

## Of cameos and female impotence

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By Laura Bernell

**M**y mother used to be beautiful, like a cameo carved in ivory and, at the same time, like a dark-eyed MGM movie star from the 1930s and 1940s - waves of lush dark hair lapping at fine, opalescent cheekbones. She schooled me intimately in female impotence, teaching me the inflections of its language, the insidiousness of its power. She conducted her best lessons on impotence in the bathroom.

From the far end of the hallway, I'd watch her, framed by the bathroom doorway, bent over in despair on the closed toilet seat, head lowered between her knees. She'd sit up and look toward me, mascara smudged beneath dark eyes, curls of black hair pasted by tears to her temples - a cameo crying.

She lured me down the hallway, through the doorway, into her privacy. Mistaking my egocentricity for omnipotence. as a child is apt to do, I always placed a tender hand upon her drooping shoulders.

"Don't cry, Mommy. Please don't cry." But the words stayed inside my head. She moaned, then glanced out the doorway, anticipating my father's reappearance in the hall. But his storm had passed. She could come out now, moonlight through clouds, but still she sat, bowed in despondency despite my arms around her.

Certain of my powers to console, I stood for a very long time beside her, she sitting on the closed toilet seat, me standing, puny, beside her. My slight arms encircled her, and every muted sob that shook her shoulders passed like jolts of electricity through my arms and into my chest. I felt her tears and phlegm drip onto my wrist; I tasted her hair in my mouth but resisted the urge to move my hand and scratch the itch of it above my lip for fear that, if I moved, she would collapse altogether, and I with her. While I believed I had the power to hold her together, I did not have the will to release myself from her.

Eventually she rose, astonishingly tall. She'd let my arms slip from around her and leave them flopping, like a Raggedy Ann doll's, at my sides while she walked to the sink and studied herself in the mirror, rinsed her face, and blew her nose. Then she retreated into her bedroom,

closing the door and leaving me behind it to hold her pain in my gut like a rock.

"Come out!" I wanted to scream through the closed door. Come out and wrap your mother's arms around this child!" But the screams were trapped inside of me, tearing at my throat, held back by a child's mandate to believe in her mother. Mute, I raised my fists. They sliced air, and I evaporated, until next time, into the walls.

And there would be a next time. Over the years, this scene repeated itself again and again in our home. Yet my mother would not remove herself from the apparent cause of her anguish. She remained in my father's house and, for another 40 years, would lie in his bed, cook his meals, set his table, endure his insults, await his next assault, and leave the bathroom door open when she sat, bent over, on the toilet seat crying.

Long after I left my father's house, I would carry my mother's pain, believing we were both powerless against it and fearing that I would pass our impotence on to my children, and they to theirs. Then my father died.

After my father's death, my mother found new tormentors to be protected from, anxieties to bend her over, sorrows rows to set her moaning. Others tried to reassure her and, to my enlightenment, others failed. It is hard for my mother to unbend herself after so long. She is stiff. She doesn't trust her body's ability to support her erect. While she struggles out of her contortions, I remove myself from her enticements. With a wider view than from the end of the hallway into the bathroom, I have continued my female education.

Other mentors have tested my powers to console: a woman whose husband left her, a rape victim, a woman whose child died. I have felt their tears dampen my hair and wiped their tears from my cheeks. I've spoken, and their sobs softened. Even the woman whose child died stopped crying, if only for a little while, after weeping hard, held in my arms. I can comfort those who let me.

Though the weight of single parenting has at times bent me over in despair, there is no tyranny between us. My children have seen me cry, and they have seen me stop crying after they released their slight but comforting arms from around me and told me they love me and that I look ugly crying. And I have play-spanked them for calling their mother ugly and booted them out the door, roughhousing and laughing.

Over recent years, I have practiced resisting my mothers impotence. When near enough to hear her moan, I have offered to do the dishes; I

have offered her my chair or a pillow for hers. If she accepted none of these, I eventually learned to walk away, and each time I did so her moans and my remorse dissipated a little.

I am the daughter of a woman who, during her 50 years of marriage, had only one route to power: her impotence. Denied access to exterior conduits of control she took tortuous, interior routes, bending herself into contortions to turn impotence into power. I used to complain of the behavior of my mother variously: crazy-making, chronically victimized and weak. But I have come to believe that much of the seemingly irrational and indisputably exasperating behavior was the pathetic, valiant struggle of my mother to exert influence over something, to fend off subjugation somehow.

Now my mother's lush black hair has thinned into white, tenuous waves. And sometimes I witness something wonderful: while her own errant cells have turned against and may usurp her, she struggles valiantly on behalf of herself. While her body weakens and withers and bends, her will strengthens and straightens. She executes more direct gestures of control on her domain. She states her pain clearly. If acknowledged, she sighs resolutely. She asks for gingerroot tea when she is cold and mint tea when she has an upset stomach. She drinks it and then reports feeling less cold or more settled within. When I bring books for her to read, she declines those about cancer and asks for a "good mystery" instead. A waste of time, I say. She smiles, and wisps of her hair play upon fine, opalescent cheekbones.

My mother has decided to undergo radiation treatment. Despite the nausea and fatigue it induces, she monitors her eating to maintain her weight. She will decide whether or not to stay in the house where once she sat bent over, disconsolate, on the toilet seat. For now, she remains resolute about staying. But if confined to a hospital room or a hospice, she will decide whether to have roses in the vase beside her bed or irises or no flowers at all. I do not impede her from making things happen in her dominion, however diminished it may be. Nor does she impede me from the same. The power of maternal impotence has been vanquished.

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