Freedom Song, for My Mother

by Fran Muir

L'auteure relate l'histoire de sa mère qui a dû confronter un monde d'incompréhension face à une vielle femme qui questionnait sans cesse la logique aristotélicienne, cette pierre angulaire du patriarcat, afin de simplement vivre sa vie à sa façon.

My mother died in late September, 1994. She was ninety.

The fall of her passing is fittingly as luminous as those brilliant Indian summers of her native Manitoba; hers and mine. Luminous in me is the woman I met, finally, when she was facing a world that increasingly would not accommodate an *old woman* whose mind was breaking loose from Aristotelian logic, that cornerstone of patriarchy, to be simply who she was.

The month I told my mother I was divorcing, after thirty years of marriage, she found a small lump in her breast.

Going in for a lumpectomy, she told me. She was eighty-five.

Your mother's heart fibrillated under anaesthesia, one of the doctors across from me says. The two of them, young residents watch me with wary eyes. Between us, my mother lies silent under neatly folded sheets.

The good news is we got it all, no further treatment needed. Something in me calibrating the spaces between his words, the opacity of their eyes, the feeling there is something they know that I, we, don't.

My mother says I am not to bother her doctors. I feel her fear of them. I see her surgeon once, at his office. When he calls her in, his eyes avoid mine. I keep wondering why so much is gone, her whole left breast, lymph nodes; why there is no follow-up chemotherapy, radiation. I wonder if it is cancer. She never says. I am silenced by her silence.

Beverley Deutch

Two years later I can put a name to the silence of those doctors. *Multi-Infarct Dementia.* It seems my mother's fibrillating heart, its irregular beat during anaesthesia and since, has flung a rain of small blood clots into her brain, where they lodge, causing bouts of memory loss, confusion, anxiety, until the clot dissolves, returning her to some kind of clarity, except that parts of her memory and ability to know where she is in time and space, who she is, seem to be missing.

Telling her keys from bus pass and money, what each is for, trying to get it under control. She has a bleeding ulcer. Pills she is supposed to take for the ulcer, for her heart; too many. Strangers invite themselves into her apartment, look into her fridge and cupboards and ask her personal questions, say she should not live there any more.

The *Geriatric Assessment Unit* to which my mother is referred has what they call an *intake* interview. Although my mother does not know why she should be there, does not wish to be there, she is polite, until the doctor, a man who is unknown to her begins asking her about her childhood and her parents.

Why are you asking me questions that are none of your business? she asks, angering. He reaches over and pats her arm. As though she is a child?

Don't touch me, she cries, shrinking away from him into the chair, ending the interview. They try to get her to bake cookies, join a memory group, talk to a psychiatrist...

She just walks away, they tell me, when they call me in for an emergency meeting with the *team.* When they use words like, *paranoia, possibly psychosis, possibly hallucinations,* I feel my mother—always in my memory a solitary being, private, reserved, aloof even and very independent—fighting for her life.

It becomes clear they want me to agree to my mother's committal to a *secure facility.* The geriatric unit at a psychiatric hospital is mentioned. Surrounded by ten or so health care professionals, doctors doing their residencies in geriatrics and psychiatry, psychiatrists, psychiatric social workers, nurses and occupational therapists, I feel the system covering its bureaucratic backside, closing in on my mother. And the need to walk carefully.

There are two follow-up phone calls urging me to reconsider. Both women, the psychiatrist and the head nurse suggest what a danger my mother could be to herself and others. Something definitely feels dangerous for my mother. The nurse says:

We can send an ambulance to come and get her. Mistaking my silence, she adds,

You don't have to be there.

I think of that word *intake,* of being caught in a machine.

Later that week, on a warm July night, I come to my mother's to see if she would like to go for a drive. She flattens herself against the bedroom doorway.

Where are you taking me? she says.

A drive, I say, *and some ice cream.*

Oh, she says, looks pleased, excited. This power to please her is new and too heavy a measure of her vulnerability to bear.

We sit in the soft dusk up on Jericho Hill, watch the lights come on across English Bay and the freighters in the bay.

I can see it all, she says, meaning in her head, *I just can't find the words.* I ask her what she sees. She tells me and I am a child listening to stories she has never told me, about her life, the farm, her ten brothers and herself the youngest. About her mother, Jane, from Edinburgh, how hard her mother worked and never anything for herself... the colours of the flowers around the house, the trees her father planted, the garden...tears running down my mother's cheeks. I have never seen her cry. Have I never seen *her?* this child hidden in what shadows?

And so, this is how we go on. *Tell me what you see,* I would say to her...and I tell her what I see...

She can't remember my childhood, until I tell it as I felt it. And then she does. This becomes how we retrieve our past silences, heal the absences, the gaps between us. We begin to know one another. Dementia becomes our breakthrough, becomes a journey we both take, discovering our mind's heart and heart's mind.

I want to know more about my grandmother, Jane. There is no record of her, not even her name. She is referred to as my grandfather's wife. I write a story about her and my mother, Jean, called *Dreaming The Heart.* I want to write about mothers and foremothers and why they are absent from history. I want to write them back into their stories. I am going back to the land of my grandparents, Scotland, and the birthplaces of my mother and father, in Manitoba and Ontario. I will be away two months.

My mother has been in an Intermediate Care Residence for two years. The choice I hoped she would be able to make to move in there, she did make, although there are no words that can record how she managed to do it, certainly not without rage and grief on both our parts. It has been an interlude. Her ninetieth birthday was New Year's Day.

This spring I am told my mother has become *unmanageable.* It is difficult to get an explanation of what this means. The care staff are on a rotating schedule and there have been major resignations, with no permanent replacements. The online care staff, I realize are not trained in how to approach and care for someone undergoing the complexities of dementia, nor do they have the time to spend with someone in my mother's situation. Some tell me they have no problems with her, or learn how to avoid them. Others report *incidents, agitation, aggressiveness.* There is also a delirium older people experience when they are not feeling well or over-tired. Their decision to refer my mother for psychiatric assessment coincides with my departure for two months.

I ask them to do the assessment where she is, to wait until I get back. I write copious notes about what works for her, which are either not read, or not acted on. This time the system, which works for its own best interests, already has her. I have no power to protect her. I can only plead the cause of her humanity, her rights as a person. I am never to see her again the way she is before I leave, erect, able to sit, walk.

In Manitoba, at my mother's birthplace, I find a small item in the local paper from February, 1901, that says my grandfather was brought before magistrates for assaulting his wife. Something in me senses why I have been drawn here. I locate a woman my mother's age, who knew her, who is in hospital in the next town.

Sit down, she says, *I'm going to tell you the truth.* She tells me my mother's father was an alcoholic who abused my grandmother and maybe my mother as well, but nobody knows that for sure. My mother's brothers brought her mother and her into town away from him. The farm was lost, everything auctioned off. My mother left there and never went back, not even for her mother's funeral. The pieces fit together with a *click.* I want to get home. They have called to say my mother has been taken into the psychiatric unit of a local hospital.

I find her strapped into a wheelchair, drooling, her jaw rigid, eyes closed, and hardly able to speak.

We're not running a hotel here, the young woman psychiatrist says, when I express my outrage, that and, *well, maybe you'd like to take her home and look after her yourself.*

I've been to Manitoba, I say to my mother, when we are back in her room. She gazes up at me with a completely knowing look. She has been waiting for this acknowledgement for too long.

I know you had to leave there and not go back. Her eyes are filling with tears. Her jaw is so rigid from the drugs it is difficult for her to speak. I pass her kleenex to catch the drool.

It was so hard for her, she manages to say, *no one knew how hard. I was so afraid of him, to go anywhere with him.* We sit, my arm around her, so unfamiliar this holding her, or her me. But she has this past year, held me in large hugs and kissed my cheek.

It is after this the psychiatrist tells me my mother's brain is destroyed and the best that can be is if she can give my mother enough drugs so her behaviour is controlled, even if it means she has to be strapped in a chair for the rest of her life. That the drugs themselves might make people crazy is not something she considers worth discussing.

It is discovered not long after this that my mother's *aggression* is due to pain and tests indicate the pain is likely from metastasized cancer from her breast. The anti-psychotic and other drugs are eventually withdrawn, but not before she has a heart attack and a bleeding ulcer.

Now she is having palliative care on the medical ward, with morphine to manage pain. It has been seven weeks since my mother was brought to the psychiatric unit. She has thirteen days left.

A geriatric specialist stands across from me, my mother lying silent between us, under neatly folded sheets. He talks of cancer cells in the fluid building up around my mother's lungs. I motion him to stop.

She won't understand this, he says. I look at her hands that have clutched mine as he says this. He walks out of there and I never see him again.

Cancer? Cancer? what did I do wrong? my mother tries to raise herself up, grips my hands. *Did someone make a mistake? I don't know where to go...* she says it over and over.

A palliative care doctor comes by a few days later, says outside her door that *she doesn't look like she's dying. I read her chart, I'm from Manitoba too,* he tells me, walks in, leans a rather large, beefy face into hers.

Do you remember when you were a little girl growing up on the farm in Manitoba? My mother has never seen him before. She lowers her head.

I've been a lot of places since then, she says, quietly, to herself more than him.

My daughter comes from Ontario to say goodbye. My sons don't make it in time. We sit together, my daughter, my mother, semi-conscious now, and me. We feed her tiny spoonfuls of things she will eat, like vanilla ice cream. She is losing her ability to swallow. She wakes up, looks at my daughter.

I'm tired...I'm sore...I'm old...I'm young...she says.

The night she dies I realize I have fallen in love with my mother, her breath gone, into me...

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Men Have a Way of Disappearing After the Kids Come

not that they aren't good husbands and fathers,
aren't there for dinner,
weekend tussles, family vacations
and pouring iodine on open cuts

but if they decide suddenly
it's time to join a club
or pull the old clarinet out of the closet
and play in a band on Tuesday nights
or do overtime at the office at double-time
because you need the money

what can you say? He works hard
(not that he doesn't play with the kids);

but who rubs mentholatum on blazing chests
and hushes nerve-jangling coughs
so he can get his sleep?

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