Ruth's Song
(Because She Could Not Sing It)

—Gloria Steinem—

Happy or unhappy, families are all mysterious. We have only to imagine how differently we would be described—and will be, after our deaths—by each of the family members who believe they know us. The only question is, Why are some mysteries more important than others?

The fate of my Uncle Ed was a mystery of importance in our family. We lavished years of speculation on his transformation from a brilliant young electrical engineer to the town handyman. What could have changed this elegant, Lincolnesque student voted “Best Dressed” by his classmates to the gaunt, unshaven man I remember? Why did he leave a young son and a first wife of the “proper” class and religion, marry a much less educated woman of the “wrong” religion, and raise a second family in a house near an abandoned airstrip; a house whose walls were patched with metal signs to stop the wind? Why did he never talk about his transformation?

For years, I assumed that some secret and dramatic events of a year he spent in Alaska had made the difference. Then I discovered that the trip had come after his change and probably been made because of it. Strangers he worked for as a much-loved handyman talked about him as one more tragedy of the Depression, and it was true that Uncle Ed's father, my paternal grandfather, had lost his money in the stockmarket Crash and died of (depending on who was telling the story) pneumonia or a broken heart. But the Crash of 1929 also had come long after Uncle Ed's transformation. Another theory was that he was afflicted with a mental problem that lasted most of his life, yet he was supremely competent at his work, led an independent life, and asked for help from no one.

Perhaps he had fallen under the spell of a radical professor in the early days of the century, the height of this country’s romance with socialism and anarchism. That was the theory of another uncle on my mother’s side. I do remember that no matter how much Uncle Ed needed money, he would charge no more for his work than materials plus 10 percent, and I never saw him in anything other than ancient boots and overalls held up with strategic safety pins. Was he really trying to replace socialism-in-one-country with socialism-in-one-man? If so, why did my grandmother, a woman who herself had run for the school board in coalition with anarchists and socialists, mistrust his judgment so much that she left his share of her estate in trust, even though he was over fifty when she died? And why did Uncle Ed seem uninterested in all other political words and acts? Was it true
instead that, as another relative insisted, Uncle Ed had chosen poverty to disprove
the myths of Jews and money?

Years after my uncle’s death, I asked a son in his second family if he had the key
to this family mystery. No, he said. He had never known his father any other way.
For that cousin, there had been no question. For the rest of us, there was to be no
answer.

For many years I also never imagined my mother any way other than the person
she had become before I was born. She was just a fact of life when I was growing
up; someone to be worried about and cared for; an invalid who lay in bed with
eyes closed and lips moving in occasional response to voices only she could hear; a
woman to whom I brought an endless stream of toast and coffee, bologna
sandwiches and dime pies, in a child’s version of what meals should be. She was a
loving, intelligent, terrorized woman who tried hard to clean our littered house
whenever she emerged from her private world, but who could rarely be counted on
to finish one task. In many ways, our roles were reversed: I was the mother and she
was the child. Yet that didn’t help her, for she still worried about me with all the
intensity of a frightened mother, plus the special fears of her own world full of
threats and hostile voices.

Even then I suppose I must have known that, years before she was thirty-five
and I was born, she had been a spirited, adventurous young woman who struggled
out of a working-class family and into college, who found work she loved and
continued to do, even after she was married and my older sister was there to be
cared for. Certainly, our immediate family and nearby relatives, of whom I was by
far the youngest, must have remembered her life as a whole and functioning
person. She was thirty before she gave up her own career to help my father run the
Michigan summer resort that was the most practical of his many dreams, and she
worked hard there as everything from bookkeeper to bar manager. The family
must have watched this energetic, fun-loving, book-loving woman turn into
someone who was afraid to be alone, who could not hang on to reality long
enough to hold a job, and who could rarely concentrate enough to read a book.

Yet I don’t remember any family speculation about the mystery of my mother’s
transformation. To the kind ones and those who liked her, this new Ruth was
simply a sad event, perhaps a mental case, a family problem to be accepted and
cared for until some natural process made her better. To the less kind or those who
had resented her earlier independence, she was a willful failure, someone who lived
in a filthy house, a woman who simply would not pull herself together.

Unlike the case of my Uncle Ed, exterior events were never suggested as reason
enough for her problems. Giving up her own career was never cited as her personal
parallel of the Depression. (Nor was there discussion of the Depression itself,
though my mother, like millions of others, had made potato soup and cut up
blankets to make my sister’s winter clothes.) Her fears of dependence and poverty
were no match for my uncle’s possible political beliefs. The real influence of newspaper editors who had praised her reporting was not taken as seriously as the possible influence of one radical professor.

Even the explanation of mental illness seemed to contain more personal fault when applied to my mother. She had suffered her first “nervous breakdown,” as she and everyone else called it, before I was born and when my sister was about five. It followed years of trying to take care of a baby, be the wife of a kind but financially irresponsible man with show-business dreams, and still keep her much-loved job as reporter and newspaper editor. After many months in a sanatorium, she was pronounced recovered. That is, she was able to take care of my sister again, to move away from the city and the job she loved, and to work with my father at the isolated rural lake in Michigan he was trying to transform into a resort worthy of the big dance bands of the 1930s.

But she was never again completely without the spells of depression, anxiety, and visions into some other world that eventually were to turn her into the nonperson I remember. And she was never again without a bottle of dark, acrid-smelling liquid she called “Doc Howard’s medicine”: a solution of chloral hydrate that I later learned was the main ingredient of “Mickey Finns” or “knockout drops,” and that probably made my mother and her doctor the pioneers of modern tranquilizers. Though friends and relatives saw this medicine as one more evidence of weakness and indulgence, to me it always seemed an embarrassing but necessary evil. It slurred her speech and slowed her coordination, making our neighbors and my school friends believe she was a drunk. But without it, she would not sleep for days, even a week at a time, and her feverish eyes began to see only that private world in which wars and hostile voices threatened the people she loved.

Because my parents had divorced and my sister was working in a faraway city, my mother and I were alone together then, living off the meager fixed income that my mother got from leasing her share of the remaining land in Michigan. I remember a long Thanksgiving weekend spent hanging on to her with one hand and holding my eighth-grade assignment of Tale of Two Cities in the other, because the war outside our house was so real to my mother that she had plunged her hand through a window, badly cutting her arm in an effort to help us escape. Only when she finally agreed to swallow the medicine could she sleep, and only then could I end the terrible calm that comes with crisis and admit to myself how afraid I had been.

No wonder that no relative in my memory challenged the doctor who prescribed this medicine, asked if some of her suffering and hallucinating might be due to overdose or withdrawal, or even consulted another doctor about its use. It was our relief as well as hers.

But why was she never returned even to that first sanatorium? Or to help that might come from other doctors? It’s hard to say. Partly, it was her own fear of returning. Partly, it was too little money, and a family’s not-unusual assumption
that mental illness is an inevitable part of someone’s personality. Or perhaps other family members had feared something like my experience when, one hot and desperate summer between the sixth and seventh grade, I finally persuaded her to let me take her to the only doctor from those sanatorium days whom she remembered without fear.

Yes, this brusque old man told me after talking to my abstracted, timid mother for twenty minutes: She definitely belongs in a state hospital. I should put her there right away. But even at that age, Life magazine and newspaper exposés had told me what horrors went on inside those hospitals. Assuming there to be no other alternative, I took her home and never tried again.

In retrospect, perhaps the biggest reason my mother was cared for but not helped for twenty years was the simplest: her functioning was not that necessary to the world. Like women alcoholics who drink in their kitchens while costly programs are constructed for executives who drink, or like the homemakers subdued with tranquilizers while male patients get therapy and personal attention instead, my mother was not an important worker. She was not even the caretaker of a very young child, as she had been when she was hospitalized the first time. My father had patiently brought home the groceries and kept our odd household going until I was eight or so and my sister went away to college. Two years later when wartime gas rationing closed his summer resort and he had to travel to buy and sell in summer as well as winter, he said: How can I travel and take care of your mother? How can I make a living? He was right. It was impossible to do both. I did not blame him for leaving once I was old enough to be the bringer of meals and answerer of my mother’s questions. (“Has your sister been killed in a car crash?” “Are there German soldiers outside?”) I replaced my father, my mother was left with one more way of maintaining a sad status quo, and the world went on undisturbed.

That’s why our lives, my mother’s from forty-six to fifty-three, and my own from ten to seventeen, were spent alone together. There was one sane winter in a house we rented to be near my sister’s college in Massachusetts, then one bad summer spent house-sitting in suburbia while my mother hallucinated and my sister struggled to hold down a summer job in New York. But the rest of those years were lived in Toledo where both my mother and father had been born, and on whose city newspapers an earlier Ruth had worked.

First we moved into a basement apartment in a good neighborhood. In those rooms behind a furnace, I made one last stab at being a child. By pretending to be much sicker with a cold than I really was, I hoped my mother would suddenly turn into a sane and cheerful woman bringing me chicken soup à la Hollywood. Of course, she could not. It only made her feel worse that she could not. I stopped pretending.

But for most of those years, we lived in the upstairs of the house my mother had grown up in and that her parents left her—a deteriorating farm house engulfed by the city, with poor but newer houses stacked against it and a major highway a few
feet from its sagging front porch. For a while, we could rent the two downstairs apartments to a newlywed factory worker and a local butcher’s family. Then the health department condemned our ancient furnace for the final time, sealing it so tight that even my resourceful Uncle Ed couldn’t produce illegal heat.

In that house, I remember:

. . . lying in the bed my mother and I shared for warmth, listening on the early morning radio to the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip being broadcast live, while we tried to ignore and thus protect each other from the unmistakable sounds of the factory worker downstairs beating up and locking out his pregnant wife.

. . . hanging paper drapes I had bought in the dime store; stacking books and papers in the shape of two armchairs and covering them with blankets; evolving my own dishwashing system (I waited until all the dishes were dirty, then put them in the bathtub); and listening to my mother’s high praise for these housekeeping efforts to bring order from chaos, though in retrospect I think they probably depressed her further.

. . . coming back from one of the Eagles’ Club shows where I and other veterans of a local tap-dancing school made ten dollars a night for two shows, and finding my mother waiting with a flashlight and no coat in the dark cold of the bus stop, worried about my safety walking home.

. . . in a good period, when my mother’s native adventurousness came through, answering a classified ad together for an amateur acting troupe that performed Biblical dramas in churches, and doing several very corny performances of Noah’s Ark while my proud mother shook metal sheets backstage to make thunder.

. . . on a hot summer night, being bitten by one of the rats that shared our house and its back alley. It was a terrifying night that turned into a touching one when my mother, summoning courage from some unknown reservoir of love, became a calm, comforting parent who took me to a hospital emergency room despite her terror at leaving home.

. . . coming home from a local library with the three books a week into which I regularly escaped, and discovering that for once there was no need to escape. My mother was calmly planting hollyhocks in the vacant lot next door.

But there were also times when she woke in the early winter dark, too frightened and disoriented to remember that I was at my usual after-school job, and so called the police to find me. Humiliated in front of my friends by sirens and policemen, I would yell at her—and she would bow her head in fear and say “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” just as she had done so often when my otherwise-kindhearted father had yelled at her in frustration. Perhaps the worst thing about suffering is that it finally hardens the hearts of those around it.

And there were many, many times when I badgered her until her shaking hands had written a small check to cash at the corner grocery and I could leave her alone while I escaped to the comfort of well-heated dime stores that smelled of fresh
doughnuts, or to air-conditioned Saturday-afternoon movies that were windows on a very different world.

But my ultimate protection was this: I was just passing through, a guest in the house; perhaps this wasn’t my mother at all. Though I knew very well that I was her daughter, I sometimes imagined that I had been adopted and that my real parents would find me, a fantasy I’ve since discovered is common. (If children wrote more and grownups less, being adopted might be seen not only as a fear but also as a hope.) Certainly, I didn’t mourn the wasted life of this woman who was scarcely older than I am now. I worried only about the times when she got worse.

Pity takes distance and a certainty of surviving. It was only after our house was bought for demolition by the church next door, and after my sister had performed the miracle of persuading my father to give me a carefree time before college by taking my mother with him to California for a year, that I could afford to think about the sadness of her life. Suddenly, I was far away in Washington, living with my sister and sharing a house with several of her friends. While I finished high school and discovered to my surprise that my classmates felt sorry for me because my mother wasn’t there, I also realized that my sister, at least in her early childhood, had known a very different person who lived inside our mother, an earlier Ruth.

She was a woman I met for the first time in a mental hospital near Baltimore, a humane place with gardens and trees where I visited her each weekend of the summer after my first year away in college. Fortunately, my sister hadn’t been able to work and be our mother’s caretaker, too. After my father’s year was up, my sister had carefully researched hospitals and found the courage to break the family chain.

At first, this Ruth was the same abstracted, frightened woman I had lived with all those years; though now all the sadder for being approached through long hospital corridors and many locked doors. But gradually she began to talk about her past life, memories that doctors there must have been awakening. I began to meet a Ruth I had never known.

. . . A tall, spirited, auburn-haired high-school girl who loved basketball and reading; who tried to drive her uncle’s Stanley Steamer when it was the first car in the neighborhood; who had a gift for gardening and who sometimes, in defiance of convention, wore her father’s overalls; a girl with the courage to go to dances even though her church told her that music itself was sinful, and whose sense of adventure almost made up for feeling gawky and unpretty next to her daintier, dark-haired sister.

. . . A very little girl, just learning to walk, discovering the body places where touching was pleasurable, and being punished by her mother who slapped her hard across the kitchen floor.

. . . A daughter of a handsome railroad-engineer and a schoolteacher who felt she had married “beneath her”; the mother who took her two daughters on
Christmas trips to faraway New York on an engineer’s free railroad pass and showed them the restaurants and theaters they should aspire to—even though they could only stand outside them in the snow.

... A good student at Oberlin College, whose freethinking traditions she loved, where friends nicknamed her “Billy”; a student with a talent for both mathematics and poetry, who was not above putting an invisible film of Karo syrup on all the john seats in her dormitory the night of a big prom; a daughter who had to return to Toledo, live with her family, and go to a local university when her ambitious mother—who had scrimped and saved, ghostwritten a minister’s sermons, and made her daughters’ clothes in order to get them to college at all—ran out of money. At home, this Ruth became a part-time bookkeeper in a lingerie shop for the very rich, commuting to classes and listening to her mother’s harsh lectures on the security of becoming a teacher; but also a young woman who was still rebellious enough to fall in love with my father, the editor of her university newspaper, a funny and charming young man who was a terrible student, had no intention of graduating, put on all the campus dances, and was unacceptably Jewish.

I knew from family lore that my mother had married my father twice: once secretly, after he invited her to become the literary editor of his campus newspaper, and once a year later in a public ceremony, which some members of both families refused to attend as the “mixed marriage” of its day.

And I knew that my mother had gone on to earn a teaching certificate. She had used it to scare away truant officers during the winters when, after my father closed the summer resort for the season, we lived in a house trailer and worked our way to Florida or California and back by buying and selling antiques.

But only during those increasingly adventurous weekend outings from the hospital—going shopping, to lunch, to the movies—did I realize that she had taught college calculus for a year in deference to her mother’s insistence that she have teaching “to fall back on.” And only then did I realize she had fallen in love with newspapers along with my father. After graduating from the university paper, she wrote a gossip column for a local tabloid, under the name “Duncan MacKenzie,” since women weren’t supposed to do such things, and soon had earned a job as society reporter on one of Toledo’s two big dailies. By the time my sister was four or so, she had worked her way up to the coveted position of Sunday editor.

It was a strange experience to look into those brown eyes I had seen so often and realize suddenly how much they were like my own. For the first time, I realized that she might really be my mother.

I began to think about the many pressures that might have led up to that first nervous breakdown: leaving my sister whom she loved very much with a grandmother whose values my mother didn’t share; trying to hold on to a job she
loved but was being asked to leave by her husband; wanting very much to go with a woman friend to pursue their own dreams in New York; falling in love with a co-worker at the newspaper who frightened her by being more sexually attractive, more supportive of her work than my father, and perhaps the man she should have married; and finally, nearly bleeding to death with a miscarriage because her own mother had little faith in doctors and refused to get help.

Did those months in the sanatorium brainwash her in some Freudian or very traditional way into making what were, for her, probably the wrong choices? I don’t know. It almost doesn’t matter. Without extraordinary support to the contrary, she was already convinced that divorce was unthinkable. A husband could not be left for another man, and certainly not for a reason as selfish as a career. A daughter could not be deprived of her father and certainly not be uprooted and taken off to an uncertain future in New York. A bride was supposed to be virginal (not “shop-worn,” as my euphemistic mother would have said), and if your husband turned out to be kind, but innocent of the possibility of a woman’s pleasure, then just be thankful for kindness.

Of course, other women have torn themselves away from work and love and still survived. But a story my mother told me years later has always symbolized for me the formidable forces arrayed against her.

“It was early spring, nothing was open yet. There was nobody for miles around. We had stayed at the lake that winter, so I was alone a lot while your father took the car and traveled around on business. You were a baby. Your sister was in school, and there was no phone. The last straw was that the radio broke. Suddenly it seemed like forever since I’d been able to talk with anyone—or even hear the sound of another voice.

“I bundled you up, took the dog, and walked out to the Brooklyn road. I thought I’d walk the four or five miles to the grocery store, talk to some people, and find somebody to drive me back. I was walking along with Fritzie running up ahead in the empty road—when suddenly a car came out of nowhere and down the hill. It hit Fritzie head on and threw him over to the side of the road. I yelled and screamed at the driver, but he never slowed down. He never looked at us. He never even turned his head.

“Poor Fritzie was all broken and bleeding, but he was still alive. I carried him and sat down in the middle of the road, with his head cradled in my arms. I was going to make the next car stop and help.

“But no car ever came. I sat there for hours, I don’t know how long, with you in my lap and holding Fritzie, who was whimpering and looking up at me for help. It was dark by the time he finally died. I pulled him over to the side of the road and walked back home with you and washed the blood out of my clothes.
“I don’t know what it was about that one day—it was like a breaking point. When your father came home, I said: ‘From now on, I’m going with you. I won’t bother you. I’ll just sit in the car. But I can’t bear to be alone again.’”

I think she told me that story to show she had tried to save herself, or perhaps she wanted to exorcise a painful memory by saying it out loud. But hearing it made me understand what could have turned her into the woman I remember: a solitary figure sitting in the car, perspiring through the summer, bundled up in winter, waiting for my father to come out of this or that antique shop, grateful just not to be alone. I was there, too, because I was too young to be left at home, and I loved helping my father wrap and unwrap the newspaper around the china and small objects he had bought at auctions and was selling to dealers. It made me feel necessary and grown-up. But sometimes it was hours before we came back to the car again and to my mother who was always patiently, silently waiting.

At the hospital and later when Ruth told me stories of her past, I used to say, “But why didn’t you leave? Why didn’t you take the job? Why didn’t you marry the other man?” She would always insist it didn’t matter, she was lucky to have my sister and me. If I pressed hard enough, she would add, “If I’d left you never would have been born.”

I always thought but never had the courage to say: But you might have been born instead.

I’d like to tell you that this story has a happy ending. The best I can do is one that is happier than its beginning.

After many months in that Baltimore hospital, my mother lived on her own in a small apartment for two years while I was in college and my sister married and lived nearby. When she felt the old terrors coming back, she returned to the hospital at her own request. She was approaching sixty by the time she emerged from there and from a Quaker farm that served as a halfway house, but she confounded her psychiatrists’ predictions that she would be able to live outside for shorter and shorter periods. In fact, she never returned. She lived more than another twenty years, and for six of them, she was well enough to stay in a rooming house that provided both privacy and company. Even after my sister and her husband moved to a larger house and generously made two rooms into an apartment for her, she continued to have some independent life and many friends. She worked part-time as a “salesgirl” in a china shop; went away with me on yearly vacations and took one trip to Europe with relatives; went to women’s club meetings; found a multi-racial church that she loved; took meditation courses; and enjoyed many books. She still could not bear to see a sad movie, to stay alone with any of her six grandchildren while they were babies, to live without many tranquilizers, or to talk about those bad years in Toledo. The old terrors were still in the back of her mind, and each day was a fight to keep them down.
It was the length of her illness that had made doctors pessimistic. In fact, they could not identify any serious mental problem and diagnosed her only as having “an anxiety neurosis”: low self-esteem, a fear of being dependent, a terror of being alone, a constant worry about money. She also had spells of what now would be called agoraphobia, a problem almost entirely confined to dependent women: fear of going outside the house, and incapacitating anxiety attacks in unfamiliar or public places.

Would you say, I asked one of her doctors, that her spirit had been broken? “I guess that’s as good a diagnosis as any,” he said. “And it’s hard to mend anything that’s been broken for twenty years.”

But once out of the hospital for good, she continued to show flashes of the different woman inside; one with a wry kind of humor, a sense of adventure, and a love of learning. Books on math, physics, and mysticism occupied a lot of her time. (“Religion,” she used to say firmly, “begins in the laboratory.”) When she visited me in New York during her sixties and seventies, she always told taxi drivers that she was eighty years old (“so they will tell me how young I look”), and convinced theater ticket sellers that she was deaf long before she really was (“so they'll give us seats in the front row”). She made friends easily, with the vulnerability and charm of a person who feels entirely dependent on the approval of others. After one of her visits, every shopkeeper within blocks of my apartment would say, “Oh yes, I know your mother!” At home, she complained that people her own age were too old and stodgy for her. Many of her friends were far younger than she. It was as if she were making up for her own lost years.

She was also overly appreciative of any presents given to her—and that made giving them irresistible. I loved to send her clothes, jewelry, exotic soaps, and additions to her collection of tarot cards. She loved receiving them, though we both knew they would end up stored in boxes and drawers. She carried on a correspondence in German with our European relatives, and exchanges with many other friends, all written in her painfully slow, shaky handwriting. She also loved giving gifts. Even as she worried about money and figured out how to save pennies, she would buy or make carefully chosen presents for grandchildren and friends.

Part of the price she paid for this much health was forgetting. A single reminder of those bad years in Toledo was enough to plunge her into days of depression. There were times when this fact created loneliness for me, too. Only two of us had lived most of my childhood. Now, only one of us remembered. But there were also times in later years when, no matter how much I pled with reporters not to interview our friends and neighbors in Toledo, not to say that my mother had been hospitalized, they published things that hurt her very much and sent her into a downhill slide.

On the other hand, she was also her mother’s daughter, a person with a certain amount of social pride and pretension, and some of her objections had less to do with depression than false pride. She complained bitterly about one report that we had lived in a house trailer. She finally asked angrily: “Couldn’t they at least say
‘vacation mobile home’?” Divorce was still a shame to her. She might cheerfully
tell friends, “I don’t know why Gloria says her father and I were divorced—we
never were.” I think she justified this to herself with the idea that they had gone
through two marriage ceremonies, one in secret and one in public, but been
divorced only once. In fact, they were definitely divorced, and my father had
briefly married someone else.

She was very proud of my being a published writer, and we generally shared the
same values. After her death, I found a mother-daughter morals quiz I once had
written for a women’s magazine. In her unmistakably shaky writing, she had
recorded her own answers, her entirely accurate imagination of what my answers
would be, and a score that concluded our differences were less than those “normal
for women separated by twenty-odd years.” Nonetheless, she was quite capable of
putting a made-up name on her name tag when going to a conservative women’s
club where she feared our shared identity would bring controversy or even just
questions. When I finally got up the nerve to tell her I was signing a 1972 petition
of women who publicly said we had had abortions and were demanding the repeal
of laws that made them illegal and dangerous, her only reply was sharp and aimed
to hurt back. “Every starlet says she’s had an abortion,” she said. “It’s just a way
of getting publicity.” I knew she agreed that abortion should be a legal choice, but
I also knew she would never forgive me for embarrassing her in public.

In fact, her anger and a fairly imaginative ability to wound with words
increased in her last years when she was most dependent, most focused on herself,
and most likely to need the total attention of others. When my sister made a
courageous decision to go to law school at the age of fifty, leaving my mother in a
house that not only had many loving teenage grandchildren in it but a kindly older
woman as a paid companion besides, my mother reduced her to frequent tears by
insisting that this was a family with no love in it, no home-cooked food in the
refrigerator; not a real family at all. Since arguments about home cooking wouldn’t
work on me, my punishment was creative and different. She was going to call up
The New York Times, she said, and tell them that this was what feminism did: it
left old sick women all alone.

Some of this bitterness brought on by failing faculties was eventually solved by a
nursing home near my sister’s house where my mother not only got the twenty-
four-hour help her weakening body demanded, but the attention of affectionate
nurses besides. She charmed them, they loved her, and she could still get out for an
occasional family wedding. If I ever had any doubts about the debt we owe to
nurses, those last months laid them to rest.

When my mother died just before her eighty-second birthday in a hospital room
where my sister and I were alternating the hours in which her heart would slowly
down to its last sounds, we were alone together for a few hours while my sister
slept. My mother seemed bewildered by her surroundings and the tubes that
invaded her body, but her consciousness cleared long enough for her to say: “I
want to go home. Please take me home.” Lying to her one last time, I said I would. “Okay, honey,” she said. “I trust you.” Those were her last understandable words.

The nurses let my sister and me stay in the room long after there was no more breath. She had asked us to do that. One of her many fears came from a story she had been told as a child about a man whose coma was mistaken for death. She also had made out a living will requesting that no extraordinary measures be used to keep her alive, and that her ashes be sprinkled in the same stream as my father’s.

Her memorial service was in the Episcopalian church that she loved because it fed the poor, let the homeless sleep in its pews, had members of almost every race, and had been sued by the Episcopalian hierarchy for having a woman priest. Most of all, she loved the affection with which its members had welcomed her, visited her at home, and driven her to services. I think she would have liked the Quaker-style informality with which people rose to tell their memories of her. I know she would have loved the presence of many friends. It was to this church that she had donated some of her remaining Michigan property in the hope that it could be used as a multiracial camp, thus getting even with those people in the tiny nearby town who had snubbed my father for being Jewish.

I think she also would have been pleased with her obituary. It emphasized her brief career as one of the early women journalists and asked for donations to Oberlin’s scholarship fund so others could go to this college she loved so much but had to leave.

I know I will spend the next years figuring out what her life has left in me.

I realize that I’ve always been more touched by old people than by children. It’s the talent and hopes locked up in a failing body that gets to me; a poignant contrast that reminds me of my mother, even when she was strong.

I’ve always been drawn to any story of a mother and a daughter on their own in the world. I saw A Taste of Honey several times as both a play and a film, and never stopped feeling it. Even Gypsy I saw over and over again, sneaking in backstage for the musical and going to the movie as well. I told myself that I was learning the tap-dance routines, but actually my eyes were full of tears.

I once fell in love with a man only because we both belonged to that large and secret club of children who had “crazy mothers.” We traded stories of the shameful houses to which we could never invite our friends. Before he was born, his mother had gone to jail for her pacifist convictions. Then she married the politically ambitious young lawyer who had defended her, stayed home and raised many sons. I fell out of love when he confessed that he wished I wouldn’t smoke or swear, and he hoped I wouldn’t go on working. His mother’s plight had taught him self-pity—nothing else.

I’m no longer obsessed, as I was for many years, with the fear that I would end up in a house like that one in Toledo. Now, I’m obsessed instead with the things I could have done for my mother while she was alive, or the things I should have said.
I still don’t understand why so many, many years passed before I saw my mother as a person and before I understood that many of the forces in her life are patterns women share. Like a lot of daughters, I suppose I couldn’t afford to admit that what had happened to my mother was not all personal or accidental, and therefore could happen to me.

One mystery has finally cleared. I could never understand why my mother hadn’t been helped by Pauline, her mother-in-law; a woman she seemed to love more than her own mother. This paternal grandmother had died when I was five, before my mother’s real problems began but long after that “nervous breakdown,” and I knew Pauline was once a suffragist who addressed Congress, marched for the vote, and was the first woman member of a school board in Ohio. She must have been a courageous and independent woman, yet I could find no evidence in my mother’s reminiscences that Pauline had encouraged or helped my mother toward a life of her own.

I finally realized that my grandmother never changed the politics of her own life, either. She was a feminist who kept a neat house for a husband and four antifeminist sons, a vegetarian among five male meat eaters, and a woman who felt so strongly about the dangers of alcohol that she used only paste vanilla; yet she served both meat and wine to the men of the house and made sure their lives and comforts were continued undisturbed. After the vote was won, Pauline seems to have stopped all feminist activity. My mother greatly admired the fact that her mother-in-law kept a spotless house and prepared a week’s meals at a time. Whatever her own internal torments, Pauline was to my mother a woman who seemed able to “do it all.” “Whither thou goest, I shall go,” my mother used to say to her much-loved mother-in-law, quoting the Ruth of the Bible. In the end, her mother-in-law may have added to my mother’s burdens of guilt.

Perhaps like many later suffragists, my grandmother was a public feminist and a private isolationist. That may have been heroic in itself, the most she could be expected to do, but the vote and a legal right to work were not the only kind of help my mother needed.

The world still missed a unique person named Ruth. Though she longed to live in New York and in Europe, she became a woman who was afraid to take a bus across town. Though she drove the first Stanley Steamer, she married a man who never let her drive.

I can only guess what she might have become. The clues are in moments of spirit or humor.

After all the years of fear, she still came to Oberlin with me when I was giving a speech there. She remembered everything about its history as the first college to admit blacks and the first to admit women, and responded to students with the dignity of a professor, the accuracy of a journalist, and a charm that was all her own.
When she could still make trips to Washington’s wealth of libraries, she became an expert genealogist, delighting especially in finding the rogues and rebels in our family tree.

Just before I was born, when she had cooked one more enormous meal for all the members of some famous dance band at my father’s resort and they failed to clean their plates, she had taken a shotgun down from the kitchen wall and held it over their frightened heads until they had finished the last crumb of strawberry shortcake. Only then did she tell them the gun wasn’t loaded. It was a story she told with great satisfaction.

Though sex was a subject she couldn’t discuss directly, she had a great appreciation of sensuous men. When a friend I brought home tried to talk to her about cooking, she was furious. (“He came out in the kitchen and talked to me about stew!”) But she forgave him when we went swimming. She whispered, “He has wonderful legs!”

On her seventy-fifth birthday, she played softball with her grandsons on the beach, and took pride in hitting home runs into the ocean.

Even in the last year of her life, when my sister took her to visit a neighbor’s new and luxurious house, she looked at the vertical stripes of a very abstract painting in the hallway and said, tartly, “Is that the price code?”

She worried terribly about being socially accepted herself, but she never withheld her own approval for the wrong reasons. Poverty or style or lack of education couldn’t stand between her and a new friend. Though she lived in a mostly white society and worried if I went out with a man of the “wrong” race, just as she had once married a man of the “wrong” religion, she always accepted each person as an individual.

“Is he very dark?” she once asked worriedly about a friend. But when she met this very dark person, she only said afterward, “What a kind and nice man!”

My father was the Jewish half of the family, yet it was my mother who taught me to have pride in that tradition. It was she who encouraged me to listen to a radio play about a concentration camp when I was little. “You should know that this can happen,” she said. Yet she did it just enough to teach, never enough to frighten.

It was she who introduced me to books and a respect for them, to poetry that she knew by heart, and to the idea that you could never criticize someone unless you “walked miles in their shoes.”

It was she who sold that Toledo house, the only home she had, with the determination that the money be used to start me in college. She gave both her daughters the encouragement to leave home for four years of independence that she herself had never had.

After her death, my sister and I found a journal she had kept of her one cherished and belated trip to Europe. It was a trip she had described very little when she came home: she always deplored people who talked boringly about their personal travels and showed slides. Nonetheless, she had written a descriptive essay...
called “Grandma Goes to Europe.” She still must have thought of herself as a
writer. Yet she showed this long journal to no one.

I miss her, but perhaps no more in death than I did in life. Dying seems less sad
than having lived too little. But at least we’re now asking questions about all the
Ruths and all our family mysteries.

If her song inspires that, I think she would be the first to say: It was worth the
singing.

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