

For Giving Me Life - A Mosaic Of My Mother by Anthony Fagin

Somewhere – I can't find it now – on my left leg just above the knee, is a small scar. It is the relic of several stitches I had to have at the age of two or three. I'd fallen onto a broken glass left carelessly on the floor in my parents' bedroom. I sometimes wonder whether it was my father who'd left the shards lying there, or my mother. Or their marriage.

The gardens were lush with tall flame-red flowers. The Monastery, on High Level Road, once a religious institution, was now a psychiatric hospital.. My father led Anne, my sister, and me through the colonnaded entrance into the high-domed hall. Soon a brisk nun was leading us along antiseptic corridors. She stopped and unlocked a door into a bare room where my mother, in a green hospital smock, was squatting on a mattress on the floor. Her head had been shaved. She grinned hello. As she shifted, the smock rode up her thighs. Between her legs I saw hair; I couldn't understand why. This was after the first bout of shock treatment.

One afternoon she'd received an anonymous phone call from a woman informing her that Dad was having an affair with Mrs Brint, one of his customers. Mom must've gone into shock and left home. When Dad came back from work that evening to find her not there, he phoned round. Nobody knew where she was. In the end he phoned the police and reported her missing.

Later that night a patrol car found a woman fitting the description of Mom wandering along Victoria Road in Bantry Bay. When asked her name, she was unable to reply. She had forgotten who she was. Shock treatment at The Monastery jolted her back into remembering. Several weeks after our first visit, she was discharged – to take up her life again.

During my mother's breakdowns I would go to stay with Auntie Pearl. She was my great-aunt and godmother and, not having a child, she treated me as her own. After a stay with her, Dad would come to take me home. Once, shortly after one such return home, I was out shopping with Mom when we bumped into Auntie Pearl in Regent's Road. I let go of my mother's hand and clutched on to Auntie Pearl's skirt. She tried to give me back to my mother. 'No!' I cried, 'I want to go with you!' My insistence compelled her to take me back to Chatsworth, the block of flats she lived in. Here she patiently made it clear to me that she was not my mother and that I had to go home to my real mother. Later, Dad came to fetch me and reluctantly I went home.

The worst rows between my parents were before my father set off on 'a country trip'. He had gone on the road after closing down Swan Shirts and Pyjamas, a small factory manufacturing clothing for boys. Because of 'competition from Durban', it'd been running at a loss for several years. His going on a country trip meant, in my mother's mind, unlimited opportunities for him to have affairs.

'So help me God, Lew, this time I'm going to kill you!'

My mother's enraged voice rips into my sleep. I get up and go to my bedroom door. Through the crack I see Mom in the corridor with a bread knife in her raised right hand, thrusting down at Dad. His head is to one side, trying to avoid the sharp point of the knife. He is gripping and twisting her wrist.

'Lorna! Drop the knife! Drop the knife now!'

The force of his twist compels her to drop the knife. She is flung against the wall and crumples to the floor. A spray of red races up the wall like the speeded-up growth of some lurid flower. 'Lew,' she whimpers, 'I'm bleeding, you've broken my nose, phone Greasy.' (Grisha Edelstein was our GP.) 'Quick, get me a towel, phone Greasy, but don't tell him how this happened.' Dabbing with her dressing-gown, she tries to staunch the gush of blood. Soon Dad is back with a heap of towels. From the hall, further down the corridor, I hear the murmur of his voice on the phone to Dr Edelstein. I slip back to bed.

Reenee, a first cousin, was my mother's main confidante. Often Mom would be in a huddle over the phone in her bedroom: 'Reenee, please help me, I don't know what to do. Lew does..... Lew doesn't..... Lew never..... Lew is always..... Once, Lew..... Lew doesn't seem to realize. This particular afternoon she was especially desperate: 'Reeeneee' – a needy whine – 'I am having a complete and utter nervous breakdown and Lew doesn't seem to care. I can't go on any more.'

Reenee had suggested that Mom come over to her flat in Albenor, on Beach Road, so I left off my studies and drove Mom down. Over tea, and with the spectacular fifteenth-floor view out to sea, Mom reiterated her litany of Dad's transgressions and omissions. Reenee listened sympathetically though she had heard it all many times before: 's true 's God, Lorna, I don't know how you cope.' But I, exasperated, blurted out: 'Mom, for goodness' sake, you keep going over the same old ground. It's Dad this and Dad that. You make him out to be a complete monster. WHY are you so down on him?' 'Right!' she launched into me. 'So, you want to know, you really want to know! Well, I'll tell you!'

And out it all poured: she got pregnant shortly after meeting Dad; her mother insisted on an abortion; Dad took her to a seedy place in Woodstock and left her there to make her own way home by bus, in terrible pain; her mother compelled her to marry Dad: 'You've been ruined for any decent man.' Eighteen months later I was born. 'I will never forgive your father for taking me to that place and leaving me there alone. For all the pain and suffering he has caused me I want to see him grovelling in agony at my feet!'

I have often wondered whether the life terminated inside my mother would have grown into a girl or a boy. 'As I was under the *chupah*,' – the wedding canopy - 'I knew I was making a mistake,' she would insist. And I sometimes ponder: my sister Anne and I are the products of this 'mistake'.

My mother was a keen subscriber to the Readers' Digest Popular Classical Music Collection. I would get excited when a new box-set arrived: twelve LPs with a booklet of notes and commentary. I remember the thrill I felt when I heard the surge of the sea in Mendelssohn's Fingal's Cave Overture. Mom had a three-star system for marking the pieces she liked most: everything by Chopin; Grieg's Piano Concerto; Debussy's La Mer; Tchaikovsky's ballet music and his First Piano Concerto ('esp. last movement!'); Beethoven's Appassionata;She must have listened frequently. But strangely, not once did I encounter her listening.

On a trip back to Cape Town I asked Dad why he and Mom didn't get on. 'Your mother has never really been warm to me.'

My parents met at Fiat, a social club for young people returning from the War. Fiat sometimes put on theatre productions. Mom and Dad were in a play in which she played a character with only one line, in broad Cockney: 'erbie, come 'n look what's 'ere' – a corpse! At a party my mother, attracted to my father, tall, charming, a joke-teller, went up to him and flipped his tie. Once, when I asked her what had drawn her to Dad, she replied: 'He used to make me laugh.' In a tirade about Dad's misdemeanours, Mom urged me in my early teens: 'You go and tell your father what a terrible man he is!' A few years after Dad passed away, I once said to Mom something critical of Dad, sure it would fall on receptive ears. 'How can you say that? How dare you say such a thing about your late father, may-he-rest-in-peace. He was the most wonderful man.'

Yesterday I got an e-mail from my mother's social worker. She said my mom would like to see me. It's been over fifteen years. Lying on the therapy couch, I fed each sentence to the air. Occasionally I would shift to be able to check if Juliette, my therapist, seated well behind me, was still there. Apart from the odd gnomic utterance, she maintained a resolute silence.

'I feel.....while there is still time.....I need to go out to see my mother.....,' I could think of no other way to say it: 'to thank her for.....for giving me life.' I stopped in an attempt to eke some response from Juliette. After a while 'Perhaps you would like to thank me for giving you something', emanated from her.

In another session I spoke of my need to let go of my resentment towards my mother. 'I feel I need to forgive her because it was.....out of her that I came. And I would rather have been born than not.' I commented that I hadn't before realized that the word 'forgive' contains 'give'. Cryptically Juliette enquired: 'What is it that you would like to 'give' me?' And when I remained silent for some considerable time, she appended: 'Or perhaps – what is it that you would like me to give you?' Juliette's house was in a cul-de-sac named Sidmouth End. Because of my inability to grasp her meanings, I came to dub her 'The Sibyl of Sidmouth End'.

The day after my arrival in Cape Town my good friend Ritva, with whom I was staying in Camps Bay, drove me over the Nek to Highlands House to see my mother.

Iris, Mom's social worker, met me in the foyer and led me to her office, where she prepared me for the encounter: 'You will meet a very old lady who gives little or no response'. She added something about 'a narcissistic personality disorder.' 'So, if I were you, Mark, I wouldn't expect too much.' Room 341 was on the third floor: spacious, sunny, with its own balcony. On the bed lay my mother. Skeletal. Withered limbs. Thin, bony, long fingers. Heavily lined face framed with wisps of white hair. Big blue eyes staring fearfully. No flicker of recognition of me. I hadn't seen her for fifteen years.

'Queenie,' Ritva coaxed, 'here's Mark, say hello, he's come all the way from London to see you.' All I could think of was the words I'd spoken in the therapy room in London, so I knelt by the bedside and laid a hand on her bony knuckles.

'Mom, I want.....I want to thank you for giv.....'

'All-I-want-is-to-DIE!'

'But God doesn't want me.'

I crumpled to the floor.

Ritva – fortunately a trained nurse – gathered up the pieces of me and somehow got me out of the room.

The second visit to my mother was in the company of my nephew Brian and his three-year-old son Jonas who managed to drag from a cleaning cupboard in the corridor a large vacuum-cleaner together with all its tubes, pipes, fixtures, appendages and attachments. His waving of the big central metal tube posed a danger to my mother's display of her favourite ornaments. 'Jonas, be a good boy and give that to Granny,' pleaded Brian, channelling his son towards my mother's bed. Gently he encouraged the hand-over of the metal tube. 'Thank you, Jonas,' my mother said, 'you're a good boy.' She smiled at him. Brian then busied his son on the floor with a swivelled brush-attachment. On the final visit to my mother, I was alone with her. Across the room from where she lay, I sat in an armchair. Mid afternoon sunshine glared through the glass balcony door. Silence. A noisy car passed in the road below.

'Your father was a womaniser.'

Still banging that old drum. I sighed.

I sat a while, then got up, went over to the bed and bent to kiss her forehead.

'Mom, I have to go now. Brian's waiting outside for me in his car.'

Her piercing blue eyes looked up at me.

'You were a quiet child.' I had to turn away.

Slowly I walked out of the room and softly closed the door.

I never saw her again.

The day after my mother died, Brian sent me a photo of a letter written by her. Dated almost twenty years before her death, it laid out her last wishes: to be cremated and her ashes "scattered at Kleinmond Seaside Resort in the nature reserve on the mountainside. My late father Robert Arkin owned many of the plots there. He loved Kleinmond and when I was a child, I used to go there often for holidays with my parents, so I would very much like my ashes to be scattered in a place which my father loved."

My mother's other wish was that one night of prayers be said for her in the small synagogue at Highlands House.

On a shelf by my bedside are several framed family photographs. One is of me as a baby, in a white smock, securely encircled by my mother's arms. To the left, my father is looking on with keen interest. It is summer: Mom is wearing a strapless, sleeveless dress with a tight, elasticated bodice. Round her neck is a chunky choker of white beads. Her hair is well-styled. Perfect early 1950s. It is late on a Saturday night. I am about to get into bed, ready for sleep. I stand and look long at the photo. Baby-me is looking up towards Dad. Mom is beautiful, smiling tenderly down at me.

This morning in shul I marked Mom's first *yahrzeit*. I sang in the choir as usual. Towards the end of the service, I had the honour of opening the Ark for the *Aleinu*. Her name was read out among those who'd died in early December in years past. I recited Kaddish for her soul finally to be at peace.

Mom, this is how I would like to remember you – as you are here in this photo.

Dear Mom,.....

Dearest Mom, I need you.....to let me.....let you go.

Written by Anthony (Tony Fagin)

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site in January 2023