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 vieille femme qui questionnait sans cesse la logique aristotéllicienne, 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 know where she is in time and space, her doctors. I feel her fear of them. I don’t know why she should be there, does not wish to be there, she is polite, 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 emer-
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 want to write my mother's birthplace, Canada, 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, _not 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
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?

Susan McCaslin is an instructor of English and Creative Writing at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C. She is also the poetry editor and reviewer for Event, a literary journal. Her poetry has been published in journals throughout Canada and the United States.