

## Lessons From My Mother

By Victoria Millard

One of the last things my mother taught me was the proper way to put on a paper toilet seat cover. I am fifty-four years old, she 80. We are in the bathroom of a medical clinic, just after her tenth radiation treatment for glioblastoma stage four brain cancer. She is unsteady on her feet as she pulls the oval cover out of the metal holder.

“Here, let me help you,” I say, as I punch out the middle and place it on the seat.

“That’s backwards,” she tells me. “The punch-out flap goes in the front, not the back.”

And suddenly, I understand why, for decades, I’ve seen these things slide down into the bowl time and again before I can manage to sit down on them. It seems so obvious. And now, faced with losing her, I wonder who will remind me to put my cotton blouses on permanent press, take them out of the dryer immediately, so they don’t wrinkle? Who will remind me not to slouch, not to use a metal spatula in a Teflon pan, or never to put used Kleenex back in my pocket? My mother, who knows the proper way to do things, who informs me, her middle-aged daughter, when I’ve outgrown my pants, how will I live without her? Who am I if not my mother’s daughter?

One day a violent eye twitch, accompanied by nausea and the sickening smell of hamburger and onions, the next, emergency room X-rays, MRIs, steroids, anti-seizure medication, and the verdict: without radiation and chemo, three months to live—with treatment, a fifty-fifty chance of living a year. She asks many questions, never “Why me?” but “Oh, Vicki, is this how it ends?” The doctors are very kind. She tells them she would like to attend her granddaughter’s wedding, nine months in the future. “We won’t rule it out. We will try for that.” They haven’t used the harshest words, “inoperable” and “incurable,” that now seem to take up all the space in my head and stick in my throat.

Dad and I are told what to expect. She can eat whatever she wants. She will lose her speech, her memory, her balance, her ability to walk. She may have personality changes, become apathetic.

Mother decides to buy as much time as she can to be with family. I fly from Seattle to be with her through seventeen radiation treatments, seizing the opportunity to fill in the blanks of my mother’s life, to ask the questions I should have asked before, to find out as much as I could before speech fails her. And to try to reconcile our differences. No matter how different we have come to be, we share a name, a history, and a longing to find common ground.

Lord knows she tried to make me into a lady. In high school, I obeyed my parents, never missed Mass, didn’t drink or smoke; tried not to fight with my siblings, pass gas, laugh too loud, spill milk, or leave my shoes by the door. I got good grades, was impeccably dressed and coiffed, always wore a girdle, and was friends only with nice girls. I graduated from college and had a respectable job, but in my late twenties I gave it all up—to become a clown. I felt it was my calling, but Mother was less than pleased. At the time she got sick, I’d had a long career on stage and was working as a children’s hospital clown. Dad loved the stories I told, of

red nose transplants, squirt gun syringes, dancing doctors, juggling nurses and tears turned to laughter. But mother remembered the loss of my baby sister and could not imagine it. “Oh, my, I don’t know how anyone could do that,” she said.

In the few months I care for my mother, I skip the questions about “regrets” and “wish I’d done” and ask her a spiritual question: had she ever felt she had a calling, a special purpose to her life? And if so, did she fulfill it? She answers that yes, her calling was to share the gift of music, and she fulfilled that through forty years of playing organ at Sacred Heart Church in Woodbine. She was especially proud of directing the music for the ecumenical Midnight Mass at Christmastime—welcoming mainline Protestants, evangelicals and Mormons to collective worship. “At times I really felt the presence of God there,” she told me. I reminded her that she was also gifted at playing the devil’s music on the piano, anywhere, anytime, as people gathered round to laugh and sing.

Soon Mother can no longer climb the curved oak staircase of her elegant Victorian home, even with one of us pulling from the front and another pushing from behind, so my father and sister and I have placed a hospital bed in the parlor. It has no quilt or lace coverlet, no embroidered pillows, like all the other beds in the six-bedroom, three story house. Just a plain sheet and blanket that don’t quite cover the metal frame and wheels underneath. She’s mad because we moved the bed downstairs without her permission. She’s mad because other people are now making all the decisions, and this one very ugly thing that does not belong is wedged over there beside her piano where the antique brocade love seat used to be, with its blue period print that perfectly matched the blue of the carpet, the roses carved into the back of it complementing the intricately carved moldings and window frames.

Of course, being my Mother, she’s not just mad: “Why, Vicki! I’m surprised and shocked that you would ever do such a thing!” The guilt, the shame, the betrayal of one’s very nature; she was good at jarring you back to the person she raised you to be. And I knew she was right. We should have consulted her, let her come to the realization more slowly that this is the last leg of the journey, that the presence of a bed in her sitting room means that soon she will no longer walk at all, and then...and then...

She is already losing her speech. This is frustrating for her as she struggles to find the words to say what she means, everything gets jumbled up and the words come out wrong. Most of the time, however, it also amuses her and makes us laugh.

“I’ve got a recipe on my forehead,” she tells us. “No...it’s a road, no, no....a rough patch! That’s it! I’d better put some ice cream on it.”

Though mostly she’s played straight lady to my Dad’s antics for fifty-nine years, she’s cracking us all up now in spite of herself. Yesterday, she blew her nose on her bra--my mother, who believed fervently in the proper selection and use of foundation garments.

Now it’s time to add one more thing to the parlor that doesn’t belong. We must move the round glass coffee table with the tiny lacquer boxes from Russia and the porcelain basket of flowers from China. We must move them to bring in a portable toilet, because we can no longer guide her wobbly body through the dining room, past the bay window and the cherry buffet with the crystal candy dish to get to the bathroom.

The toilet is also on wheels. You can move it back and forth, store it out of sight, then wheel it over to the bedside to pull the patient to a standing position and set her down quickly. The toilet seat is shaped like a proper toilet seat, giving the illusion of the flushing porcelain wonder of the Western world, but it’s really just camouflage for a hard plastic container you remove when no one’s looking.

Why don't we use the toilet now, Mom?" my sister Joy asks, as if she's making a casual suggestion instead of giving an order.

"No, no, no!" Mother says, shaking her head with frustrated obstinacy. No one tells her when to do such things. She is still the lady of the house, who will not be deposed from her curvy white boudoir chair with a dusty rose seat cushion that sits in front of her vanity table in a bathroom with rose and cream colored carpet and a print of Les Baigneuses accenting the flowered wallpaper.

"Please, mom, you haven't gone for a while," I implore her.

"No, no, no!" she persists.

I begin to panic. My sister Joy, however, a lady modeled in her mother's image, with her impeccable blond hair coiffed and sprayed, matching earrings and necklace, knit sweater and slacks and a pair of mules that look like they were bought yesterday, considers the situation before us. Joy is practical, calm and controlled. She has, after all, earned a master's degree, mothered four children (one with autism) and is Executive Director of a statewide non-profit for special needs children. She weighs each situation, a master of persuasion, expert in the art of what she calls "closed-end choices", a technique that gives a reluctant person the feeling of having a choice when there really isn't one. Joy used the closed-end choices technique the day before when Mother refused to wear an adult diaper to bed. "Well, mother, you have a choice. You can wear this one or... (holding up an identical in her other hand) that one. Which do you prefer?"

"I'll take that one!" Mother said, pointing to the second. It reminds me of the time I saw this technique used by a clown who wanted an audience member to mount a unicycle. When the man refused, the clown produced a much taller unicycle and told him he could either ride that one or the original smaller one. Without hesitation, the alarmed spectator chose the small one.

Suddenly, the thought occurs to me: what would Dr. La Foo do? Then it hits me. Music! "Let's put on some music!"

Joy looks at Mother to gauge her reaction. We are still dressing her in matching print ensembles. Today she is wearing one of olive green, with lavender, teal and rose trim—one that I would never wear, but am bound to inherit. I've got on beige pleated shorts and a peach colored blouse of stiff cotton. I hate it, but it makes my mother happy. I'm bare foot, and she is wearing bed socks.

"Mom, do you want to go to the toilet with music or without music?" Joy asks politely. Mother merely smiles, as if amused by the thought or aware of the joke.

"We could do a toilet dance!" I say.

Joy kicks off her shoes with uncharacteristic abandon, or perhaps sheer desperation, "Yes, we'll dance! I've always wanted to do a toilet dance!"

I choose a CD I've bought at the downtown variety store, old timey hymns played jug band and blue grass style. Mom's face cracks into a wider smile as the banjo picker plays "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," about four times faster than Great Grandma Lanie ever sang it in the Primitive Baptist Church in Loveland, Iowa. We fold our arms across our chests and do-see-do around each other, then hook elbows and spin round. Joy takes one of mom's hands and I take the other. We sit her up on the edge of the bed, swing her arms back and forth and do a few steps in time to the music. Then we hoist her up, Joy on one arm, me on the other, pull down her pants and suspend her for a moment above the rim.

"Set me down!" she laughs.

“Wait, wait, it’s not the right time in the music yet! “Five, six, seven, eight!” As the phrase ends we plop her down, and the banjo picks up the refrain. My mother sits, peeing and laughing. Her hair, always her crown jewel, is half gone from the chemo; bald on the sides and back, it sticks up in silver tufts from the top of her head, as if styled for the big top. My sister grabs the toilet lid and jumps around the room, beating and shaking it like a tambourine. I am in awe, peeing my own pants with laughter, at this hilarious scene of a life about to close, at these two women who played it straight all their lives, who bore the weight of private grief—my mother the loss of a child, my sister, the loss of her husband when her children were very young—these women who had remained strong for their families, preserved their dignity at all costs, and are now bringing the house down, bringing the clown to her knees. Tears streaming down my face, I fall back on the hospital bed, my whole rebellious, misguided, misunderstood life redeemed before my eyes.

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**Victoria Millard writes essays, humor and poetry, and is working on a memoir about her life as a stage and hospital clown. Her writing has appeared in *Humor Times* and *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. Forthcoming in *Halfway Down the Stairs* is her article about placing second in the Ladies' Chicken Calling Contest at the Iowa State Fair. Millard lives in Seattle with her psychiatrist husband, and is proud to be the silliest mother and grandmother on the planet.**

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