

Excerpts from “My Mother and Me and Betty Grable “ essay from In The Fullness of Time: 32 Women on Life After 50 (Atria,Simon&Schuster 2010)

My Mother and Me and Betty Grable

“Mashed potatoes!” My mother sits straight up in bed in the intensive care unit in New York hospital on yet another of her emergency admissions for heart disease. Her head is wrapped in a printed scarf, her lipstick is a fuchsia slash, her eyes are as wild and roving as all the other times she’s been in this manic state.

“I am dying here, and they bring me mashed potatoes!” She stabs at the air with her index finger and gestures for me to take my seat. She is in the middle of her aria.

How this Mad Hatter in a Carmen Miranda turban can be holding court in the intensive care unit speaks for her sheer force. She’s got the staff jumping. Nurses adjust her tubes, shaking their head in disbelief, muttering objections to being ordered around. Diabetes and heart disease have joined with manic depression to complete the circle of illness that has held her hostage from my earliest memories.

None of the doctors can figure out what keeps her alive. As her caretaker for thirty years, I know her better and know she still has the will to jump into action, if only with her voice which rasps and growls, as words are swallowed and spit out again. The anti-psychotic drug Thorazine has destroyed her once lovely singing voice.

Her thoughts leap, dipping and diving as the familiar manic soliloquy takes over,
“Middle of the movie...mad money...that salesman your father...Teddy’s daughter!
...” She sneers at the thought of my father and goes on to me, “You, you Sarah Lawrence

girl, you!the doorman, the doorman...sailing on the *Liberte'* ...those twerps... wrapped in wildflowers...I was.”

Settled back against the pillows, she glares at me, “They gave me the wrong baby!” she bellows, her eyes narrowing, aiming for the bull’s eye, instinctively knowing what will hurt me the most. But probably not knowing she’s identified the pain of our long, entangled story; of my attachment and revulsion. My obstinate wish for reunion that keeps me in her thrall.

When she summons one of the nurses, I slip out of the room. She and I know I will be back. I will be in the grip of her seductive power until the end, until that moment when I am finally off duty, when there is nothing more I can fix for her, when I can ask myself, how did this woman get so many chances with me?

Now that she was gone, my mother was manageable. Without her endless drama, in the raw stillness of an Upstate winter, I could go back. ...

Although I am four, my mother and I sometimes pretend I am still a baby so she can sing her rendition of Brahms’ lullaby. I lie on my stomach in the dark and feel her hand lightly patting my back as she sings in her perfectly pitched voice. This is not the crazy voice that can snarl or rise in gasps of rage, this is the soft tone of another woman, another mother. As she pats my back in tentative irregular beats, she also touches my hair, so lightly that I can’t be sure it’s happening, but when I am grown and even middle aged, a light touch on the back of my head, ruffling my hair, can bring me to tears.

When she leaves the door ajar, so I can see the hall light, I pretend to be asleep so that she will know she has taken me there with her singing. I don't expect the snarling mother to reappear because I still believe the scary woman is accidental and the real one, the soft mother, will be there in the morning....

The Loews movie theater is our Egyptian palace of burnished brass, right there on Sheridan Square. When my mother lets me play hooky on a school day and we sit together on red velvet in the darkness, we are in perfect collaboration; conspirators against the regular world of homework and housework. Every time we are at the movie together, there is the exquisite pleasure of the lights dimming, the crackle of cellophane as I open the chewy jelly box of Dots. This moment of transport, out of this world, into the movie. Me and my mom. And Betty Grable....

In the years that followed my mother's death . . . [m]y relationship with my mother keeps getting better and better. I can approach her now and take from the family album what I need. I can even return to the mischievous little girl who runs wildly around the garden as her mother holds out a sweater, insisting on protection from the evening chill. I am shrieking with glee as I skip just ahead of her, proud of my speed, and happy to be fooling around with my mom.