

Wanting Out

JENNIE MORROW

La narratrice se rappelle les derniers jours de sa mère quand elle lui a confessé qu'elle était amoureuse d'une femme. Sa mère n'a pas compris son choix et sa mort a laissé l'auteure avec une immense nostalgie de ne pas avoir réussi à la convaincre. Finalement, elle a compris qu'il était préférable de ne rien regretter, de pardonner à sa mère et de la laisser partir.

I've awoken from a dream about my mother. They don't come very often any more, if they ever did. I can't remember the specifics of this one, but she was there, we spoke, the conversation was, as usual, a little stilted, the silences more eloquent than the words that passed between us. The dream doesn't bring grief; it's been long enough now. But it does leave me worn out. As it fades her presence remains, an ether in the dim air, something I cannot see but can almost taste.

The room is a myopic gray and the house still silent, so I sink back and close my eyes again, grasping at whatever remains of the dream, her presence, the feeling of her, her memory, anything; the line between her eyes, the mix of accents in her

speech. I try to remember her gentleness without letting it be polluted by anger, hers or mine. Even when she lived I was at pains to bring to mind her face and voice. But now as I reach for her, I am reminded that her reality is still there, secure within my heart, firmly under my flesh. Even if it is only at the whim of my dream life that I can access her, she continues to live with me, not so much in memory as in feeling.

I fumble on the windowsill for my glasses and roll quietly out of bed. It's early yet, plenty of time to enjoy the slowly breaking dawn, drink some tea and become once again, if only for this extended moment, a daughter. Not a mother or a spouse, not for now, not just yet. In the kitchen I plug in the kettle and look out the window toward the lake.

It's really not all that different from that gray morning at the other end of the province, fifteen years ago, long before I had the privilege of knowing the three souls I now share my life with, when I awoke from another dream about my mother. A very different dream, but with similar weighty silences that groaned under heavy truths not spoken. In that

dream, shockingly—impossibly—she had died. There were telephone calls, travel arrangements, visits from neighbours not seen for years, casseroles in the fridge, a house full of flowers. Throughout the busyness ran a thread—a new, but familiar, vivid and painful sting. All the things I'd never said to her, confessions of anger or love, and also the secrets she'd never told me.

Silence so pervaded my family life growing up that I was in my thirties before I began to realize that not all people who love each other do so in acknowledged ways, silently. I could probably count the number of times my mother hugged me, as an adult, and I cannot bring to mind one that lingered. These were the silences of things completely unsaid, such as why don't Jeff and Catherine have children? What was wrong with uncle Roger anyway? Why can't we talk about my dead sister? I would blurt out something only to be met with a discussion-stopping silent bomb.

"Mum! Mum!" I'm ten years old and a budding naturalist. "You'll never guess what I saw! Two *Passer montanus* mating on the fence!" And her bright-eyed smile of anticipation abruptly

closes as she turns away. At twelve, watching the news, "What are test-tube babies? Sounds like a good idea." The reply, begrudgingly handed out: "It's a dreadful idea! Dreadful!" I've said—worse, thought—something terribly wrong; I *am* terribly wrong! But why? The hunch that I was somehow disappointing, even shaming to my mother, was a feeling that I carried under my skin throughout my growing up.

Woven through and through that dream of the aftermath of my mother's death fifteen years ago was a persistent and powerful regret for one thing I'd never had the courage to say. I was in a romantic relationship with a woman. This was not new for me, but it was the first one that had lasted. Looking steadily back from this morning, this life, it is clear that the relationship was patently wrong as much for my partner as it was for me. But at the time it was all the world. Not to be able to speak of it with my family was a nagging, scraping pain. Like a swelling appendix or a cancer, it demanded to be out.

The kettle boils and I pour water over a teabag then, cup in hand, creep down to the basement and haul our a box marked "journals." I sit on a crate and flip pages, skimming over the lines, the questions, the passions and observations of a young woman at the other end of a long line—she reaching into her future, seeking what wisdom I might have today to send back down to her, even as I now reach into the past towards her, still searching to know her heart, as if it would help to understand my own. I find the passage I'm looking for.

When I awoke, then, fifteen years ago at the other end of the province, I rushed around the attic room and kitchen of my cheap student housing to get ready for a class, but grabbed my journal and brought it on the bus with me. I wrote feverishly about the dream, its unusual and vivid clarity,

the difficulty of speaking with my family, my mother especially, about many subjects, the importance of telling her of this one thing. I also took a political bent in my writing and urged, to myself at least, the importance of being visible.

Bit by bit, though, that morning and throughout that week, I put the uncomfortable dream from my mind and tried as best I could to focus on assignments and research. The time, if it was ever meant to come, was not now, I told myself. A week went by and Easter came. A childhood friend was visiting relatives in town with her new husband and I joined them for brunch. When I came home it was sunny. I remember that, sunny with the smell of wet greenery so typical of spring and especially of Easter. When I got to my room the phone was ringing. My mother. Not my mother. My mother. Something wrong. From what I remember of the conversation, she said, "Something has happened and you must tell me one thing." Her voice was angry.

"O-kay..."

"What is your relationship with that, that *pharmacist*, the one you keep mentioning—"

The window, the walls, a cat sleeping on the desk, my book case, a peeling corner of a poster, anything. I took a breath. "Rita." The cat stood and stretched. "Rita is my lover, Mum."

Disgust, invective, horror. My gut cramping. The terrible shame. Was it really worth this? Never mind the openness of my generation, never mind visibility, this was *my family*. Shouldn't I have kept my mouth shut, maintain a double life like so many others? I'd been a coward, coward, coward to speak out. Then something about cancer.

"What?"

"I have *cancer* again," she said. "I'm not going to get better unless I can forgive you. End it now!"

At some point she hung up the phone. I sat on my bed with the receiver in my hand, leaning against the hard wall and looking at the window through which poured the still beautiful sunlight.

Both cats appeared on my bed. A mother and daughter, they had scrapped and hissed for months, the mother always leaving the room whenever the yearling arrived, taking a swipe if she could. The relationship had suddenly soured the day the kitten had returned from being spayed at the vet. The two would never negotiate more than an uneasy peace for the next twelve years of life together. But this one time, both stepped onto my bed and rubbed against me.

How had she guessed? Had I dropped hints, had the frequent mention of "my friend Rita" tripped her alarm? Had she, too, had a vivid dream?

Now, sitting in the basement of the house I've bought with the family I've built in the life I've chosen in a town that I love, at the other end of the province and a decade and a half away from that conversation, my gut still cramps at the memory. I look up from the journal in my lap and stare at the dusty window. Somewhere nearby the sun is already shining. I put a hand to my post-children belly. I breathe in and out slowly, but my heart is still racing.

All around the world men and women, youth, and even the elderly are telling their loved ones similar stories of themselves, speaking similar truths. I'm in love with a girl, or a boy, or I am a girl, not a boy, or I'm in love with a Christian, or I'm pregnant, or I dropped out of high school or med school, or I'm not a virgin, or I had an abortion, I have HIV, I'm leaving the church, I'm stopping piano lessons, I'm a communist, I quit my job, I shot a man, I hate you, or how about this one—I hurt a child and feel no regret.

All around the world—often, at

least usually—life goes on after these avowals. Usually the love continues despite the anger. The relationship is strained, terribly strained, there are arguments, accusations, denial, doors slammed, phones hung up. Sometimes there is disowning. Sometimes, acceptance eventually comes. Sometimes even forgiveness. But even at worst—when the door is locked

come much sooner.

I second guessed. Was I indeed being true to myself? I attempted to discuss my uncertainty with Rita, who for her own reasons found the conversations difficult. I swirled about in the uneasy idea that I alone had the power to keep my mother alive. As she'd said, by ending my relationship. Yet I loved Rita.

a mother, not a mother and all her secrets, not a mother, all her secrets, and much of her love. But she gave nothing, nothing, no more in her death than in her short life. Instead, as I yearned for more, her abundant vitriol carried a terrible power to hurt.

My daughter is asleep upstairs and I wonder, now, what she could ever do for me to put her through such

If she could only tell me more, if I could glimpse even a slice of her heart, then when she was gone I would lose less: a mother, not a mother and all her secrets, not a mother, all her secrets, and much of her love. But she gave nothing, nothing, no more in her death than in her short life. Instead, as I yearned for more, her abundant vitriol carried a terrible power to hurt.

and the child, lover, spouse or friend is forbidden access forevermore—I would submit that the anger still unites the disputing parties because it is shared. Somehow, wherever they go in the world, whatever paths real or metaphorical they choose, they still hold a line that keeps them, somehow, together.

On the broad stage of the world and its billions, my story is really not that spectacular. But like all of these stories, it clamours to be told.

A few months passed. I wrapped up my semester, got out of my lease, moved back to my parents' house in Ottawa, walked up and down the halls of the house I'd grown up in, rode my bike around the neighbourhood, wrote some essays, played the piano, drove my mother to chemotherapy treatments, held whispered late-night phone conversations with Rita, and avoided talking to my mother or anyone in my family about *it*. Easier by far to focus on my mother's galloping cancer, but even there, her mortality could only be alluded to, and not in her presence. My father made vague references to "next summer," but my wiser self, the one that had dreamt of her death, seemed to know it would

My mother and I both suffered from insomnia that summer. After a surreptitious and often stressful conversation with Rita, I would write in my journal by flashlight. I find many entries from that summer, all written with line breaks but without poetry, like a series of false starts, a few words, three, four, five, building up some speed, then a cough and a new start on the next line. I did not write so much as sputter: about the silences and the shame, the atmosphere of the house, Rita and the role of women in my life. But mostly, I notice as I turn page after page, I agonized over wanting *more* from my mother—more trust, more contact, more stories, more questions, more answers. More love. I berated myself for lying awake in the dark while she lay awake in the next room, and not going to her, while it was still only space that separated us. I collected the questions that she'd never answered—what she thought, what she really cared about, what private terrors or griefs she nursed, what she *was*—then failed to ask them once again. But if she could only tell me more, finally, now, if I could glimpse even a slice of her heart, then when she was gone I would lose less:

agony. Join a fundamentalist religion? Espouse the fatwa against Salman Rushdie? Evict Palestinians from their homes? Navigate the law to bring victory to weapons manufacturers, tobacco giants, hydroelectric enterprises? Dream up marketing schemes to hook girls on tobacco, babies on formula, teens on antidepressants? Hurt a child without regret? I can imagine my agony—no, I can't. But I can imagine the tears and the fights, shouting matches, slamming doors. But could I make her feel that shame? Is it within my power to inflict so much pain—or, to inflict such pain *willingly*? But what if I were also fighting for my life? Before me, rushing up to slam me in the face, death. Turning around to face life, and confronted with something I abhor.

My university was on my case about a grant that needed to be spent before the end of the year. I attempted to refuse the funds but was asked to consider using them later in the year so as not to jeopardize the university's chance of receiving similar funding in the future. Against my screaming better judgment, I accepted the grant, which required that I travel north of 60 to carry out research for my

Master's degree. I left home on the first of September.

How often have I tried to bring to mind the last departure from my mother's house. I'd left it so many times, to go to school or visit a friend, out on a date, to university in Toronto for the first time and after each visit home. I can bring to mind a picture of my mother waving from the kitchen window, but I don't know if the memory includes that last departure. Perhaps she was too sick in bed to wave from the window. I might have said goodbye at her bedside then, saying I'd see her in six weeks, promising many phone calls from Yellowknife. Or she might have been sitting on the sofa, I might have made her a cup of tea and put a blanket over her legs before I left. Where was my father? He must have taken me to the airport, but I don't remember that departure either. Any memories of departures blend into a composite in which my mother is standing at the kitchen window, waving and smiling, visible only in part through the reflection of the sun on the glass, and I'm on my way up the street to catch the bus to school, work, friends, a train, my future without her.

I am not an intuitive person. I didn't anticipate Chernobyl or Mount Pinatubo or the Twin Towers or the tsunami. I don't reach to answer the phone just before it rings, and picking it up say, "What do you want Bob?" and it's Bob. I've never known anything—any fact, let's say, anything tangible, I don't mean love—without the help of science. But somehow with my mother it was different. With a powerful dream I anticipated her death a week before she told me she was out of remission. Four weeks after my arrival in Yellowknife, I awoke on a Monday morning from a troubling dream about her. She was terribly weak and failing. Tuesday I awoke from a similar dream, only she was smaller. Wednesday, Thursday—each

morning that week, she was smaller and weaker than the morning before. I know this because I described these dreams in a letter I mailed to Rita on the Thursday. I have the letter and its envelope. The postmark reads Thursday September 28th. Thursday night, my father called and told me to sit down. With the faith of a drowning horse who still reaches its nose above the waves, I cast about for anything else that I could need to sit down for.

My father said, "Your mother has days or hours to live." It was a long night and once I was packed I stayed up folding origami cranes. The following morning I flew to Edmonton and changed planes, then flew to Toronto. Rita met me at the airport and walked me to the gate for the next flight to Ottawa. I was booked on the 6:00 flight but was able to squeeze onto the 4:00 flight. When I arrived in Ottawa I found a taxi but did not know where to ask it to take me. I should have said the hospital. I gave the driver my parents' address. When I arrived my father and sister told me my mother had died alone at 5:00.

Shortly before I left for Yellowknife, my mother told me, looking obliquely out the window, that she wondered whether my "lifestyle" was causing her to die. I'd been reading Austen aloud and put the book quietly aside.

"I'm fighting for my life," she ruminated.

"I'm living mine!"

The following afternoon I went to her and cried. I didn't want to kill her, I said. I was making my own way, I was doing nothing wrong. I told her everything in my heart. And because she was my mother, that above all, she lay my head in her lap and stroked my hair and said, "There, there." When I was eventually comforted for the last time by my mother: my one moment of grace, I told her I wasn't planning to spend my thirties in the way I was spending my twenties. I gave her whatever hope she needed, yielding

nothing. There are a lot of things I regret. I wish I could remember the last time I saw her and the last phone conversation we had. I wish I hadn't listened to the university pressuring me to use the grant. I wish I had listened the one time my intuition screamed the truth in multiple ways, telling me to go home now, now, *now*. But that open-ended statement was one moment of perfection for which I have always been grateful.

My family is starting to stir and the sun is fully up. There are still a few sips of tea in my mug. Our basement isn't the loveliest place but it will stay private just a little while longer.

During the conversation that ended the relationship a few months later, Rita and I agreed on one thing—that my mother's illness and death had artificially extended the relationship. Sometimes I wonder if it was the wrongness of the relationship that my mother was responding to at some gut level. I've never believed that I killed her—her position that she never relinquished—but because the accusation has never been withdrawn, I continue to defend myself against it. As often happens with chaos and suffering, much good arose from my mother's death. Insights have come to me that I would never have had with her around, useful ones about how to live well and love openly, the knowledge of how I don't want to do things, and somewhere, surely, an embracing of some portion of her example of patience, creativity and industriousness. Patterns of living, too, I hope, have fallen into place that will cause the waters of habit to flow into the channels of forgiveness and joy as I grow older and less flexible. And as if I predicted or created it, just shy of my thirtieth birthday I met a perfectly lovely life partner with whom I have conspired to create a pair of gorgeous children, one of them thumping across the floor above me now, calling my name.

Some years after my mother's death I began to dream of her. The dreams came occasionally, three or four a year, for a long time consisting of nothing more than innocent anecdotes of our life together as a family. We'd be by some European seaside with my grandmother, or talking in the living room of our Ottawa house. Eventually the dreams became heavier. They

brilliant scholars, record-breaking athletes—have disappointed their parents in various ways and told me terrible stories of alienation. They have all enjoyed, slowly, eventually, the forgiveness of their parents and the construction of a newly invigorated relationship on the strong foundation of the old. Similarly, a number of women who knew my mother have

Of course I've continued to wonder whether it would have been better to keep my mouth shut about Rita, not to have dropped hints, not allowed my mother to guess, or lied when she did. But that first dream of her death reminds me that it would have been a terrible regret not to let her know. As my son climbs into my lap I think of the silences of my own childhood and

I understand for the first time something so clear, so familiar, that I must have known it all along: to let my mother go at last, to finish the packing and send her out the door already, say goodbye once and for all, I need to forgive. Her. I'll never get the *more* that I long for, will never break through silences, delve into her mysteries.

were riddled with silences that bore weighty but unspoken judgments. I would awake filled with the *feeling* of her. Seven or eight years ago I dreamt for the first time that instead of merely avoiding talking, I was also helping her pack to leave on a long journey. Eventually I couldn't bear it any longer, threw my arms around her and cried, "I'm going to miss you so much!" She responded again with "There, there," the familiar hand stroking my hair. The comfort and succor that were her maternal duty, nothing more—no word of where she was going, whether she'd miss me, not even an acknowledgement that she really was leaving at all.

The dreams have dwindled now. I couldn't say whether I even dream of her once a year. She's still packing to leave, and I'm still helping her get ready to go. At least once I've cut through the silence enough to blurt out that I'm going to miss her, a sort of goodbye that I was never able to give in person. But she still hasn't left. Fifteen years of hanging around is long enough.

My story isn't unique. Many of my friends—upstanding citizens, caring mothers, devoted husbands,

assured me that she would have eventually "come around." This should reassure me but it does not. This morning I begin to understand why: because she never did "come around." We never did rebuild a new relationship on the foundation of the old. She hasn't forgiven me, or apologized, and never will. Nope, I'm on my own for this one.

I close the journal and start to say goodbye to the young woman at the end of that line, but remember that she and I are points on a longer line. Ahead of me now, somewhere, is the old woman I hope one day to be. What advice could she give me? What will she think in ten or thirty years, of the choices I make now? How will the decisions I make today affect the way she remembers her mother? And what will her own children think of her?

Little feet appear on the steps and my son's squeals follow the discovery that I'm sitting on a crate in the basement. My daughter is crawling on the kitchen floor above my head and bangs a pot. The coffee grinder starts. When the children were born I was aware of becoming part of a mother-child relationship once more.

understand that no, like my mother's own secrets, like the cancer that killed her too quickly, it had to be out.

Shortly after my mother's death, a friend brought her condolences. She had lost her father as a child.

"Nine years ago," she marvelled. "It can't be that long!"

A year or two later, a dear octogenarian friend shook her head, remembering her parents had died over forty years before. "Seems like yesterday," she murmured.

For me it's been fifteen. The pain is gone, certainly. But every day, in different ways, I miss her smell, her voice, even her silence. And I continue to want more, and I continue to want her apology. Now, with my son wriggling in my lap, I understand for the first time something so clear, so familiar, that I must have known it all along: to let my mother go at last, to finish the packing and send her out the door already, say goodbye once and for all, I need to forgive. Her. I'll never get the *more* that I long for, will never break through silences, delve into her mysteries. They were hers and all of that is gone now. All that remains, really, are myself, my sister, my father and my two children.

But—how to forgive someone who won't apologize?

But then I consider that every little forgiveness I've managed for the small wrongs—the receptionist's rudeness, the nurse's unkindness, the lover's betrayal—they've all built to this. To forgive my mother. And send her on her way. And perhaps in forgiving her, I might glimpse what her apology could have been.

"Mummy, what are you doing?"

"I'm thinking about Grannie."

"My Grannie?"

"Uh-huh."

"Your mum?"

"Yes. Do you remember her name?"

A careful pause, then a proud smile.
"Christine!"

Forgive. Yes. For her, for my children. For myself.

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SUSAN MCCASLIN

Demeter's Epic Smile

Like a spar suddenly rising
from the depths of a turbulent sea
to offer itself as a raft
for a swimmer who has heaved
her last breath after hours
and relinquished her limbs
to the downward pull of the waves

so to me the image of my daughter
advancing toward me
in the full flesh and flower
of her womanhood.

Susan McCaslin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

RENEE NORMAN

Spill of Trees

Morning. Bare limbs on trees. Grey skies with a hint of light to come. The promise of Spring. The circle of ice on the outdoor table melted for now. A shine of windows across the creek. Two fat squirrels heavy with maple nuts waddle across the fallen leaves now more mulch than foliage. Houses, rooftops form the backdrop for skeletal branches, criss-crossing in patterns that speak of paint spillage: random, beautiful, permanent. Here and there a hair gnarl of knotted branch. A last leaf bereft of its original shape. Still the grey light entices, reminder that winter too has more than darkness.

Last night I could not sleep, thought of daughters. How content I am they swirl around me still. In and out between their work, projects, concerns, cups and wineglasses left for parental pickup, stray underwear strewn by bathrooms, clothes left hanging to dry, the basement pantry their shop-at-home-free store (the price is right). And I would not trade one unmade bed from a sleepover, nor the blueberries that find their way under the depths of the fridge, nor the opened wine, or the cranky hurricane takeover of my bathroom, for anything else.

That promise of Spring is not for bargaining. The Jackson Pollack spill of trees is only one canvas I love.

Renee Norman's poetry appears earlier in this volume.