

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A N O V E L
Her



**Mother's
Daughter**

"A PAGE-TURNER WITH HEART."

The New York Times Book Review

**MARILYN
FRENCH**

AUTHOR OF THE WOMEN'S ROOM



Bailantine/Fiction/35362 (Canada \$7.95) U.S. \$5.95

Her Mother's Daughter

A N O V E L

MARILYN
FRENCH

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

FOR MY MOTHER, ISABELLE 1904–1986

Copyright © 1987 by Belles-Lettres, Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Published in the United States of America by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-7061

ISBN 0-345-35362-5

This edition published by arrangement with Summit Books, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First International Edition: June 1988

First U.S. Edition: October 1988

PART 1

**THE CHILDREN
IN THE MILLS**

I

1

MY MOTHER LIVED to be old, although she always said she would die young. All through my childhood she warned me—threatened me?—that because of her defective heart, she would depart early from this vale of tears, whereas my sturdy peasantlike father would live forever, drowning the memory of her fastidiously prepared meals in canned pork and beans, which he would enjoy just as much. When I was fifteen and searching through her bureau drawers one afternoon—hoping, probably, to discover some clue as to how she felt about me—I found a sealed envelope marked “To Be Opened After My Death.” In a rage I tore it open, pulled out a piece of stationery, and found that her Limoges china service for eight (with some missing), her five crystal water goblets (one had broken), and her silver service for eight were to be evenly divided between my sister and me. Still furious, I burned the thing, and as it went up, I panicked and threw it into the toilet. The paper kept burning, so I slammed down the lid, not realizing it was plastic and flammable. When the toilet seat began to burn, I called the fire department. The neighbors clucked their tongues for weeks afterward about young girls sneaking cigarettes when their mothers were away from home. My mother not only didn’t get angry, but she invited me to sit in the backyard with her and smoke. She never wrote another will. I checked.

In any case, her flawed heart did not noticeably shorten her life. She lived long, only she shrank. Or maybe my body blew up over the years, so that when we appeared together in the full-length mirror in the bridal shop dressing room where we were trying on dresses for my daughter's wedding, we looked like creatures from two different species. I can remember when we looked alike, when strangers recognized us as mother and daughter. But now she is tiny and frail for all her middle bulk. Her bones, her very skull, are delicate, smaller than a child's, and the flesh has shriveled on her arms and knit itself so tightly on her small face that her eyes have almost disappeared. Whereas I am tall and broad-shouldered and thick (I don't quite know when that happened) and my face shines like a swollen moon. It wasn't even that we looked like two versions of the same product, one designed for light home use and the other for heavy industry; we looked like two different kinds of creature, like a fat smooth rhino and a wrinkled impala. If you knew that we were mother and daughter, you would suspect some mysterious voodoo process whereby I grew by sucking in all her fluids. Like midges. Midge mothers do not lay eggs, they reproduce young from inside their bodies without benefit of clergy, state, or even any informal male assistance. And the baby develops inside the mother's body, not in a uterus, but in her tissues, and eventually, she fills her whole body, devouring it from the inside. When she is ready to be born, she breaks out of her mother/prison, leaving behind only a chitinous shell. They never have mother-daughter squabbles: midge mothers may sacrifice themselves entirely for their young, but the young never have to hear about it. It is also true, of course, that young so produced begin within two days to reproduce themselves in the same way. They hardly have time to complain about the quality of their lives.

Women of the past had no time for that either, and my mother has little sympathy for those who complain about the quality of life, feeling, I suspect, somewhat like a midge mother. Still, as she stood there in the dressing room mirror, miserable at the poor fit of the dresses she was trying on, wanting to look splendid for Arden's wedding, she swung her head away from the mirror angrily. I looked down on that tiny head and I wanted to caress it, to console her as one does a child, by touching, affection. But my mother is not a woman to be consoled. Her head is stiff on her neck. She gazed in the mirror again, not seeing that her lined face was unblemished by age spots or that her fine soft hair was still blond, and made a foul face at that person in the mirror, and asked me if that was really how she looked.

When my mother was in her heyday—her second heyday, but the only one I saw—that is, when my sister and I were grown and married and she had a little money and leisure, she had her hair cut in a soft short bob called a feather cut, and went to an expensive shop and bought beautiful clothes. I still remember them: she had a red wool suit with a short jacket collared in leopard, and a black wool suit with a high round neck trimmed with mink, a navy blue wool dress with a skirt cut on the bias so it whirled when she walked, and a short white wool knit jacket, double-breasted with gold buttons. She drove an old Cadillac, and announced her address proudly to saleswomen in the good shops. Into these shops she carried a stiff smile, eyebrows that seemed permanently raised, and her fine clothes. These shops were the only place she could obtain the sense of having a public life. Sometimes she and my father went out to dinner, but in those years she was so loudly disapproving of restaurant food that my embarrassed father resisted going. They played bridge once a week with my aunt and uncle, but a formal suit was a bit too warm for such an occasion. She seemed relatively content in those years.

But when she aged, her body changed. She grew shorter, the skin on her arms and legs shriveled, and she expanded in the middle. Her middle got to be four sizes bigger than the rest of her. It was impossible to find fine clothes to fit this alien body, and she began to buy polyester pantsuits with expandable waistbands, or wraparound skirts. One day, during a winter when she and my father were visiting Palm Beach, they walked into a shop on Worth Avenue, and the owner blocked their passage, asking rudely what they wanted. "A golf jacket," my mother blurted angrily. He nodded his head brusquely to the left. "Try down the block. We don't have them." She never got over this incident. "He wouldn't even let us in, Anastasia! How did he know we wouldn't buy anything? What was it, do you think? Was it because we're old? Because my clothes look cheap?" She told this story repeatedly, always ending it with the same questions: she must have forgotten she had asked them before. I was never able to find answers that satisfied her.

It tormented her so that she was still talking about it a decade later, and I got the sense that the incident had plugged into a recurrent nightmare. As if you suddenly found yourself in real life peeing in a toilet exposed to a room full of people, or saw your hair falling out in clumps, or whatever your recurrent nightmare is. The storekeeper had treated her with contempt. It occurred to me that she had arranged her life so that she would

never be exposed to contempt. Certainly none of her family would think of treating her contemptuously. Her husband treats her like his sovereign; sometimes he even refers to her as "my lady." And my sister and I and our children also defer to her as if she were royalty. We placate her, fuss over her, wait on her. When we speak, we direct our faces toward her and enunciate very distinctly, so she can read our lips as we speak. When we cook for her, we avoid oil, onions, garlic, most spices. She is helped, by someone, in and out of cars, up and down stairs, and even through doorways, because she is feeble, arthritic, and subject to the dizziness caused by inner-ear disease. My daughter's husband, meeting her for the first time, found her a grande dame. I was surprised to hear him say that. I had never seen my mother that way.

Not at all. We didn't defer because we feared her, because she held power that could strip us of our estates or rank, or heap them on us if we pleased her. We did it because . . . we always had. Because Daddy did. Because she seemed to need us to do it. It didn't seem much to give her, making her the center, deferring. Because somehow we understood that she had suffered more than anyone, more than any of us, and that in some sense we were responsible for her suffering. When I was a child I could not understand in what way it was my fault that Jesus had died, or how it was he died for me. I felt rather indignant about the whole thing: *I* certainly hadn't wanted him to die, and I failed to see how his doing so had in any way helped me. But I had no trouble whatever understanding that my mother had in some sense died for me, that she was a kind of midge mother whose effort had been so extraordinary that she had saved us, my sister and me, from being midge mothers in our turn. Because we are not midge mothers, we had vitality and pleasure and strength even after we had children. So we laid it at her feet, our vitality and strength, and tried to give her pleasure too. That was difficult though, and became increasingly so as she aged. She would watch our gyrations, our efforts to serve and please, like a bored dying aristocrat who knows that her servants are well-paid to please her. There was a cold distance in her eye, and sometimes a sneer of contempt upon her lips or a mocking edge in her voice. Visitors would see my father offer her tea and shawls, me offer scotch and sympathy, my sister, with an edge of hysteria in her voice, trying to make her laugh by recounting a recent family mishap, and they would perceive a family pattern, and try to fit in, as was appropriate. I would watch her watching them, and I knew what she was thinking: Nothing, nothing you do can console me for the

loss of my life. I heard it, I saw it, I understood. For only I knew her heart.

2

I AM TALKING about my mother in the past tense as if she were dead, but she isn't. Her walk is as tottering as an infant's and her breathing sounds like the cooing of pigeons; she is nearly blind and nearly deaf even with her hearing aid; and she is afraid to cross a street or climb a staircase because of her continual dizziness. But her mind is sharp and she looks marvelous and people praise her looks. She smiles like a knife edge, but they do not recognize that: she is an old lady, and all old ladies are sweet.

When we are alone, she grimaces and mocks them: "Oh, the sweet old lady! That's what they think!" Then falls silent, sips her scotch and holds the liquid in her mouth a long time before she swallows it. When she was still smoking, she'd light another forbidden delight. "I don't *feel* old," she'd protest. She'd sit up suddenly, as if energy had returned to her limbs, and announce, "I feel eighteen. Twelve!" Nine, I would think. You feel nine.

My mother feels nine; I feel older than she. She has not noticed that I have aged. She seems to expect me to look as I did at thirty, slim and untouched by lines or grey hair, and she gazes at my increased girth critically, and wonders why my hair is so dull. She doesn't realize that I have as many pairs of eyeglasses as she and that my hearing is not as good as it was. "You always had wonderful hearing, Anastasia," she says if I mention the subject. Better than hers, is what she means. And good legs. These were her two wishes for her first daughter, the spells she wrought to undo her own baleful influence—bad hearing and thick legs. I do not know if she thought she had any gift to offer me. I suspect not. She once said the only talent she had was for dancing. She was a good ballroom dancer. I was not.

Sometimes I think I will die before she does. I don't want to. It might cause her pain. For myself, I don't care. I am living out years I would not have been granted had I been born a hundred or two hundred years ago. I am nearly fifty, an age not many women reached then. And I have bad habits. I smoke too much and drink too much and also I travel frequently by air. I often stay up late at night, I have to fight for sleep when the sounds of morning begin: car doors slamming, motors fighting to wake up in the cold winter stillness, the whine and grind of garbage trucks, the fucking birds. I like to spend the night out of bed,

walking through the streets of foreign cities, arms linked with those of newfound friends, all of us uproarious, singing, laughing, making jokes about being arrested (in certain cities, anyway, like Zurich), going from pub to pub to after-hours clubs, ending in my hotel room (sneaked in past the desk clerk in Zurich, that proper city) where there is always a bottle, four or five of us sitting around on the beds, smoking, drinking, laughing, singing until dawn has given way to morning. My newfound friends and I swear love and fellowship which, next day, I will remember and they will forget. Still, if I meet those friends in two or three years, they will remember me but I will not recall their names, and perhaps not even their faces. The night we spent together will have gathered itself with the other soaring nights of my past, each of which stands discrete and distinct in my catalog of ecstatic moments, yet from all of which the faces have disappeared.

Because I always have to come home again. Who knows what those faces might have turned into had I stayed? I don't, on the whole, stay with faces. I seek moods. The faces that are constants in my life—well, I don't care to replace or repeat them. My children, with all their unending problems. My parents, with theirs. The only thing that endures is that line, blood, the people who can't be changed, exchanged, substituted for. Not that I want to change them, not that there's anything wrong with my life. Quite the contrary. My life is exactly as I want it, as I would have wanted it. I have independence, and—finally—enough money so that I don't have to worry daily about making ends meet. I have a career I love and some success in it. I get to travel all over the world, something I wanted to do from the time I was very young. I have everything anyone could want.

Except last time I was home, I went out to Long Island as I always do to visit my parents at the lake. They were sitting together in the glassed-in porch, on a wrought-iron sofa, gazing out at the lake and the birds, and each of them had an arm laid on top of the sofa cushions toward each other. And suddenly, gently, hardly noticeably, my mother's hand opened and surrounded my father's wrist. She reached toward him. She touched him. And my eyes filled with tears and I thought—the way odd thoughts just suddenly light up in your mind—I thought: oh, if only you'd done that years ago! It would have made all the difference!

Later, of course, I saw her gesture as a braceleting, a manaccling of his wrist, this man on whom she so depended. Later, too, I wondered at my teariness: I never cry, never. At least, I never did. Because since then I find myself bursting into tears at anything at all—pictures of famished children on the television

news, stories in the papers of lost children, reunited families, young fathers dead on duty—in fires, in police work, in the military. A television play about the incarceration of an old grandmother in a nursing home reduced me to a sniveling pulp, grabbing tissues by the handful from the box I finally put beside me.

Of course my strange emotional state does not interfere with my work. Many days I get up early in the morning and go out with my camera to photograph; many nights I work in the dark-room into the morning. I prepare diligently for my journeys, reading everything recent so that I will have some idea of how to approach the new subject. Usually I look for what no one else has found interesting. I don't like to add to a line of thought already developed, like a footnote to someone else's chapter. This isn't because I am egotistic, although I may be. It's because I figure that the lines of thought that are already developed are those that are acceptable, and if you want to change things, you have to look for what is illegitimate—in subject or in approach. This tendency has caused me great difficulty in my life: it is always easier, whatever your line of work, to fall in line behind those who have gone before, and add your little tot, than to say the hell with what's gone before, what about what hasn't? Such an attitude can keep you poor.

But I never felt I had a choice about this. I couldn't bear to look at anything as it presented itself to be seen. I didn't even really see the damned rocks but only what lay under them. And this is because of my mother, I know that even if I don't quite understand why or how. All those hours I spent at her feet. "Tell me about when you were little, Mommy. What was your mommy like? What was your daddy like?" I never stopped asking, not even when I was fifty. As if under the rocks that were her stories, there was something buried, something hidden, something I could discover if I persisted that would make all the difference.

All what difference?

As I said, my life is fine. Couldn't be better. Oh, well, could be, I suppose, if we lived in a different world. It would be nice, I suppose, to be able to love someone who loved me. I've gone beyond love, romantic love, all that stuff. Need and power struggle, that's all it is, and I have no needs. Truly. That is, I have no needs I cannot satisfy by myself. I don't know any successful woman with love in her life. Men can manage it, but not women. Disproportion in numbers, and besides, men are too threatened by independent women. They can always find one who will build up their ego. And I, we, independent women, can't find a man

who doesn't need continual bolstering. Enough already. I've had enough.

God knows I've known enough men, had enough lovers, friends, and acquaintances that the sex is not unfamiliar to me. I even have a son, rotter that he is. You think I shouldn't say that, shouldn't speak so about my own child. Blame it on my mother, she brought me up to be honest. He's a conniver, what can I say? I didn't raise him to be a conniver, but on the other hand, I can't blame him for being one. Unlike me, he sees surfaces, sees them and understands the power lines so visible to those who look carefully. Why not? you say. Character sets itself gradually, like gel. His gel isn't completely set yet, it can still be melted into another shape, but at the moment he does not make me proud, even if he's fulfilling mothers' dreams and going to medical school. I feel like my own mother when nice smiling ladies hear what my son is doing and turn on me in a gush of praise: "Oh how wonderful! You must be so proud!" I want to bite their lips right off their mouths so that when they smile in the future they'll look like the sharks I feel they are. And to tell the truth, my daughters aren't any better. Everything seemed okay until they grew up. Now, everything seems wrong.

So when I'm not bursting into tears at the sight of a motherless child, a childless mother, or a dead father, I'm snapping around the house like a wet towel. I can't seem to find a quiet heart, except when I travel, and nowadays I don't get commissions that often. I can't even get any sympathy. Last time I visited my mother, I came to feel very low as we sat around talking, and I told her about a fight I'd had with Arden. She'd been awful for a long time, hanging around the house smoking, glaring at me; playing the piano at its loudest, banging her way through every book of music in the house without bothering to correct the mistakes in any one piece; and refusing to help clean up, even to clean her own room. Not that the house ever really looks cleaned up even when it is, but with Arden around, it was beginning to look like a bus terminal. Then one night she opened the door to my developing closet even though the red light was signaling I was working inside and needed dark—something she's known since she was an infant. She wanted the car keys, and for some reason I'd taken my handbag inside with me. But I screamed. She'd completely ruined a dozen negatives I couldn't replace. I was a wild woman, I shouted, I yelled, I tore my own hair. She shrugged. "I needed the car keys. I couldn't wait for hours until you came out." She was sullen, surly, and I felt as if all the blood

in my body had mounted to my head, and I slapped her, hard, across the mouth.

That was unusual enough, since I was never given to physical punishment, but she took it as a declaration of war. She slapped me back, I slapped her, we hauled into each other, twisting arms, socking each other, slapping. I was quickly reduced to pinching and twisting, because my daughter, although shorter and lighter than I, had studied karate, and had twenty-five years less smoking to slow her down. She got me pinned: I couldn't move: she shoved me backward, onto the arm of a stuffed chair.

"I could kill you now!" she hissed.

"Go ahead!" I yelled. "It would be a blessed release from living with you!"

She let me go then, grabbed my bag and took the car keys, and stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

This was the story I told my parents, and as I finished, my mother began to cry. I was astonished.

"Why are you crying?"

My father looked at me as if I were stupid. "She feels bad for you, Ana. Of course she'd cry."

Nonsense, I thought. She's never cried for me in her life. I turned to my mother, and asked again, severely, "Why are you crying?"

She was sobbing now. "Oh, I wish I could have talked to *my* mother like that! I never talked to her, I never told her how I felt, I never knew how she felt, and now it's too late!"

Well, that rocked me. Because in all the years I'd listened to my mother's tales, there had been these two, my mother and her mother, two throbbing figures in a landscape of concrete, suffering suffering, separately yet linked, like wounded animals wandering through miles of silent tree trunks oblivious to their pain. Like a woman I saw once, walking down the street in Hempstead with a man on one side of her and a woman on the other, holding her arms. She was youngish—in her early thirties, and pretty, a little plump—but there was something in her face that made my heart tremble for her. . . . No one else seemed to notice anything odd, people walked past her, around her, and did not glance twice at her. But that night I saw her picture in the newspaper: she was the only survivor of a fire that had killed her husband and her four children.

That was my image of them, these two women, mommy and grandma. And I had never had any inkling that anything lay in the space between them except their shared knowledge of grief. It was blind of me, of course, it simply makes sense that there had

to be more. All my life I had rejected prettied pictures of life, slamming shut the saccharine children's books I was given at school, pulling wry faces in movie houses, questioning angrily people's sweetened explanations for things. I was an offensive child, and perhaps am an offensive adult, responding indignantly to anything that seems facile, designed to conceal, smooth over, sweeten, a reality I know to be grim and terrible. I would insult my mother's friends, announcing in outrage, "I don't believe that!" or making faces at their gushing, swooping voices as they insisted that people were good and life was nice. Or the reverse.

Yet here I had all these years simply accepted as truth my mother's relation to her mother as one of total, unswerving love and devotion. Certainly, that was all I had ever heard or seen. My mother said her mother was a saint, and a saint was what I saw too. Quiet, sad, Grandma would sit in a small corner of the couch when she visited and open her arms to me, and I'd sit beside her and she'd take my hands in hers—so soft, as if the wrinkles had changed the texture of the fabric of her skin—and smile with love, saying, "My Anastasia, my little Anastasia." She and my mother would talk together in the kitchen in Polish, and my grandmother would laugh and nod her head. No anger ever came out of her voice or showed on her face. I can't imagine her angry. She would just cry when her grandson, my cousin, kicked her when she tried to put him to bed. She never raised her voice. Once, when she was visiting us, she and my mother walked the two miles to the German pork butcher for chops for dinner, and the butcher's wife said something to her husband in German. When they left the shop, my grandmother giggled: she was pleased at being able to understand their language without their knowing. What the woman had said was "What a gentle face that woman has!" She was talking about my grandmother.

And whenever my mother spoke of her late at night, her voice would grow foggy and her eyes teary: "My mother was a saint." Then her voice would thicken: "Poor Momma." And then she'd go off toward one part of it, some part of it, the incredibly cruel man, the submissive woman, the brutalized children; or the poverty or the ignorance. All of it hurt her, my mother, equally, although when she came to the ignorance, her voice grew an edge, a bitterness that sometimes seemed almost ready to spill over onto her mother. But if I probed that, she would shrug: "What could she do? She knew nothing." When she spoke of the other things, she spoke like a child: her voice was high and thin and her sentences simple. And through it all, the same shrug, the same sigh: "I was such a stupid kid. I didn't know anything."

This is a part of my mother no one but me has seen. I know her as the nine-year-old she had been and in some way remains. My father would not want to listen to such grief; he doesn't like problems unless they are solvable mechanically, like a broken clock or a stuck window. These he enjoys, and brings considerable ingenuity to solving. Nor does my sister enjoy harping on past sorrows. She likes to pull herself up and address the present, finding in present action the only solution to past loss. And I am like her in that—at least, I always used to be, or anyway, I thought I was. Yet what have I been doing all these years, sitting with Mother in the dimly lighted room as the clock hand moves silently toward four, smoke clouding the air? (My father, who in the days when he worked had to get up early in the morning, was forced to go to bed by one at the latest, had gone sighing and grumbling upstairs. At two or so, he would get up noisily and go to the bathroom for a heavy towel, which he would insert in the crack between his bedroom door and the floor to keep the odor of cigarette smoke from rising into his sleep—his small protest and reproach to us.) My mother and I agree to have just one more drink, and I get them, although sometimes at that hour (this was long ago), my mother would insist on getting up herself and making our drinks. But I would always follow her out to the kitchen while she did it, and carry my own back to the little room she called the porch where we would sit and talk. What have I been doing, listening over and over, asking over and over, obsessed with something, unsure what? Listening, putting myself into her, becoming her, becoming my grandmother, losing myself, as if I could once and finally lose myself inside my mother, and in the process give her the strength and hope she needs. Return the liquids I drained from her, become a midge mother in return, mothering my own mother.

And she would never tell these things to anyone else. Not even her sister, who “doesn't know, she wasn't there, she didn't see what I saw, she doesn't remember, she thinks Poppa was wonderful, she doesn't want to hear anything else.” No, only I know this part of my mother, but it is her deepest part, the truest, the core. So when other people say things about her, I just look at them. I don't know what they are talking about.

3

AND OTHER PEOPLE do say things about her. She is a difficult woman. She is deaf or nearly deaf, and angry about that: she gets

irritated with people who speak softly, and grimaces and turns her head away disdainfully. People who don't understand what is happening think she is bored and rude. It is risky to give her a gift. She receives gifts, as well as certain acts designed to please, as challenges to which she is more than equal: she will in some way make sure the giver knows they have not managed to please her.

She is worst of all in restaurants, especially if one of us, my sister or I, have taken her. The place is invariably too noisy: with her hearing aid on, she cannot filter sounds, and the scrape of fork on plate, or chair on floor, are as importunate as the sounds of voices on her receiver. Usually, the place is too cold as well. Beyond that, the food is never good. My sister strains her budget to take Mother to dinner for her birthday, and is—as always—gay and brittle over the clams casino, the mushroom soup, the medaillions de veau. “Isn’t this great?” she exhorts Mother. “Isn’t it delicious?” Mother’s mouth twists into a stiff smile. “Very good,” she obviously lies.

Later, to me, she almost spits her disgust: the clams were nothing but bread crumbs in margarine, the soup flour and water, the veal frozen. Later, my sister will be snapping at her children—why is the house such a mess, why can’t they ever pick up their shoes, throw away their soda cans, empty their ashtrays. Glancing at each other, the children will ask how dinner was. “Great, really terrific!” Later, her husband will tell her she is chewing on the inside of her cheek. “Your mother upset you,” he will suggest, laying a kind hand on her back. Joy will flare up. “She didn’t! It was a great dinner! If she didn’t like it, that’s her problem, I could care less! I can’t worry about it. I could care less! I could really care less!”

Sometimes my mother whines, sometimes she sulks. She is enraged if my father is not at her side to help her at all times, but often when he puts his hand gently under her elbow to help her over a threshold, she will snatch her arm away and snap at him: “I’m all right, Ed!” as if he were coercing her into helplessness. She turns her cheek to the kiss he confers upon her before every meal, just after he has helped her into her chair. Often, she sits alone, idle and silent, on the porch of their house, a broad glassed-in room overlooking the lake. But she no longer cries, and she no longer locks herself for days in a darkened room claiming sinus headache, the way she did when I was a teenager.

For many years, she granted me a small power, one that bound me to her irrevocably: when I came to visit her, she would rouse herself, she would talk and laugh and sometimes even for-