Another Marvelous Thing

For my mother on her first Mother's Day without hers.

Tessa Meyer Santiago

I'm planting roses in my garden. Pulling off my gloves to tie Julia's shoelaces, I see my fingers for the first time. Are these my mother's square, short-nailed, garden-dirt-rimmed hands or are they mine? I never noticed her garden much as a child: plum trees on the periphery; hydrangeas lifting heavy, pastel-blossomed heads that brushed my thighs as I ran by; a short, orange skirt of chrysanthemums ringing the bougainvillea boa hugging the front door; mint by the garden tap, gathered on Christmas Eve for the lemon-banana punch; and hibiscus lady blossoms we undressed with eager fingers. My younger sister Laura remembers trips to the nursery as hot and tedious, Mom lifting pony pack after pony pack, sniffing each like a bloodhound on the trail of the perfect petunia; aisle after aisle in the African sun, geranium after geranium, camellias, freesia, dahlias, and daisies, sniffing—while we waited, shifting from leg to leg, squinting in the sun.

I tried to go to Homebase yesterday. Well, I did go, but not the way I wanted to. My children ended up in the ornamental fountain splashing all the nice old ladies heading for the petunias and too brightly orange marigolds. After a strict castigation delivered in the violently hushed voice I recognized as the one my mother used to use on us in church and in public, the children shifted their attention to the moveable stepladder that some agile youth used to stack Homebase's white trellis thirty-five feet high on the shelf. I had almost found the perfect purple salvia when Christian yelled, "Wump," and spread his wings from the top step. I loaded Christian, Julia, not the perfect purple shade of salvia, not the right kind of rose food, too many Shasta daisies, and a giant dahlia instead of a regular one onto the cart and headed for the door. You know, just

as Christian was about to plant himself in the concrete, I had the salvia held up close to my face. I was checking to see if it was a healthy plant. But, if you were looking at me, you would have sworn I was sniffing it.

Perhaps in Julia's memory, the trips to the nursery will be long and tedious, the Utah sun beating down on her head as she watches me standing mesmerized before pallets of fertilizer, head cocked to one side, a glazed look in my eyes, as I conjure up visions of my garden's summer bouquet. Perhaps she will have hazy memories of afternoons in the garden—playing in the wading pool in her bright pink swimsuit, her mother puttering off to the side, fussing in the soil, pulling grass here and there—just as I have memories of me and my mother.

I climbed trees for a living when I was five. As my childhood mother, who never changes in my memory—always the same size despite two pregnancies, the same height, the same smell, the same hands—planted her nursery treasures, I climbed trees. I hung upside down. I swung from limb to limb. I stole loquats from the neighbor's tree and grapes from the other neighbor's toolshed vine. I walked like a trapeze artist along the single-brick-wide, red wall dripping with passion fruit vines. I traced cobblestone pathways in my head and checked the clover patch for fairies. All the while, on the edge of my adventure, my mother plodded, planting.

Except once. Once my childhood mother stole my center stage. One afternoon she told me, while she checked on the seedlings beneath the study window in the front garden, that she had done acrobatics when she was a child. I didn't believe her. I couldn't believe her. This was my mother who dyed her gray hair, wore panty hose on Sundays, and knew how to make chocolate chiffon cakes so light they floated. So there, in her flowered housecoat, surrounded by passion fruit vines and hibiscus trees, and watched by her disbelieving fifth child, my ancient mother kicked off her sandals and did a cartwheel, landing, quite gracefully, with her long, brown legs in the splits, her garments peeking out from beneath her hem. I was shocked, stunned. She might have just as well grown wings and taken to the air. I asked her to do it again. She didn't. She laughed that laugh she laughs when she can't quite believe she just did what she did and went back to weeding. If I'm

correct, Mervyl, the ancient, unchanging mother of my childhood, was only thirty-seven at the time.

Why then was I so shocked at her impulsive gesture? Perhaps because it revealed the Mervyl behind the mother. To me as a child, my mother was not a woman. She was mother. She was a collection of parts melted together that took her face and smell. She was a red-and-white Volkswagen bus waiting at the end of the school driveway on the days it was too rainy to walk home. She was clean, cool, cotton sheets on my sick bed while I took a bath during week-long asthma attacks. She was a green, dimpled bottle of 7-Up in the refrigerator door during my bouts with tonsillitis. She was a cooler of egg-salad sandwiches wedged between the front seats of the VW bus on the way to Plettenburg Bay. She was ripe-red tomato sections and Vienna sausages on a plate on the counter when Julia Smitherman came to lunch after school. She was fingers stroking my hair as I slept on her lap during golden-lighted Sunday evening sacrament meetings. She was a voice rising, falling, then stopping as she fell asleep during my bedtime story. She was the hum of the sewing machine making quilts from piece goods bought at the Laura Ashley store in London; the bark of dogs as they rounded the corner early on the gray morning walks before the rest of us were awake. She was the smell of Nivea on summer afternoons spent pouring over her Sunday School lessons. She was there, always, mother, unchanging, warm.

Rarely did I see Mervyl. I saw Mervyl in the cartwheel. I saw Mervyl in the shoes that came flying after me when I had been particularly rude. I saw Mervyl in the nervous stroking of the hair at the nape of her neck. I saw Mervyl in her hands clasped tightly to her waist, as if to reassure herself, as she ventured into a social encounter. I used to wonder why she felt so inadequate around other people when she was all to me. But I never really knew her story. I heard fragments of it at night: about Blue, her fat horse when she lived on the farm in the Orange Free State, who never wanted to do more than walk when heading away from the farmhouse, but who would gallop in a frenzy the moment you turned his head around; about eating eggshell sandwiches during the war when food was rationed; and about lying awake at night in a wet bed afraid to tell the nuns at the Catholic boarding school her

mother sent her to when she was five years old. Then, just as she was getting to the best part of the story, the part when I would really be able to see what it was like for her as a child, her voice would rise, fall, then stop with the nodding of a sleeping head. Now, I see she was exhausted. Then, I used to elbow her awake demanding that she finish. She never did. So fragments of her life beyond me floated in my consciousness, assuming mythic proportions as I created a childhood Mervyl who did cartwheels atop fat Blue as he plodded away from a farmhouse that was filled with eggshell sandwiches and a wicked mother, who sent her only daughter away to a lonely, Catholic boarding school when she was five and still a child.

This wicked mother, my grandmother, wasn't always so wicked. Most of the time she, too, floated in parts in my memory: lemon creme biscuits that tasted of laundry detergent (she kept them in the same cupboard), stories on tape she sent to her grandchildren so that we could eat her peanut butter biscuits and listen to her voice on long afternoons, a shimmery white purse like crocodile skin, and amber crystal vanity sets arranged on her dark wood dresser. She was a grandmother of superlative stature, complete with yearly trips to the ballet where we got to eat in a restaurant and order fizzy drinks. But, I sensed and heard snatches of other stories that didn't fit so neatly next to her cut-glass perfume bottle with the diamond stopper. In fact, when I was in my teens, I regarded my grandmother with a sort of horror for what I perceived she had done to my mother.

I specifically recall one school picture I had found in a cigar box in the linen chest that smelled of mothballs. In it, my mother stood among many rows of other young school girls in the wartime South Africa of the early 1940s. Each wore a dark pinafore with a white-collared shirt. My mother's collar swooped in two perfect half-moons around her neck. I thought it quite beautiful. On the sides of each row stood nuns—dark angels waiting to punish my mother for wetting her bed; I silently cursed them with all the virulence an eleven year old can muster. Then my mother said, "Oh, those collars. Look at them. They were the biggest in the whole school." I looked again. They really were. "My mother used to embarrass me so much. She insisted on making all my school

clothes. She always tried to make them so stylish. And I always looked so different. I know we were poor, but she always had to be different. I hated it." I knew exactly what she meant. She had sent me to first grade with a homemade, green gingham apron festooned with a red rickrack-smile face with red button eyes. I was to wear it over my green school uniform. I loved it. That was, until a seventh grader, assigned to welcome the first graders to junior school, sneered, "Ooh cute, did your mother make that?" "Well, yes," I stuttered quietly, my six-year-old heart shriveling inside me. So I knew what my mother meant.

But that was only an apron. Her mother also made her do acrobatics and perform in front of people to overcome her shyness. She made her eat those eggshell sandwiches to get enough calcium. She left my mother alone at night in a tent in a dark mining camp so she could go dancing. And the nuns, well, who can forgive a mother who sends her five year old to a place where dark angels make children sleep in their own urine to teach them a lesson? I would watch my grandmother sometimes, watch her face and her body as she walked among us, wondering whether she knew what she did to her child, whether she was sorry for the pain she caused.

To try to tell a mother's story, we must tell the story of two women's lives: the child who becomes the mother, and the woman who mothered her. The story of any woman is essentially the story of two women. I suppose I could put any two names there: Johanna and Mary, Mary and Mervyl, Mervyl and Tessa, Tessa and Julia. For in each woman's life, the root of memory is watered and shaded by her mother's choices.

My mother was an only child because her mother had borne six children before her who all died within a week after their births. My mother was raised in a single-parent family for most of her life because her mother divorced her father, a particularly reprehensible man, who not only forced my grandmother to marry him by raping her, but also forced her to live with his constant

adultery as part of her marriage vows. (This story my grandmother never told her only child for fear, perhaps, my mother would find her lacking. We have been told, though, that we are not to name any of our children after my mother's father.)

My grandmother took my mother to Northern Rhodesia, as far away as she could get, I suppose, and worked as a mining-camp nurse to support her child. It was there my young mother used to lie awake at night, petrified, with a candle for company, while her mother went dancing. Then Mary, my grandmother, took a chance on love and married a kind man, a Mr. Vernon-Harley. My mother left school after the tenth grade because her stepfather, who took this small family to his farm and loved them, died of cancer. She said once she used to dream that he was her real father, but she knew he wasn't.

The story of a mother is so intricately connected with her own mother's, it is difficult to tell where one stops and the other begins. I suppose Mary thought nothing of taking her child with her into the African bush because her mother, Johanna, had raised her two girls while following her husband around Africa as he plied his trade as a hunting guide. I suppose Ella, my mother-in-law, has a garage full of hidden treasures because she was raised by Rose who homesteaded near Stansbury Island with her beloved Stanley in a home with no running water and an icehouse. I believe my father became an architect because Margaret, his Scottish mother, had a husband who spent too much time lawn bowling, so she built an addition to her house helped by her seventh child, young Gerard. I'd like to think Mervyl filled her adult home with children and good books because she wanted us to have what she never did.

I think, though, that the truth is somewhat different. I had in my childhood, and still do have, exactly what she had in hers—a woman, who, now mother, does what she must to raise her child or children in peace and joy. If it took a scandalous divorce in the late 1930s and work in a mining camp, so be it. If it took nursing a newborn through breasts swollen with mastitis, so be it. That is what mothers do. How do we know? Because our mothers showed us as best they could.

I remember another picture that hides itself as a backdrop to the wedding of my oldest sister, Margo. It shows my older mother,

forty-two years old. Her hair is almost gray. She is standing in the dining room beside her sewing machine. Behind her, hanging from the sliding-door track, are seven dresses: a bride's dress, two bridesmaids', and the flower girls'. Her oldest daughter is getting married in about two weeks. In her arms, she holds her youngest child, Alexandra Margaret, not three weeks old. She is looking at her child with tender eyes, the same way she looked at my children when she cared for them after their births. Her face, though, is almost gray, heavily lined, her shoulders bent.

In my child's eye, I remember the wedding, the pieces and parts of it: My mother's food, the tuna mousse, the chippolata sausages, the cast-iron tubs swimming with grape juice bottles and ice cubes. My red-sprigged flower girl's dress, the dancing and the reading of telegrams; my youngest sister, five weeks old, in her bridesmaid's dress, carried in my mother's arms down the aisle.

As a woman and a mother now, I see a different picture of the same event. I am shocked by the exhaustion in my mother's face. I am stunned by the sheer logistics of the whole picture: giving birth to your seventh child in your forties, sewing seven dresses while plagued by a severe case of mastitis (I remember the doctor and his black bag visiting her in bed; I had never seen my mother sick in bed before), catering a whole reception six weeks after the birth, and caring for your family in the meanwhile. The woman in me aches for Mervyl during that time—that she swallowed her pain, her exhaustion, and her fear that she could not do it all and went on anyway. I ache for her intense love for this unexpected child who made her way into the family at such a time and for her loss as she watched her daughter marry a man clearly unsuited for her. But the child in me thanks the mother in Mervyl for not stopping, for not sitting down in a heap on the kitchen floor and declaring, "That's it. I can't do it any longer. I'm done." While the woman battled her exhaustion and her fear, I practiced for life, building memories of weddings and turkeys with white-frocked drumsticks, filing away snatches of "jolly, good fellows" and confetti baskets to pull out when I remember Margo's wedding.

How many other events could I examine more carefully and reinterpret, now that I am grown? She piled us into the red-and-white VW bus some afternoons, laden with carrot sticks and bread

crusts to feed the mountain deer. They nuzzled our hands with their skittish black noses, stealing carrots softly from our outstretched palms. My mother read in the car, sometimes she walked around, far from us. Quieter that way, I realize now. I used to wonder why she didn't join in or why she always invited a friend. She needed an adult to talk to.

She let me take ballet lessons, music lessons, squash lessons, art lessons. Every afternoon of the week found me in a different place: Monday, I was doing pirouettes, spotting the exit sign at Oakhurst Girls' Assembly Hall; Tuesday, Mr. Barlow, with his Swedish accent, taught me tennisette underneath the oak trees; Wednesday, I watched Sister Brockbank's glitter nail polish sparkle in the sun during Merrie Miss A in Classroom 8; Thursday, I was surrounded by boys speaking Afrikaans and girls who never looked at me in classes at the white-pillared art school; Friday, ballet again, this time on the splintered floor of St. Thomas's; and some Saturdays, it was music lessons. I know another reason now for this full childhood schedule, other than my mother wanting her children to develop confidence. For the very same reason, I've signed Julia up for creative dance lessons this summer, as well as summer craft camp—she swung off the top of the bookshelf one too many times, and she leaves me no time for my reading.

Discovering that my mother's mothering contained strains of a struggling self, as well as the woman she was before she was my mother, does not scar my shining memories. It makes her, in fact, more precious. That she could so gently and unobtrusively work her own desires into my incessant demands without pushing me off my stage is remarkable. In my own motherhood, I keep waiting for that Kodak moment when the world will turn hazy around the edges and the camera will focus on me, dressed in pastel, with a tear in my eye as I watch Julia and Christian sing an eager "Mother, I Love You" at the top of their voices during the Primary program. At that moment, I assume I will be supremely Mother. It has never happened yet. I have hardly felt that supreme confidence, that overwhelming urge to be mother that I assumed my mother always felt. I almost always feel split between my mothering duties and my personal desires.

Once I felt raw emotion, love, I suppose, but bordering on desperate obsession: Christian lay strapped to a table, a large needle in

his spinal column; they were testing for meningitis. That night, as I lay next to him in his hospital crib, I would have dealt with the devil for my second child. My love for him was matched only by my fear and utter helplessness. But during the darkest hours when his temperature hovered around 106 degrees, when I hadn't slept for more than two days and I was reduced to tears, I realized my mother had loved me, nursed me, cared for me in the very same, desperately fierce way as I struggled to breathe in my childhood bedroom. Simultaneously, I was filled with both a desperate longing to have my child sleeping peacefully in my arms and a lightening sense of awe that somebody on this earth felt about me in this passionate, powerful, almost primeval way.

But most of the time, I walk the route between mothering and me too many times a day. For two people, though, I am beginning to occupy the same mythic space my mother filled for me. I see Julia doing things I remember doing with my own mother as audience. And I realize she must feel about me the same way I felt about my own mother. Covered with dirt, I leave my rose bushes to pick Julia up from nursery school. I am often late; I forget she is there. But her smile lights the room when I walk in. I find my hand brushing Julia's forehead in a good-night caress as my mother's hands brushed me. I drive Julia around Provo with me on errands; I see her hiding underneath fabric trees in the $2 Fabric Store; I see her pulling shopping carts over on herself. I hear the panic rising in her voice as she loses sight of me in the grocery store. She sits in the back of the cart now, her place in the front usurped by her younger brother. I tell her to share with Christian; he's only a baby. She pouts back at me with my pout I used successfully for years. It is her face that flirts with me from what used to be my fifth-grade picture: the round eyes, the rounds lips, cheekbones bunching beneath the smile. We share them, just as I do, I am told, with Margaret, my paternal grandmother. It is hard to tell where I end and Julia begins. Time's strange circle has woven itself around me and my daughter, and for a moment, if the light is just right, you cannot tell whether it is mother or daughter. And rightly so. For to be a daughter is to mother. And to be a mother is to add to that long chain of mothers and daughters, parents and children stretching far back before oak trees were acorns, before

mothers were daughters, and grandmothers were only babies suckled at their mother's breast.

Two weeks ago, Mervyl laid Mary to rest in a cool, deep grave beneath a blue gum tree in small cemetery overlooking a fishing village. Mary had lived ninety-two strong, vibrant years on God's earth, yet she ended her life as helpless as she began it. My mother cared for her mother in her final months, like a mother with a newborn child. She became her mother's mother. In the letter she wrote to her children following the funeral, she said of her final hours with her fragile mother:

> I went to her room and saw her still and peaceful at last, the strain lines on her forehead had smoothed, and she seemed to have grown smaller. . . . I cannot tell the feelings that filled my heart at that moment—relief for her sake, sorrow for her leaving me. She had mothered me for sixty years. She was the one constant in my life—the one person who would always support me regardless, always showed love and expressed it, was always there to help with whatever needed to be done, loved each of my children as much as I did.

As I think back to my mother's mothering of me, I must add my grandmother's love as part of it. The woman who raised my mother loved me as fiercely as she loved her own child. She too, I believe, would have dealt with the devil for my soul. And there, perhaps, is my mother's most precious gift to me. As she took her place in a long line of women who mothered their children, she gave me twice a mother's love: hers and her mother's. To know that on this earth, there is somebody who loves me with the fierceness with which I can love my own children; who thinks of me as constantly as I think of Julia and Christian; who prays for me with the protectiveness with which I pray for my two; who would march resolutely into hell to bring me back; who would try, despite her personal desires, her fear, her exhaustion, to do her best by me, is satisfying to my soul. But to think there were two women who loved me this way . . . ah, now that is a bright, marvelous, wonderful thing.

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