to appear in person at the school and refusing to say why. When Sylvie didn't show up for her final exams of the year, it was the last straw for Sister Agnes. She went straight to the principal, who made some phone calls and found out that Sylvie's mother was in the hospital dying of cancer. A few weeks later, Sylvie went to school to take make up exams. Sister was as nice as she could be, managing to pat Sylvie on the shoulder. In the fall, the kids treated Sylvie in unnatural ways, as though she were as fragile as a porcelain doll or as tragic as the sole survivor of a massacre. It lasted a long time, until Sylvie went to a public school on the other side of town and made new friends.

Grown up Sylvie put the lid on the box. That was thirty-two years ago and it seemed like yesterday. Trite but true. Time is a funny thing, she told herself as she looked at her watch. At some point somebody decided that it goes in a straight line, from morning to noon to night, from yesterday to today to tomorrow, only it really goes in circles. She went to the fridge for a glass of Chardonnay. If time is linear, and life is a game of connect the dots until I fall off the line, then what's the purpose of memory? What does anybody have to do with anybody else? Mother, Sylvie thought, where are you when I need one?

Sylvie's mother used to watch the soaps on T.V. The characters were scary. They were obsessed with what they called moving on, and constantly telling each other to forget the past practically before it happened. They reminded adolescent Sylvie, into sci-fi at the time, of space aliens turning humans into zombies so they could be used to commit unspeakable acts. Anyway, once a soap opera character actually managed to develop amnesia about the past, it always came after them in the form of a hateful person or a dirty deed of their own, so what was the point of all that effort? As anyone with a brain could see, if the future was one thing, it was forever going up in smoke.

How depressing, thought Sylvie, sipping her wine, gently massaging the site of her first excavation. She tried to remember whether the present played any significant role in the soaps. As near as she could tell, it was like a waiting room. People used it to hatch plots and bide their time till they got what they wanted, usually revenge. Or they used it to recover from epic misfortunes that eventually knocked everyone, good or bad, down to size. Maybe that was the attraction for mother, Sylvie thought. Everybody got theirs, whether they deserved it or not. Maybe the idea that there was nothing much a person could do in the face of randomly distributed disaster was a comfort. Who knows. Mother didn't exactly talk a blue streak, especially that last week, but the T.V. was always on, no matter what else was happening, even when she died. "Even when she died," said Sylvie, staring across the room at her own blank screen.

Sylvie got up and went into the bathroom. It was Wednesday, bath night in the old days. While the tub was filling, she poured apple scented bubbles into the water, got some candles from the kitchen and the rest of the wine. She balanced everything on the edge of the tub, turned off the lights and stepped into the bath. She tried to think whether the present played any significant role in her own real life. The big C, resulting in her currently lopsided condition, had been incubating for years before Sylvie found the lump. All those once present moments, of which she had only spotty recollection, had accumulated to seriously transform her future. Maybe if she'd been paying attention, they wouldn't have come back to get her, just like in the soaps. Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. How is a person supposed to know?

Sylvie snuggled under the bubbles and tried to concentrate on her cellular activity. Was it back to normal? Was it running rampant, gearing up to give her another nasty surprise? I'd like to meet Tillie's daughter, Sylvie thought. Tillie talks about having one someday. Why fool around? I'd like her kid to admire me. I'd like her to think I'm good looking and smart, but not too smart. Let's face it, if I got too full of it she'd find me out and there's nothing worse than a deflated con artist trying to make up for lost time. What's gone is gone, Sylvie said to herself, glancing down through the bubbles at her flat side. Nobody lives forever. Jesus. She took a deep breath and slid her head underwater until her thick dark hair was soaked.

God gave you a brain, Sister Agnes used to say. It's a sin not

to make the most of it. Well, thought Sylvie, pouring what was left of the wine, seems like a sin that life is so complicated a person has trouble telling which way is up. People should be born with a set of directions to keep them from getting lost along the way. There should be a central registry where clues about how to proceed in difficult situations could be made available to everyone. Life should be more like it was for the three musketeers, all for one and one for all and never mind the pioneer stuff. If being alone in the wilderness was so great, people wouldn't get cabin fever and go crazy as often as they do, right?

Sylvie stood up and wrapped herself in her favourite towel. It was a gift from Tillie, who knew how purple flattered her mother's olive skin. She went into the bedroom and dropped onto the quilt. A copy of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* was on the pillow. Sylvie opened the book to a story called "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." It was about twin girls visiting their cousin for the weekend. The girls went to a convent school and irreverently referred to each other as Temple One and Temple Two, which made Sylvie laugh. What would Sister Agnes say, she wondered. She didn't seem to have a sense of humour, certainly not about religion, but who knows what she did behind closed doors. Maybe she was a real wild woman. People are such sad mysteries. Whoever said you can't take it with you was seriously off base. You have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure anybody out. Even then you don't know the half of it, and before you can blink they're history, untold tales, secret selves and all. Nobody can believe they're gone for good, like soldiers missing in action. There's so much unfinished business.

In the dark, thought Sylvie, is the last place I want to leave Tillie. In the dark, the T.V. droning doom, is not the way I want to go. We can do better, Tillie and me. We've got brains, whatever their origin, and big hearts. When the past comes back to Tillie, I want her to be in charge. Life is too short for guesswork. We'll talk, Tillie and me. I'll make sure of that. We'll pop the cork on our feelings and get maudlin if we're so inclined. Mothers and daughters are allowed certain liberties, after all, even if one of them is a doctor living miles away in Michigan. Maybe, with a little luck, the future won't be as slippery as it was on my mother's soaps. It's worth a try. No question.

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ANNE INNIS DAGG

By Train Across Canada

At twenty
I was the centre
  of my universe
When I spoke
  young men listened
  old men smiled
  women responded
I felt strong

At forty
I was almost
  a spectator
Men liked me
  but only if I
  wore high heels
  used mascara
  and listened
Women liked me if I
  wore sensible shoes
  no lipstick
  and listened

By sixty
  I had become invisible
When I spoke
  no one listened
In the diner
  I was ignored
My best dress
  impressed no one

Now I'm eighty
I stamp my cane
  and trainmen jump
I shout out questions
  and conductors stammer a reply
I lose my ticket
  and fellow passengers panic

I am again the centre of the universe

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