The Curse

BY LUCIANA COSTA

Whenever she was angry with us, and she was often angry, often in a rage without ever really knowing why, she would remind us that soon, very soon, she would leave us for good.

—for Steven Atkinson

When I had the accident, I knew what my mother must have felt the instant she died. The sound of it, the moment of impact, metal slapping against metal, still resounds in my ears. It was as though the whole thing happened to someone else. I was not in my body, but somewhere just above it, aware of the haze from the airbags that had filled the car when they burst, aware that my left arm and left breast were burning, singed from the impact, aware that my daughter, my baby, was trapped in her car seat behind me. When the car finally stopped, crumpled up against a hydro pole, I jumped out and pulled her to safety. I was numb.

I knew how my mother must have felt the instant her car had slammed into that tractor trailer filled with cows, live cows; the moment her car was crushed underneath that trailer's cab, the sound of it, metal collapsing under metal, roaring in her ears, shattering memory. And then, for her, it was over. She was out of it, out of the car, out of her body, her head no longer recognizable, her body, bruised, and folded up, in on itself, a mass of flesh no longer warm, pulsing, alive. It was icy that day. She had lost control of the car and slid underneath the wheels of that tractor trailer that couldn't have done anything to avoid her. The cows were mooing, distressed by the impact. The trailer jackknifed into the ditch. It happened quickly.

My father drove by only a few moments afterwards. The police were already there. They tried to hold him back. He had recognized her car. Her arm was hanging outside the open window, the same way we had seen her do it a thousand times before. We were sure she must have fallen asleep at the wheel. She hung her arm out the window when she was tired, palm pressed against the cold air rushing next to the car. It helped keep her awake, she said.

What was she thinking about, I used to wonder, in that second, when the top of the car came crashing down on her head? Once, in her youth, a gypsy in Rome had read her palm, when the lines in her hands still bore the promise of a future, of a life that could be rosier, better, easier somehow, perhaps. That gypsy had told her she would die young and my mother had been waiting for her death ever since. Whenever she was angry with us, and she was often angry, often in a rage without ever really knowing why, she would remind us that soon, very soon, she would leave us for good. After awhile we waited with her for her death. We waited and wondered when it would happen. And we learned to be afraid. And, it was a fear that would stay with us for a very long time, long after her death even. Maybe, in that second, she knew that gypsy's prophecy had finally come true.

For an instant, when I learned of her death, I felt something like relief. It had finally happened. We wouldn't have to wait for it anymore. Always looking for it around the corner, anticipating the anguish. My father felt the same way. I know because I asked him and he told me the truth—for once.

I hadn't realized then that because we would not be allowed to view her body—"it is in no condition to be seen" the man at the funeral home had insisted—for years afterwards I would be plagued with dreams in which she was alive and had returned home. In those dreams her death had been a joke on us, all of us, the family that didn't appreciate her, that didn't love her enough, that didn't understand her anger, her pain, her madness. She had left us in order to punish us, to show us that we couldn't live without her, to squelch our attempts to carve out some kind of normalcy, some kind of contentment, something to fill up the hole we had, all five of us, and my father too, the raw, gaping hole we had inside that we pretended wasn't there, wasn't serious, and certainly wasn't worth mentioning. Just a hole. Who cares, anyway?

Only she cared. Or so she said. She always told me that nobody would care as much about me as she did, nobody could ever love me, or us, as much as she did, nobody could ever be a true friend to me (us), except her. Why would we ever need any-

one but her? She loved us the best, the most, of anyone. She was our mother.

Sometimes I can hear her laughing, worse, hear her swearing at us for going on without her, cursing us for having let her down, again.

In my dreams, in my nightmares, I have only just come to the place, 15 years after her death, that I can contain my fear enough to say to her, "What have you done to us?" Never in my dreams, in my nightmares about her, does she ever give me solace.

When I was a baby, they tell me, I used to scream at night, a tortured wail, all night long. They couldn't quiet me. No one in the house could soothe me, stop the crying. Not my mother, or grandmother, or grandfather, or father, or any of the boarders that lived in that little house in downtown Toronto where all the Italian immigrants moved to in the '50s—"little Italy." Talk had it that I had been cursed. There was no other possible reason for the haunting cries that pierced that house, that first house, full of new immigrants in search of a better life, piercing cries that made them wish that they were back somehow in the safety and comfort of their villages, where they knew everyone in the town, where a look spoke volumes and words meant nothing, where it didn't matter what you wore, what mattered was what you had for dinner and who sat at your table. My mother and grandmother poured salt on the windowsills outside my bedroom every night for a very long time. After the ritual of sprinkling the salt, my grandmother would prepare a bowl of water which she would cradle in her left arm. With her right hand she would gingerly hold a teaspoon of olive oil, turning it ever so slowly in order to allow two or three drops of the oil to fall into the bowl, all the time muttering under her breath, stopping only to make the sign of the cross several times with her thumb on my tiny forehead. I didn't know it then but she was praying. If the oil spread through the water, dispersing into many small droplets, she would nod and without saying a word my mother would know that the "maledizione," or curse, was still active. My grandmother would have to pour the water and oil down the kitchen sink and start the whole process all over again. She kept doing it, over and over again, until at last the oil remained floating on top, one large, shiny pool. That meant the curse had been lifted—for a time, anyway. It took awhile but several months later the screaming finally stopped. The boarders who lived in our home, sleeping two and three to a room, could finally get a good night's rest. They told me, many years later, that the salt on the windowsills kept the witches from coming into my room.

I come from a long line of women with a tradition of curses that binds them together, like the balls and chains clamped around the feet of prisoners, preventing movement and flight, preventing freedom, keeping them bound together, one behind the other, one in front of the other, so that the movement of the first in line resonates on down through the line to the last, affecting each one like an echo that rebounds from one direction to its opposite.

I come from a long line of women with a history of curses. When my mother met my father in Rome and decided in a hurried moment that she would marry him and come to Canada, her mother exploded with fury. She had been able to prevent several marriages but this time my mother could not be swayed. I'm not so sure it was love as much as it was the need to escape. "I curse you," she raged, "that one day you too will have a daughter who will leave you." A mother's curse always comes true, my mother would add gravely at the end of the story.

My mother's real parents were too poor to keep her. She was the last of six children. My grandmother gave birth to her in the fields, squatting behind rows of tomato plants that were ripe for picking. As an infant, my mother was small, scrawny, and incredibly hungry. It was a hunger she would never be able to satisfy, no

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matter how much food she stuffed into her mouth, a hunger that gnawed at her, relentess and unabating. My grandmother scooped her up and placed her under the shade fig tree. There was still work to be done and six other mouths that needed feeding. She herself never craved food. She was wiry and tough, a survivor.

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She looked at her new baby and knew there would never be enough food for another mouth in the family. She knew then she would give this hungry, mewling baby to her sister who lived in Rome, childless and lonely. My mother's aunt raised her as though she was her own. My mother's aunt loved her as much as if she had been her own flesh, loved her too much maybe, in her loneliness whose sharpness was blurred by an ever present carafe of homemade, country wine.

But my mother never forgave her birth mother, her real mother, for giving her away, even though she learned to call her aunt "mamma" and her uncle "babbo," out of her own loneliness, too, perhaps.

When my mother was 12, her real father died. They said it was a "pneumonia," tuberculosis probably. She didn't know what to feel. She hardly knew him. He never spoke to her, even when she returned to the farm for the occasional Sunday outing. He would just be there, standing somewhere in the shadow of the shed that housed their chickens, a crumpled hat pulled over his eyes, one leg pulled up, foot resting against the door, one hand in his pocket, the other expertly rolling a bit of tobacco between gnarled and calloused finger tips. Once, she thought she caught him eyeing her under the brim of his hat, curiously, as though he wasn't sure who she was. But, when her eyes met his, a pale, washed-out blue, he looked away embarassed that she had caught him, watching her, his last child, the one he never knew. Then he died and she needed something appropriate to wear to the funeral.

Some months before his death, her aunt and uncle had, in a moment of sheer folly, pleased by her tender pubescence, her innocent freshness, bought her a new coat. It was bright red—her favourite colour. Her older brothers, hankering for adventure in the big city, often came to visit her, and startled by her beauty delighted in flattering her, flirting with her, teasing and intimate, perhaps practicing their lines for later in the evening. When she showed them her new coat, childishly excited and happy, they decided to surprise her with a matching purse and shoes. They were red patent leather and the finest things my mother had ever owned. But when her father died, and she did not have anything to wear to the funeral, the coat, worn but once, was dyed black. The handbag and shoes were exchanged for something more sombre. I have a photograph of my mother, 12 years old, the one time she got to wear the red coat and shoes, the red handbag clasped tightly in her hand. Her eyes are demurely downturned, but her lips cannot help but betray the shy, pleased smile that lurks at their corners, allowing herself to be happy for one, brief moment, content and full.

After his death, my grandmother ran the farm by herself. She was not daunted. She had always taken care of everything. She grew up on that farm, knew the land better than she knew herself. Neither her brothers, nor her father, had survived the First World War. She and her own mother had learned to get by on their own. When her husband died the winter my mother turned 12, my grandmother was relieved. It meant she wouldn't be pregnant ever again. She raised her four sons, and her only remaining daughter, my mother's sister, with an iron hand. She had to. It was the only way they could survive.

By the time I met my grandmother she was absolutely crazy. They say she went mad after the death of her first-born son. She was passionate about him. After the Second World War, he worked in a munitions factory. One day the factory blew up. No one knew for certain why. When they told her he was dead she didn't believe it. "Where's the body?" she asked, calmly smoothing back strands of steel gray hair.

"It was an explosion," the foreman explained, offering her the large and bloodied sheet he held cradled in his arms. "This was all we could find."

She reached for the sheet and without speaking, counted the pieces. "There's an ear missing," was all she said as she methodically placed each piece of her son's body, her favourite son, many no longer recognizable, into a large, cardboard box. Then she went out to look for the missing ear, roaming the fields, under the greyish cast of moonlight which taunted her with shadows and shapes that she chased mindlessly, all the time moaning, calling that ear to come to her. She was never the same after that. Every night she wandered the fields and hills, restless and despairing. After awhile, the people in the village no longer heard her wails. It was just the wind, they said.

My uncle, the one who died in the explosion, my mother's oldest brother, had been planning to marry a girl from the village. They say she was the most beautiful girl in the village and he was utterly captivated. My grandmother, they tell me, was wild with jealously and refused to

give her blessing for the marriage. No one was good enough for her son who had survived the war and returned home with a medal. No one was good enough for her son who worked the hardest in the fields, who turned over to her every penny he made in the factory, her son, first-born, into whom she had poured all her hopes and desires. But he was obstinate, determined, and in love. The day the factory blew up he and my grandmother had argued violently. In a rage, she cursed him that he should come home in pieces. A mother's curse always comes true, my mother would add gravely, when she finished the story. I never believed her until I went to Italy and had the chance to ask her remaining brothers, and her sister, for the facts. By then, it had become a legend and an excuse for my grandmother's insanity. Of course it was true, they all said, without flinching.

My mother liked to tell me all kinds of stories about curses. She was superstitious like most Catholics and believed in the power of spirits to shape destinies. When she was 16, for example, she had been hired by the richest family in town as a domestic. It was there that she learned to cook. The man of the house, a prominent member of parliament, liked to eat. He adored the way in which my mother could turn the simplest pasta dish into a culinary delight. When he was home, and had the time, he liked to watch her make the fettuccine, kneading the pasta deftly, slicing it with a skill and precision that belied her years. Her hands and arms dusted with flour, her hair, soft, curly, and unusually blond, falling into her eyes, which she would brush away with powder white arms that charmed him to no end. But he made her nervous. She didn't know anything then, she said. She was an innocent, she told me. His wife found the whole thing rather irritating and eventually let her go. My mother's "babbo" was furious. They depended on the money she earned and he was too sick, too arthritic, too drunk to work. When she gave him the news he beat her black and blue. She took to her bed, shaking, vomiting, ill with dysentery. She didn't get better. The days passed and she became worse. She could hardly stand. She lost weight. Her eyes began to sink into her face. They told her "mamma" that someone had cursed her and the curse was drawing all the life from her body, draining her spirit from her bowels, liquid anguish. Country air, they were told, would do the trick and she was sent to a small village near Bologna, where they had family, to recover. That's where my mother eventually met my father. She slowly got better, stronger, clear-headed. She liked being outside, working with her hands in the wheat fields an uncle tended for a family from the city. The family didn't take too long to discover what a good cook she was, and soon, she was given the privilege of accessing the pantry for whatever supplies she needed to prepare the family's meals. She liked cooking their meals; was gratified by the way they slurped their soup, silently approving the broth's delicate flavour gently coaxed from a small onion, a piece of celery, a carrot, and the carcass of a chicken roasted the night before. A tomato plucked from the vine, and parsley crushed together with minced garlic and the rind of a lemon provided the finishing touches. A prized egg beaten lightly with some cheese was added at the end to provide some substance. She liked getting up early in the morning, stretching in her bed, planning the day's meals for the family. She liked living with people that weren't drunk all the time, that didn't beat her.

Not long afterwards the rich politician in Rome became ill. No one could help him. He was dying, they told her, and, in his stupor, he kept calling her name. Her "babbo," summoned by the rich family, came to the village to bring her back to the city. "*Il padrone*" wanted to see her, he said. When my mother, at last, crossed the threshold of that home where she had learned to cook, and hesitating, made her way to his room, he took one last look at her, lifting himself from the bed in anticipation of her youthful, innocent face, and died. Just like that. They told her he must have been responsible for the curse that had been placed on her and that he couldn't die until he saw her one last time. His death meant the curse was finally lifted, or so they said. She was not allowed to go back to the village near Bologna. They found her a job embroidering sheets with a neighbouring seamstress, where it was easy for her parents to keep an eye on her.

My mother liked telling me those stories about her girlhood, her youth, her innocent wonder about life; stories about the spirits that roamed the Roman countryside, spirits that made things happen, curses, inadvertent and studied, that shaped destinies, moulded lives, and lingered in the afterlife.

My mother cursed me when I was 17 years old. "May you never be happy one day in your life!" she screeched at me one day, while washing the morning dishes, in a fit of anger. I had dared to go on a date, once, and fancied myself in love with someone I went to school with. I was not allowed to go out, at all. We had gone to a movie, my first date, once, when my father was home and my mother was away. She didn't learn

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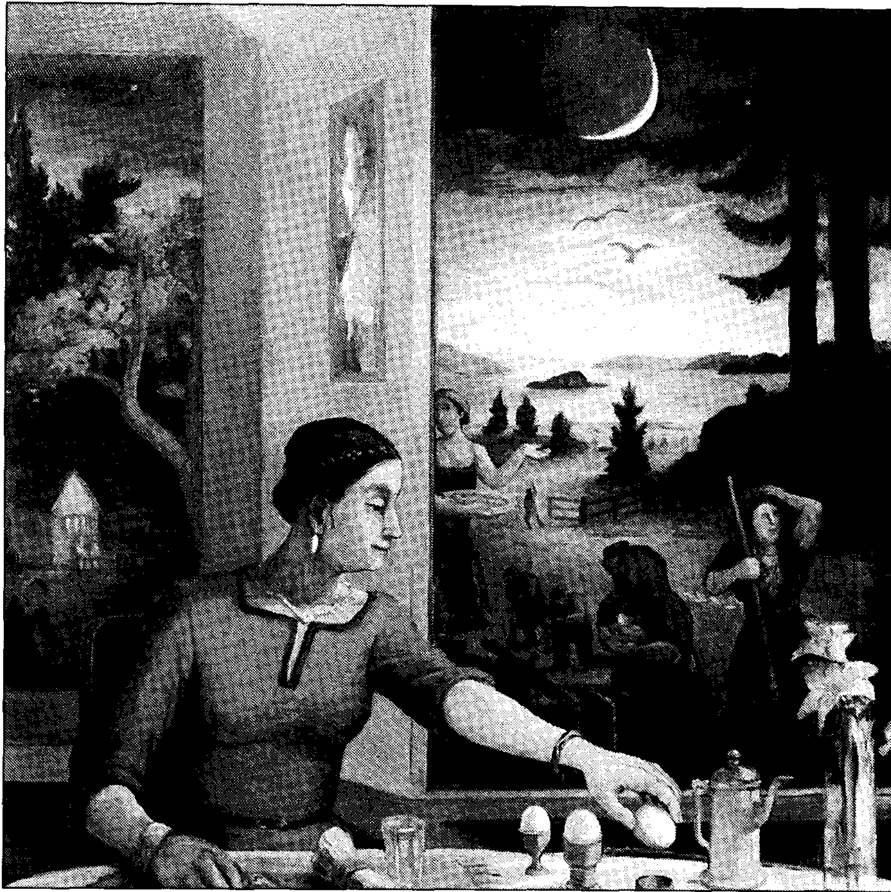

Diana Dean, The New Age-Part 3, "Breakfast," 54" x 54", Oil on Canvas, 1996.

about that date until many weeks later, when my father, cowering, confessed. She forbade me to ever see him again. I refused. "*Putana*," she hissed, "what has he done to you that you should choose him over me?"

Her fury was uncontrollable. She pummelled me with her fists, her arms, her face flushed red-hot, perspiration streaming down her temples, beading over her lips, nose, forehead, hitting me so hard that I became as small as an insect, receeding inside myself, quiet, still ... soon it would be over. This wasn't the first time, nor the last. My father just watched. He didn't do anything to stop her although he knew it was wrong. He never stopped her.

When it was over and she left the room, I crawled into bed, my body aching, my skin burning, my heart still, and squeezing my eyes shut I recited Hail Marys over and over in my head, so that it became a chant and, finally entranced, I fell asleep. This is what I always did after she beat me, skin hot, head aching, praying fervently, hoping, believing, that somehow the Virgin Mother could help me. They used to tell me that Jesus, her son, could never say no to his mother. For a very long time I really believed that she could hear me and that I was simply not worthy. That's why the beatings, the rage, the pain, never stopped. I was not worthy of their divine help. They knew I was bad.

I stopped going to school. My teachers in high school, witnesses to the bruises, said nothing.

I don't know when it was that I finally stopped praying, stopped believing.

It wasn't long before I ran away from home and thus fulfilled the curse my mother's mother (or aunt) had hurled at her when she chose to marry my father and came to Canada. I didn't know what I was doing. I was numb except for an insistent throbbing under my skin that kept telling me that I had to run.

After I left home, my mother tried to kill herself. She swallowed a bottle of pills; I don't know what they were. She took all kinds of pills, for one thing or another. For the longest time she had me convinced that she had some kind of cancer. I believed her. I told someone in one of my high school classes whose father had actually died of lung cancer. She loved him and deeply mourned his passing. We spent hours at the greasy spoon near our high school. We skipped class, and drank cup after cup of coffee, smoking cigarette after cigarette. We talked and talked about everything. Many years later I ran into her somewhere, by chance, and she remembered me. She thanked me for making her laugh during that time that her life was so difficult, that time when her father died. "You were always so funny," she said. I didn't know what to say to her. She had no idea how desperate, how unhappy, how terrified I was then. Neither did I really.

My mother did have some health problems. She was obese and diabetic, had had various hernia operations, a kidney removed, and eventually a hysterectomy. But she never had cancer. The pills she took that night almost killed her. When they revived her at the hospital, she refused to see anyone but me. The police came to get me in the seedy apartment I was renting not too far from my parents' home. They brought me to the hospital and escorted me to her room. When she saw me, she grabbed my hand and told me she had tried to kill herself so that she could lift the curse she had laid on me, trading her life for the life of misery she had wished on me.

For the longest time I thought that when the memories came back it would be cataclysmic somehow, overwhelming, overpowering, impossible to bear. But it's not like that all. It's very quiet. They are just suddenly there. And you know them to be true. This is what happened. This

is what you heard, what you saw, what you felt, what was there at the time, then, and it has never left you, really.

It wasn't until many years later, after several years of therapy, long after my mother died, that I remembered suffocating in the darkness, waking to find drops of blood on my sheets, unexplained, then forgotten. I understood then my fear of falling asleep, of the shadowy presence in the doorway, of the need to open every window in the house so that I could breathe.... It wasn't until then that I could understand the intense shame I felt, as a child, when I became aware of anyone looking at me, at my body, already mature, already old. It wasn't until then that I remembered binding my breasts tight with tensor bandages hidden under sweaters a little too large. It wasn't until then that I could name and touch my uneasiness, my anticipation of terror, my search for places to hide.

The curse is in the unacknowledged memory, real and unreal, certain and not, living inside my belly, a poisoned fetus, protected and hidden and held on to by layers and layers of muscle, tissue, and impenetrable fat. The child in my dreams needed to get bigger, I tell my therapist. Not bigger, just taller was the reply.

I don't remember everything. But this is what I know. It happened. And when it did I found a place inside the furnace that lived deep in our basement, always dark, always dusty, but full of child-sized hiding spots, into which I could crawl and despite the mustiness, be able to breathe. This is what I know: the body remembers what the soul cannot. In my dreams, my mouth fills with a sticky, gummy mucous that I can't remove. It keeps me silent, and for a time, almost safe. This, too, is what I know: the fear is rooted in reality, the truth, the knowing, still unbearable, still unspeakable, still there.

I am startled by the possibility that uncovering the memories, understanding the suppressed energy of my body, unleashing the silence that constricts my throat, might break the links and set me free.

My mother used to tell me that if she hadn't discovered she was pregnant with me she would have left my father. She stayed with him but he made her unhappy. Even in the early days of their marriage, he was always looking at other women, talking about other women, about their private parts. Once he told me that when he first moved to Canada he rented a basement apartment from a Chinese family. They had a very beautiful daughter. He used to like watching her climb the stairs so that he could peer up her dress. He enjoyed telling stories like that. He was a good looking man in his younger days and he always had a lot of girlfriends. One of them used to phone all the time, telling my mother about her evenings in bed with my father.

Once, when I was little, I heard my mother scream into the phone, "You want him? Take him, he's yours!" Then, for the longest time, what seemed to me like an eternity, she sobbed into the back of couch, her fists buried into the corners, immobile except for the shudders that travelled from her shoulder, down the length of her back, to the soles of her feet, hard and calloused from the long days she spent at the dry cleaners, where she worked then, and where her beautiful, blond hair all fell out. It was from the chemicals, she told me later. When the crying stopped, at last, she ate, and ate, until there was nothing left to eat.

My mother and father used to argue all night long. Their shouts filled the still night air of our home, the one we lived in until she died, the one we lived in most of our lives. It backed onto a ravine. There were no other houses around. No one who could hear the shouting.

Diana Dean, The New Age-Part 2, "Two Worlds," 54" x 54", Oil on Canvas, 1996.

No one who could help if you were in trouble.

When she was really angry with my father she used to crawl into my bed. I remember this quite clearly. One night in particular. She liked to curl her body around mine, stroke my hair, my back, my legs. In my ear, she would whisper that my father was a horrible man. That she was the only one who could ever truly love me. When I got older, she stopped coming to my bed and slept on the couch instead. She used to fall asleep eating cookies and milk in the dark. There was never enough food to fill her up, even though she spent all day cooking for her family, her friends, for her clients, for herself. Everyone loved her way with food, the way she could could transform the simplest ingredients into a mouth-watering, pleasure-full, sensory experience. She had turned it into a successful business. But it wasn't enough. And, she was never full.

Now, when I look at my baby, my daughter, when I pull her close, and drown in the sweet smell of her hair, the innocent softness of her skin, nursing her in the hushed stillness of the night, curled up against me in my bed, warm, hungry, and still asleep, I wonder if my mother felt such tenderness for me. I look down at the fragile life breathing ever so gently against me, a tiny hand tucked into the cleavage of my breasts, laden with milk that pours out unaided and unhampered; milk that my tiny daughter, a few weeks premature, eagerly laps like a kitten, then full, purring contentedly, sleeps nestled against my fullness, satisfied.

When I had the accident, the moment of impact, the sound of it roaring in my ears, the echo of metal collapsing against metal enveloping the fragments of my life for an instant that felt like an eternity, I understood. As I fumbled through the haze to reach for my baby, her newness still coursing through my veins like molten lava, leaving its imprint forever on my skin, I understood how her life had become mine, her breath my breath, the beat of her heart entangled with the throbbing of my heart, pulsing, and alive.

I thought of my mother, folded in on herself, crumpled under a sheet of collapsed metal, cold and unforgiving. I thought of what it must have meant to her to have the newness of life squealing in her arms, a life into which she could breathe the promise of a future, a life which could be protected by sprinkling salt on the windowsills, a life that would fill her up in a way that her husband, and then food, could not. But it would not be enough to shatter the power of the curse that shaped her destiny and mine, defined her dreams, my nightmares, haunted her into madness and me into silence.

I come from a long line of women who learned to survive with whatever they had at hand, who raged against the harshness of their lives to ensure a better future for their children, who in not knowing how to love themselves, looked to their children for the answers, used work, and food, and the promise of another future to fill them up inside, and when that, too, wasn't enough, couldn't let go. And, in not letting go, they tightened the chains that bound them together, one behind the other, one in front of the other, so that the movement of the first in line resonated on down the line to the last, a stranglehold that ensured their survival, for a time.

I look down at my baby, smiling in her sleep, her cheeks flushed, her hair damp and warm, curling ever so slightly against the softness of her brow, smooth and shiny, still radiating newness, and realize how much she has contributed to the fullness of my life, but also how full my life has become in the writing, in the living, in spite of my baby, my daughter, nestled against me, still a part of my body. I look behind me, at the women I have come from, am bound to by culture, by memory, by blood, and understand, for the first time, that I am not so different, really, except that in the writing, and in the living, I can pull them along with with me, I can pull so hard that the chain can not only be loosened but snapped. I can, with the strength of my will, for the sake of my daughter, shatter the power of tradition, break the hold of the curse, open wide doors locked by guilt, fear, and apprehension and that, in fact, my mother, and her mother before her, in their living, in their heartache and loss, in their struggle to survive no matter what, gave me the key to set them, and myself, free.

I, too, am a survivor, no matter what. That's what made me run so long ago from my mother's house. Many years later, that's what drove me to pursue an education, feeding my hunger in a way that was different from my mother's, giving me a haven that was nurturing and empowering, helping me to find a way for the rich culture that shaped my past to illuminate my present and reclaim my future.

Recognizing myself as a survivor is what allowed me to live.

I look at my daughter, sleeping contentedly, peacefully, pushing away from me so that she can stretch out her arms and legs freely and easily all over the bed, claiming all the space available for herself, safe and unafraid, and I know that she is full.

Luciana Costa is from a large, noisy, and dysfunctional Italian family. She lives in Toronto with her husband (a wonderful cook) and her two children (who are also noisy and incredibly delightful).