A Mother Remembered

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My mother died of cancer when I was twelve, so my children never knew their maternal grandmother, but I have always tried to tell them something about the woman who made my childhood a series of wonderful, magical experiences. On long rides or on rainy days one of their favorite pastimes is hearing stories about my mother, even though they know them as well as I do, and often correct me. It’s constantly, “Mom, tell us about the time when . . . . .” or “Did Grandma ever . . . . . ?” Sometimes I get exasperated, but I’m really grateful for the opportunities I have had to tell them something of the loving, vibrant personality that was my Mom.

One of my earliest memories is of my first doll. I was the first daughter, but my mother, who adored dolls herself, resisted the temptation that mothers usually can’t. Instead of the lovely but fragile bride, she bought me a cloth-stuffed, rubber-armed, cuddly baby doll. There was only one drawback to this otherwise perfect playmate: she had a china head.

Fortunately, Baby survived until well into her sixth year before she had her fatal accident, when my younger sister sat on her head. (Still tell her to this day that she did it on purpose.) But while I had her, I literally loved the stuffings out of that doll. She was my comrade in mischief, my courage in timidity, and my consolation in punishment. My mother took this attachment seriously, and Baby was a respected member of the family, at the dinner table, on a visit to our grandmother’s, or to the doctor’s office, no matter how disreputable she looked. This treatment of my cherished doll has had a profound effect on my attitude toward my children’s possessions. For years, their blankets and teddy bears have followed us everywhere. I know that the comforts they provide far outweigh any embarrassments they cause.

My mother was an old-fashioned, comfortable figure of a woman, not one of the store-window mannequins that our generation strives to emulate. I never thought she was fat. She was soft and warm, and the most beautiful woman in the world to me. Cuddled on her lap with her arms around me, I knew perfect contentment, rivaled only by the feeling of cuddling my own children; and I sing them to sleep with the same soothing lullabies that she crooned to me.

Mom loved Halloween, and would drag us from store to store until we finally found the biggest, most perfectly shaped pumpkin available. Then on Halloween night, she would dress herself up like a hob and take us trick or treating.

We always wanted pretty costumes, and would scoff when she donned my grandfather’s pants, flannel shirt, and old fishing hat and boots. We roared with laughter when she put burnt cork on her face, and stuffed the pants with pillows, and walked out the door with a handkerchief tied on to a stick. One year she took us to the department store where my grandmother worked part-time, to show her how we looked. She was the hit of the evening. The clerks and customers loved her, and gathered around laughing and calling to others to come and see Mary Murphy, a grown woman, dressed up like a hob.

My grandmother was mortified; but my mother, a natural ham, enjoyed herself immensely. She even went so far as to dance up to my grandmother’s boss, and kiss him on the cheek. I can still see Grandma standing with her hands covering her face, and groaning.

But the climax of the evening was still to come. We had left the store and were heading to our car, when we saw a crowd in the parking lot. Now if there was anything Mom could not resist it was excitement, and figuring that something must be going on, she trotted us right over to find out what was happening. It was a costume contest sponsored by the store. There were about twenty little characters dressed up in bunny, fairy and baseball costumes parading before a judge. And my mother pranced right over to the end of the line and joined them. And won first prize! From that moment on, Rosemary, my sister, and I were confirmed bums.

My parents had been divorced when I was three, and we lived with my grandparents until my mother remarried when I was almost six. During this time my mom worked at a local dime store.

I remember when I started school; that must have been a big year for ribbon companies. I probably didn’t get a lot of new dresses, because I know now that she didn’t have a lot of money to work with. I can still see her kneeling at the bathtub with the scrub board before she finally got a washer, scrubbing her knockers raw washing clothes, and then boiling the starch and starching my dresses so stiff that they’d stand up by themselves. But for every dress I had a matching grosgrain ribbon for my hair. She used to make Hugh bows out of them, and hairpin them to the back of my head with the ends streaming down my back. And every single night, no matter how I protested, she would pin curl my hair so that the next day I would have Shirley Temple ringlets all over my head. I always went to school feeling like a princess out of a fairy tale.

My sister and I went to a Catholic school, and were always teacher’s pets, because Mom used to drive the Sisters when they had to go somewhere, after she got her driver’s license. And once a year, at least, she would make a gigantic pot of spaghetti sauce, which she was locally famous for, and take it to them for their dinner. All the sisters loved her; she treated them with the same good-natured familiarity that characterized her relationships with everyone.

My stepfather was the one who taught her how to drive, for which he never forgave himself. She loved to drive, but only had two speeds: stop and go. The night she was to have her first lesson, Rosemary and I hopped into the car, watching while Dad explained the mechanics of driving. His
car was a 1949 Ford, and naturally had a stick shift. He patiently instructed her step-by-step until the car was started and she had put it into reverse. Then he said the fateful words, “Now, give it a little gas.” She certainly did. We hit the tree across the alley, going about fifteen miles an hour. Did it scare her? She kicked us all out of the car, saying that we made her nervous, and took off by herself, bumping, grinding, and lurching. Dad aged considerably right before our eyes. She came back twenty minutes later, and pulled to a stop in front of us like she had been driving all of her life. But it was a long time before she could wheedle any of us into getting into the car with her again. The day after she died, Dad found a fistful of unpaid speeding tickets in her purse where she had stashed them.

She belonged to the last generation of pinch and dab cooking. I still have some of her egg-stained recipes which she finally, after much coaxing, attempted to write down. Her main problem was that she never made anything with exactly the same amount of ingredients twice, even though whatever she made always tasted perfect. One of our favorite treats was to have a still-warm-from-the-oven roll, dripping with butter, when we came home from school. We could always tell what we were having for dinner while still a half block away from home. And there was always enough for one or two extra people to stay for dinner without the hassle that my children often hear from me.

Her greatest masterpieces of motherhood, as forever remembered by my sister and me, were Christmases. We never visited fewer than four Santas to be sure that he knew exactly what we wanted for Christmas. Once when we had seen a particularly friendly St. Nick, my mother followed us up, sat down on his lap, and proceeded to tell him what she wanted. You could never be certain what she would do next. If we weren't behaving, Santa Claus was sure to call us on the phone to remind us that Christmas was just around the corner. And, every Christmas Eve we heard his big boots stomp through the house and his booming voice shout “Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas” as he left. She never would tell us who she had connived into those thrilling deeds. When my sister and I finally told her that we didn't believe in Santa Claus anymore, it was my mother who cried.

She had the unusual talent for making each new day an exciting, wonderful adventure, not only for her, but for everyone lucky enough to have known her. The day she died, my aunt broke the news gently to us, and added that if she had lived, she would have been an invalid for the rest of her life. Young as we were, Rosemary and I both realized that she wouldn't have wanted that. When my littlest cousin, crying, asked “Won't we ever see Aunt Mary again?” my aunt answered her comfortingly with the words I'll never forget.

“Just look at night for the brightest star in the sky. That will be Aunt Mary, lighting up the darkness. She is an angel with God now, watching over you.”

Those words defined my mother perfectly. She has always been my star, guiding me in the paths of life by her never forgotten example of a kind, generous and loving nature. My fondest wish for my children is that they may cherish in the future some of the wonderful stories about their maternal grandmother, Mary Murphy.