

Hold You Closer, Tiny Dancer

By Eileen Vorbach Collins

I envied the kids with younger, prettier moms. Mothers who wore shorts and pink rollers in their hair; their nails crimson. With the Chiffons and Beach Boys on transistor radios, they did the shimmy, the twist, the mashed potato in their tiny kitchens while preparing tuna casseroles. My own mother watched the bouncing ball on the Mitch Miller Show but never sang along. I never once saw her dance. While many of those other mothers pushed my friend's younger siblings in worn-out strollers, filling the baby bottles with Orange Crush soda to get a few minutes peace, a few had jobs. I trudged the two blocks home from school for my lunch of Campbell's Chicken Soup and a bologna sandwich on white bread, hurriedly consumed while watching a short segment of a noontime soap opera. My mother was *always* home.

Once I had a rare occasion to stay at school for lunch. We had just begun to settle in when everyone got quiet. To my horror, my mother stood in the doorway. She held my forgotten brown bag with my peanut butter sandwich. I wanted to disappear. I wanted *her* to disappear.

My mother wore a calf-length skirt in a floral print that would have looked at home on an upholstered sofa. Her once-white blouse was yellowed and wrinkled where once it would have been starched and pressed until it was able to stand on its own. Ironing, formerly one of her daily routines, was a task my mother could no longer perform. Her barber-bobbed hair was oily and grey. She wore scuffed flat shoes with white socks.

My mother, at 52, had suffered a major stroke followed by little opportunity for rehabilitation. Her speech was unintelligible. She never seemed to notice the thin strand of saliva constantly dripping from the corner of her mouth.

I was out of my seat in a flash. I nearly shoved her into the hall.

"What are you doing here?" I hissed.

"I broug ya lugnh," she said, handing me the bag.

"Okay. Please go home now."

I didn't watch as my mother made her way down the hallway toward the door. I didn't worry about her ability to navigate the stairs with a foot that dragged and a hand too weak to grip the railing. My desire to be one of the popular girls eclipsed any bit of compassion my ten-year-old self might have mustered.

“Who was that?” one of the meaner girls asked, laughing.

I wanted to cry. She’d ruined everything. I hated my mother even more than I hated the mean girl.

“She’s a friend of my grandmother,” I lied. “She doesn’t speak much English. I tutor her sometimes.”

I did sort of tutor her. Some well-meaning person, possibly a speech therapist from the hospital, had given us a list of words that she should practice every day. My sister and I were supposed to read the words and have her repeat them. I hated it. Her speech never improved but I always pretended I understood her just to get it over with. I hated how my mother’s one sightless eye was always looking at me.

I’ve often wondered how my relationship with my mother might have been different if not for her strokes. She’d had several subsequent ischemic events, each leaving her with more deficits. Facial nerve paralysis had frozen her mouth in a crooked frown that I believed mirrored her dissatisfaction with life in general and me in particular. I was said to be a handful but her hemiparesis caused a weak grasp. She could not hold on to me. Aphasia left her unable to call me back as I struggled to get as far away from her as possible. Perhaps hemianopia allowed my mother to see only one side of me. The bad side. I learned to parent myself and had little empathy left over for her.

My mother suffered from depression even before the strokes, and by the time I was in middle school, she was consumed by it. After several suicide attempts—a plugged-in radio clutched to her chest in the bath, a moment on a bridge overpass stopped by a concerned stranger, other things whispered in silence, for which I felt responsible—she was committed to a state psychiatric hospital.

My sister and I would ride a bus with our father on the weekend to visit her, often waiting a long time for someone to let us into the locked unit. Sometimes we heard screaming. I learned some new curse words. After an incident involving a woman flinging feces, some of which landed on a sofa, I always looked for a metal chair and inspected it before carrying it close.

It was hard to tell if my mother enjoyed those visits. We tried to make small talk, asking questions that required a yes or no. Some of the other women, never having visitors of their own, were more eager to engage. They would come near to touch me or ask confusing questions. A very old woman asked, “Where’s my momma? Have you seen my momma?” Another carried a dirty baby doll. So proud.

I watched the clock on the wall, willing the hands to move faster. Counting the minutes until, after the quick obligatory hug, I could get out of there. Get away from the noise and the smell and the terrible burden of despair that never seemed to lift until we were safely back on the bus. On our way back home to normal.

After graduating from nursing school, I accepted a position as an RN in a private psychiatric hospital in Baltimore. This hospital was nothing like the state-run facility where my mother had been a patient for those many years. By this time many of the state-run psychiatric hospitals had dramatically decreased bed count or closed due to the efforts in the late 1960s to deinstitutionalize mental health care. My mother had been discharged from the hospital to a group home.

The hospital where I worked had lush grounds, an indoor swimming pool, a greenhouse, art studios.

Mothering and being mothered were frequent topics of discussion during one-on-one time. The younger patients hated their mothers, characterizing them along a spectrum of uncaring to overbearing. The older patients, for the most part, canonized their long-suffering and long dead mothers. As my pregnancy became obvious, my abdomen became an object of widespread interest. One young man pointed his index finger, a pretend gun, at my belly. Another indicated he'd like to suckle at my breast. An older woman insisted on teaching me to knit. I still have the infant hat she helped me fashion.

One of my favorite patients, a young man with schizophrenia, had begun making furtive hand signals in my direction during hall meetings. Later, in a moment of relative lucidity, he told me that he'd been communicating with my unborn child and confided, "It's a boy." She was not.

I had my first child at 31, a reasonable age, I had thought. I lived in a community where primipara older than I were the norm. These women were not old at forty like I suspect my mother had been. They were educated, independent and adventurous. They drove cars, had their own retirement plans, kept their names and their separate bank accounts. Depression could be hidden behind therapist's closed doors and white noise machines, anguish muffled by Prozac or Wellbutrin, anxiety stilled by Mother's Little Helper or Vitamin X.

During our guilty visits to see her grandmother, now in a nursing home, my baby babbled happily. My mother almost smiled.

I was determined not to be a mother like my own mother. Ours would be a joyful home, filled with friends and laughter. There would be Girl Scouts, 4-H, camping trips, amusement parks. I would be a model of contentment and my children would be happy and fulfilled. I danced around the kitchen with my babies. Foxtrotted through the garden with one in a Snuggly and the other leading the way with a two-step. My daughter was three, and my son an infant when my mother died. I never told my children about their grandmother's psychiatric illness. I never told anyone.

Despite my family history and my work, and notwithstanding my own adolescent bouts of longing for oblivion, as my daughter's depression became apparent, I still didn't understand. I couldn't grasp that this was happening to my bright, talented, happy child.

"Why is she like this?"

She had grandparents, aunts and uncles who loved her, private school, music lessons, her friends always welcome in our home. A childhood so different from my own. Sometimes it made me angry. I wanted her to snap out of it. Look at the brighter side. I mentioned my anger once to her new therapist, a wise woman, who said, "This is not about you."

The sudden transformation, as my loving child became my formidable adversary, took me by surprise. Friends assured me this was normal adolescent behavior, a little early, but she had always been a fast learner. I was not prepared for the magnitude of her contempt.

I took for granted that we would survive her adolescence and resume our close and loving relationship. Once, after a heated argument, she apologized, sobbing. She said that she was angry with her father and took it out on me because she knew I would never leave her.

My daughter's first psychiatric hospitalization was when she was eleven years old, a late-night admission to my previous place of employment. The place where I had subjected her, in utero, to that bizarre communication with a dear man suffering from terrifying delusions in which he wrestled with demons who told him to do things he did not want to do. Where another man would shoot her with his mock finger-gun. Where I had tried to be a good and caring nurse to atone, somehow, for the years my mother spent in that other hospital. The one with screaming shit-slingers and straps holding her, terrified, to a gurney where she was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy.

In the good hospital, ECT was still used but with an anesthesiologist at the helm. And while the use of hydrotherapy in the form of a cold wet sheet pack sounds inhumane, people begged to be swaddled. To be cared for. To be held. In training, I'd volunteered to be packed and found it calming. Normally somewhat claustrophobic, I wanted nothing more than for my colleagues to let me stay wrapped in those sheets, helpless as a tightly swaddled newborn, knowing they wouldn't leave me.

Extended hospitalizations were no longer the norm. The length of stay of my daughter's first hospitalization was one week. Some of the staff that I knew from more than a decade ago were still there. I hoped they would remember our friendship or collegiality and be especially kind to my child. Bestow an extra kindness. The average length of my daughter's three hospitalizations over the next three years was five days. My daughter never had ECT. She was never stripped, helped into a hospital gown, wrapped in ice cold sheets and strapped to a gurney. After each admission, there was a period of relative reprieve from her symptoms.

One night, after learning that it would be poorly supervised, I decided not to allow my daughter, then fourteen, to go to a planned sleepover. It was not negotiable. I could hear the maelstrom of destruction going on behind her bedroom door. Though it had been many years since I'd worked in the psychiatric hospital, I always remembered the calming effect of the cold wet sheet pack. The icy shock, the swaddling, the release of anger that came so quickly with the warming. How some of the young women would resist, although you could tell the struggle was not in earnest. They would pretend to fight but as soon as you got your arms around them, they would melt into the embrace.

When I heard glass breaking, I ran in and grabbed my raging, wispy-thin daughter from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. I fully expected her to struggle, then go limp. To let me hold her. I should have known better. She was rigid with fury. She was not going to bend, and I feared that if I didn't let her go, she would shatter. That I might break her. I wondered if I had already done so.

The hospital, the medication, the weekly visits to a therapist were not enough to hold her. My daughter ended her life shortly after her fifteenth birthday. These many years later, it still shocks me to write that. Seeing the words in print, every time, still causes that familiar burning behind my eyes. Still makes me catch my breath and makes my heart ache. Once she was a teenager, I never saw my daughter dance.

I'm sorry mom, that I was such a little shit. I didn't know. I didn't know when I was ten and the center of my own universe, that mothers have feelings. I didn't know that a stroke is a cerebral vascular accident. That it wasn't something you did on purpose just to find new ways to embarrass me. I knew nothing about Broca's aphasia; that while your comprehension was relatively intact, the process of forming the right sounds for intelligible speech took an arduous effort. I didn't know how frustrating it was to be unable to communicate. I'm sorry I laughed when you, who had never spoken a curse word, yelled, "Fuh Fuh Fugh."

If I could go back to the day my mother brought my lunch to school in that brown paper bag, I would claim her. "That's my mother," I would tell the mean girl.

I'd thank my mother for her trouble and walk her down the hall. We'd go down the stairs together and she could lean on me for support. Maybe I'd even kiss her cheek or touch her arm. I might gently take the cotton handkerchief with the embroidered lilacs from her skirt pocket and wipe the saliva from the corner of her mouth.

I'd go home after school and help her practice her words. "That's good Mom! Say it again."
"Fuh Fugh Fuck!"

I would put Mitch Miller on the TV and we'd sing aloud with the bouncing ball. Maybe I'd get her to do a slow waltz on the worn flowered linoleum.

If I could have one more day with my daughter, I would hold her tight. If she fought, I would not let go until she stopped. I would hold her until she melted into my embrace and I would convince her that life is good. That she is good. That's what I would do. If I could have one more day, I would dance with her, a Viennese waltz, where we'd spin and spin until we were dizzy and the colors ran together and everything was beautiful again.

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