



Blackbird

A Childhood Lost and Found

Jennifer Lauck



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Blackbird

For Janet Lee Ferrel Lauck and Joseph Edward Lauck



*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly*

—from “Blackbird,” The Beatles (1968)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All thanks begin and end with my husband and best friend, Steve, who said he knew I could tell this story and that he would provide the funds and space and support for as long as I needed.

From this circle, I found my teachers: Hannelore Hahn and all the lovely writers of the International Women's Writing Guild; Suzan Hall and the writers who meet at her table; Diana Abu Jaber and PSU's writing program; Tom Spanbauer and his Dangerous Writers; and, of course, Remedial Readers and you too, Howard Waskow.

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The circle closes with final thanks to the one person who has really made the telling of this story possible: my son, Spencer. Thank you, Spencer, for leading me back to the joy of unconditional love; I thought I'd never know it again.

UCLA MEDICAL AND CLINICS

Death Summary: Lauck, Janet L.

Admitted: August 25, 1971

Expired: September 19, 1971

PRESENT ILLNESS: This is the sixth UCLA Hospital admission for this thirty-three-year-old white female. The patient presented to the Emergency Room with a five-to-seven day history of weakness, fatigue, cough, and left anterior chest pain. Her significant past medical history began in 1961 with removal of a benign tumor; she had a recurrence of the benign tumor in 1968 with another neurosurgical procedure. She then developed paraplegia, neurogenic bladder, and recurrent urinary tract infections. She was hospitalized in February 1970 for an overdose and again in February 1971 because of a duodenal ulcer. She was again hospitalized in May 1971 for septic shock secondary to a left pneumonia and an empyema of the urinary bladder.

HOSPITAL COURSE: This patient was admitted with numerous medical problems: bilateral pneumonia, sepsis, and severe metabolic acidosis and severe hypokalemia. The patient had a catheter placed in the left subclavian vein; by her first night in the hospital she rapidly went into respiratory arrest and was resuscitated with intubation. Chest film taken after resuscitation reveals a large left-sided pneumothorax. A left-sided chest tube was placed with reexpansion of the lung. The patient seemed to be improving; however, she rapidly deteriorated pulmonary-wise with the development of what was felt to be the adult respiratory distress syndrome. The patient had a tracheostomy performed and seemed to improve on this regimen, however continued to have difficulty with the left-sided pneumothorax, with repeated malfunction and replacement of chest tubes. The patient died suddenly in the morning on 9/19/71. The immediate cause of death was felt to be respiratory arrest; however, arrhythmia could not be ruled out.

*Edited Dictation and Transcription,
Resident of Medicine, UCLA Hospital*

part one

Carson City, Nevada

1969



he only house I'll ever call home is the one on Mary Street.

Mary Street is in Carson City, Nevada, and Carson City is flat valley to soft hills. Past the hills are the Sierra Nevada Mountains. When you look up, the sky is deep blue, forever blue, and there are almost never any clouds up there. The clouds that do come gather on top of the Sierras and they look like wadded-up tissue paper. Every now and then, a piece of cloud will tear away and float across the forever-blue sky.

There's one main street right down the middle of the city and it's called Carson Street. The state capital building is on Carson Street and the dome of the capital is painted silver since Nevada is the silver state. Over the silver dome, two flags kick the wind, one blue for Nevada, one red, white, and blue for America.

The Golden Nugget is on Carson Street too, but everyone just calls it the Nugget.

From the Nugget, you go a couple blocks and you can see the house where Auntie Carol and Uncle Bob live with the pack of my wild cousins. There's Steven, Bobbie Lou, Andy, Mark, Tracy, and Faith Ann. Auntie Carol is Daddy's oldest sister, and the only time I go to that house is for holidays or if Momma has to see a special doctor.

West of Auntie Carol's house, you go Iris Street, Angus Street, and then it's Mary Street and our house is the one with the white fence and the big willow tree.

When you come in the front door, there's three ways you can go. Straight ahead is the living room, right is the kitchen, and left is a long hallway to bedrooms and bathrooms. The first bedroom is B.J.'s, then it's the bathroom, and then it's my room. Momma and Daddy's room is at the end of the hall, and out their window you can see the big willow tree. If the sun is just right, the shadow of the tree comes into their room and lies right over the middle of the California King. Momma says the bed is called that because it's not as wide as a regular king, and just a little longer, like the state.

Next to the California King is a pair of silver crutches, the kind you adjust tall or short by pushing in a little silver bead. Momma can stand up without the crutches and can even take a couple of steps. She still has to use the crutches when she walks to the bathroom or when she goes to any other part of our house.

There was a time when Momma walked just like everyone else, when she was only in bed at night, when she drove her car and talked on the telephone and had lots of ladies over for card games and coffee and thick slices of banana nut bread. I remember when Momma was strong enough to lift me off my feet, toss me in the air, and catch me again.

There's never been a time when I haven't been home with Momma. Daddy works, B.J. goes to school, and it's just Momma and me all day, everyday.

In the morning, I sit outside her door and listen.

That's the rule.

Moshe and Diana wait too. Moshe is one of those fast-moving crazy cats. Diana is all liquid and wait. I pet Diana's soft, sand-colored tummy and lay my head against the wall. Moshe sits apart from us, his brown head held high, blue eyes half closed.

The rule is, no cats, no kids, not until the toilet flushes.

When the toilet finally flushes, Moshe runs to the door, Diana rolls away from my hand, and I get off the floor and walk to the kitchen.

The kitchen is eighteen steps from Momma's bedroom door.

I drag a chair from the kitchen table to the counter, climb up, and lift the coffeepot with both hands so I don't spill. Daddy makes the coffee before he leaves for work and he sets out Momma's special cup so I can fill it. The cup is white and the lightest color of yellow, garlands of tiny purple and red flowers painted around the outside, a line of gold around the inside. The cup and saucer are part of our china kept in the hutch for special occasions. Momma says she likes coffee in special china, says it makes her feel pampered.

Four slices of bread in the toaster and I press the TOAST button down.

I cut off four squares of real butter, put them on the side of the plate.

The toast hops up and I stack the four slices, cut diagonal with a butter knife, and put the toast next to the butter.

Momma says presentation is everything.

I spoon into a jar of marmalade, thin orange slices swimming in the jam, one, two, three spoons next to the toast and

butter. Momma says the marmalade is from Carmel, California, which is her most favorite place in the whole world.

I put the plate on a tray with the cup of coffee in the special china.

One foot in front of the other, I walk extra slow so I don't spill.

When I get to her room, Moshe and Diana are up on the California King, cat bodies around and around and Momma pets with both hands.

"Good morning, Sunshine," Momma says.

The best part of seeing Momma is how she always calls me Sunshine and how there's that look in her dark brown eyes. It's one of those special looks for special people. Momma has that special look for Daddy too, but I mostly see it when she looks at me, and when she looks at me that way, I know I can do just about anything.

After toast and coffee, Momma lets me brush her dark curly hair and it's fine and soft between my fingers.

One time she showed me a photo of Mrs. Kennedy in *Life* magazine. Momma calls her Jackie, says the former First Lady is bursting with style. She wants her hair just like in the magazine and I make the part on the side, brush all her curls into one curl just under her chin.

"Does Mrs. Kennedy have curly hair too?" I say.

"That's a very good question," Momma says. "I don't think so."

Momma holds the mirror and watches me pat the last curl in place.

"Ready?" Momma says.

I cover my eyes and hold my breath.

"Ready," I say.

Momma sprays a cloud of Aqua Net and it's the smell of

hairspray and that sticky mist on my hands and legs. The hairspray makes Moshe shake his head and that's when he jumps off the bed and disappears until tomorrow morning. Diana doesn't care about hairspray, rolls over on her back, and takes up the sunbeam Moshe left behind.

"Getting put together is more than hair," Momma says.

She always says "getting put together," like she fell apart overnight. Momma leans over, opens the top drawer of the nightstand, and she takes out the black and white zip-up cosmetic bag.

Momma dumps her makeup out on her lap and lines the cosmetics in order: compact powder, a tube of rouge, eyeliner, and lipstick. She picks up the powder compact, snaps open the lid, and inside is a soft round pad. Momma rubs the pad over the pressed powder and moves the pad under her eyes, over her nose, up her cheeks, and down her chin. Momma touches her face so light, it's almost like she doesn't touch at all.

"Just a whisper of powder does the trick," Momma says. "Too much and you look like a clown."

Momma taps the pad of powder to my nose and that always makes me laugh. When I laugh, Momma laughs too, and the sound is better than music.

After the powder, Momma taps rouge high on her cheekbones and rubs the color until it's the lightest shade of pink.

"Rouge is like a trick on Mother Nature," Momma says, "it gives that flushed fresh look, even when you're not."

The best part of getting put together is when she does her eyes. Momma has the kind of eyes that are so dark they take in light and make it dark too. Momma says eyes never lie and if you know how to look just right, you can always find the truth in another person by watching their eyes. When I look at Momma, I mostly see that special look like she's happy I'm here. I know there are other things going on inside

that she doesn't say, but I'm still learning how to look just right.

Momma takes the tube of eyeliner, shakes it like a thermometer, and pulls out the long wand. Her hand is steady and she makes a thin line to the outside of one eye and then the other. After the eyeliner is dry, Momma looks me dead on and her eyes are even darker, which doesn't seem possible.

"Nice?" Momma says.

"Perfect," I say.

The finishing touch is lipstick and I always get to put it on. Momma gives me the tube of lipstick and I take a deep breath, hold my hand steady, and fill in her lips with the red color.

When I'm done, I let out my breath again and hand back the tube of lipstick. Momma pulls two tissues from the box on the nightstand, folds the tissues in half and then half again. She presses her mouth around the tissues and some of the red comes off in the shape of her mouth.

"Nice?" Momma says.

"Perfect," I say.

If it's a bad day, Momma puts her cosmetics away and stays in bed.

If it's a good day, she pushes her covers back and puts her feet on the floor.

Today is a good day.

"Can you get my robe, Sunshine?" Momma says.

Momma wears matching nightgowns and robes called peignoir sets and they are all different colors of yellow, pink, and peach. Today it's a creamy yellow lemon meringue and I hold her robe in my hands, the silk like water in my fingers.

One arm, the other arm, twist, shrug, and then Momma stands up so she can pull the robe around her legs. Momma shimmies a little under her own weight and I move close,

help tug the silk so the robe falls right around her feet. She sits down heavy on the end of the bed and takes a deep breath.

When something's wrong, really wrong, my skin knows first. It's a prickly feeling at the back of my neck, over the top of my head, down my forehead, and into my nose. Feels like a nosebleed coming on.

"You okay?" I say.

Momma sits up tall, shoulders straight, chin tucked. She calls sitting that way the posture of a lady.

"I'm fine," she says, "just a little dizzy."

I look past her words and into her truth and I know it's not such a good day after all.

Momma clears her throat and blinks the truth away. She crosses her legs at the knee, adjusts her robe.

"Okay now," Momma says, "take a few steps back and see the big picture."

Momma sits on the edge of the California King and she's silky lemon meringue, Mrs. Kennedy, dark eyes wide open, with that special look she gets when I'm around.

"Good?" Momma says.

"Perfect!"

"Pretty?"

"You're bursting with style."

Momma laughs when I say "bursting with style" and it's music in her room.

There is no special time for taking pills, Momma opens and closes bottles all day. Mostly aspirin, but there are others too, yellow pills, red pills. Her pills are in brown bottles with white lids and there are labels on the front. Momma lifts the bottles and reads the labels, squinting and moving her lips without speaking out loud.

Next to her pills is a water glass and it's my job to keep her glass rinsed and full of fresh water.

Momma opens bottles, tips out pills, closes bottles. She holds all the pills in her palm, makes a fist around them, but I make her open her hand so I can see. I point to the five matching pills, each one with a red *A* in the middle of white.

"What are those pills for?" I say.

"For the pain in my back," she says.

"What kind of pain?"

"An aching kind of pain."

"What's the pain from?"

"The operation."

"The operation for B.J.?" I say, "the one for him being born?"

"The one after," she says, "for the cancer that's not a cancer. You know, I told you before."

"The operation for the tumor as long as my arm?"

"That was operation number two."

"The operation for the tumor that grew back because stupid doctors didn't get it right the first time?"

She smiles when I say "stupid doctors." She holds up her empty hand, holds up three fingers.

"Operation number three," she says, "that's right, honey."

"If the tumor is really all gone now," I say, "how come you have pain?"

She takes a deep breath, lips together, air back out through her nose.

"You always ask the same questions."

"I know," I say, "but how come?"

"The pain is from nerve damage," she says, "from the operation where they took out the tumor but cut some nerves to my legs and my tummy. That's why it's hard to walk. Okay?"