Mama

Guenevere Nelson

JERI AND I WOULD HAVE SPENT ALL DAY, if possible, dancing through the sprinklers in our fruit-colored bathing suits. The asphalt intensified desert heat made the water games a necessity more than a diversion.

But soon, unfortunately, we would hear our names.

"Guenevere? Jerusha Lynn?"

Mama would call us in from the lawn for lunch and stories while she nursed Karissa. The baby's rhythmic suckling and Mama's gentle voice quickly made us close our eyes. That was her plan, but when she stopped, I awoke and protested, "Finish!"

And Mama smiled and told me as part of the daily ritual that I had to learn to read if I wanted to hear the end of Black Beauty *that day.*

Later, as I tried this, Mama would pull me out one of her unfinished afghans and quickly, magically turn ugly brown yarn into ugly brown covers. She fascinated me.

She could do anything. I wanted to be like her, to be her. Mama could do anything, make anything, control anything. With her presence, she taught of goodness and security. I trusted her.

While I am at my linguistics classes in Utah, learning about the origins of sounds, my father and Karissa, who is now fourteen, alternate mornings.

She must be cleaned and dressed and fed and encouraged and sometimes, since mornings are emotionally difficult, she must simply be tolerated. Soon after she awakes, whimpers for help, and is dragged—pulled—into her chair from the bed, the Snoopy electric toothbrush vibrates in her mouth. Her garments must be changed and her clothes carefully, precariously put on her lifted body, avoiding tubes and bruises—especially tubes. Her kinky black hair should be combed as a last tribute to vanity and femininity.

But usually there isn't time. Junior high and engineering firms start early, and breakfast—fed spoon by spoon of Quaker brown sugar oatmeal, or bite by bite of bagel and cream cheese—takes up all of the rest of the morning.

I don't have the energy to think about these mornings and activities so far away. My class work consumes most of my passions and thoughts. The rest of my energies go toward dates, friends, duties, and an often troubled sleep. I cannot afford to think about my family—I cannot help them, I can't do anything to ease their mornings. I squelch sporadic guilt spasms by turning to my typewriter or texts.

As I avoid thought, real thought, Karissa cares for Mother with the same rhythmic movements that were once done on a smaller scale for her. Karissa sees nothing unusual about this life; this is all she has ever known. She cannot remember when Mother wasn't sick.

The Easter after I'd begun kindergarten, Mama made Jeri and I matching dresses, the bodices covered with painfully small cross-stitched roses—mine in purple, and Jeri's in green.

I wore it to school the day Mama brought Karissa to class so that we could learn about babies. One girl, a friend of mine, asked her when my family was going to get another baby.

Two more Christmases, Mama answered smiling.

But instead, before the next Christmas, before the next summer, she started falling. She started crying. She stopped cross-stitching. But I didn't worry much because I was in school and my world was bigger than just my mama.

She had prepared me well for the other parts of the world. In Mrs. Pethel's class, I proudly read better than anyone else in the class, except Kristen H. and Kristen read the impossible word, "fantastic." I spent the rest of the day staring at the colorful word that had defeated me.

Mama had given me good defiant genes, not just good reading skills. When our teacher told us not to smudge our chalk drawings, I furiously smudged my picture of vases. It looked better that way. When I was finished, I had to do another for the teacher to put it on the wall.

Some days later, Mrs. Pethel gathered us for a class announcement.

"Don't eat the paste," she admonished. But how good was her advice? She had been wrong about the chalk drawings. I talked my arts and crafts table into ignoring this advice too.

My transcript had Mrs. Pethel's handwriting, "She is a very happy child."

While I smudged and ate my way through kindergarten, Mama went from doctor to doctor to find out why her legs numbed and her hands shook. Most said that she was crazy, but one diagnosed: Multiple Sclerosis.

I do call home long distance, during the days, to talk to Mother, to hear her say that everything is fine and the neighbor women sometimes visit. Her days linger with monotony, both for her and her caregiver. There are bags and tubes to be emptied and cleaned, requests to fulfill, and nothing of importance to discuss. Since Grandma died a few years ago, the name

of the day help changes often. Sometimes my brother Keith interrupts high school to feed and watch her. When Aunt Ruth can come, she cleans Mother and counsels her on hygiene.

If someone strong arrives, Mother can go out. Anywhere will do, anywhere away from the earthy browns of the house and her afghans will do.

It was exotic, really, having a mama with a disease—better than bringing a baby to show and tell. The celebrity status and the hospitals excited me. New nurses and packaged foods made me excited that I was different. Proudly I pronounced the name of the disease on the playground.

But the disease brought more than adventures. In the second grade, to honor Mother's Day, I wrote a card saying that mine was always tired. She was. She stopped making our clothes and dinners. She yelled more often. She couldn't read anymore. We didn't understand, we didn't help enough, she told us sometimes.

Sometimes, though, she seemed normal, like everyone else's mother. At first she hadn't even needed a wheelchair. Not even a walker. She took care of herself. For years I watched as she dried her hair straight for my father's benefit. At those times, I looked at her face and her wet black curls and wondered why my hair wouldn't darken like hers, why my nose looked so boring next to her exotic Hebrew one set on her olive skin.

She still loved music. Almost every day after school, we would listen to her records—John Denver, Julie Andrews, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. She let us tie her scarves on our heads as we danced to Fiddler on the Roof. She watched the three of us jump and prance with kerchiefs on our heads; my brother, my sister, and myself. Her voice sang over the stereo as she judged our dancing contests.

The dancing contests ceased as the disease withered her nerves. But she continued to work around the house, and I still had some spare time to read books—Harlequins and Steinbeck, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Judy Blume.

There was also enough time to practice sewing and crocheting to fill a hope chest for when I would be a mother and raise eight children when I grew up.

I turned nineteen this year—a little more than half a decade younger than my mother was when she was diagnosed. But I did not have a husband or four kids or even a dog; not even a plant. I did not want to acquire any of the symbols of her life, and I could not stand to hear that I look or move or act as my mother did. I couldn't imagine being her; couldn't imagine my end beginning now. I would not imagine being a burden, an invalid, or being married to one. I could not imagine living her life.

And so, when people likened us, and told me to follow her example, my vase-smudging-self defiantly laughed. Mimic my mother's life? My

career plans didn't include any cross-stitching or housecleaning or diseases.

Attachments were not in my plans either. The word marriage, spoken over a pulpit or by a friend, made me shiver. I could not take that kind of risk. I was fine, just as I was, unattached and free and safe. Hope and idealism would never seduce me.

Just before Christmas break, I told my friend my reservations about commitment and hope. I would never marry him, I told him. He stared at me. Such a statement does not fit the idealism of a religious university. With clarity and confidence he told me, warned me, and encouraged me with a few words. "Don't be afraid to trust. Choose your risks wisely, but make sure that you take them. Don't be afraid, Guenevere."

At the time, I could not see the difference between risks and imprudence. Or the difference between folly and forever. I could never risk being a burden. I did not want to be attached to anyone, to depend on anyone. Nothing was sure, I knew with a surety.

I tried to forget my friend's words, studied for finals and went home for Christmas break—feeling guilty and wishing that I could not feel.

I filled my hope chest as Mama graduated to walkers and then a temporary (we hoped) used wheelchair that we had found at a yard sale for fifty dollars. I moved into junior high and Mutual.

I didn't know how to move right in my dresses, or what dresses to pick out. I wasn't sure if I should even wear dresses.

But as we both aged, Mama's responses grew less usable. My life became more complicated as her world became more confined and simple. Grandma, her mother, visited us often and tried to work between us and involve my mother and me in each other's worlds.

Grandma would try this as she drove me to the mall to shop.

"Your mother really loves you, you know."

"Uh," I responded. I couldn't tell her about the tall blonde girl in my p.e. class who had beaten me up the day before. I had set myself up as her victim by declaring my religion. The story would make no sense in any of their worlds, and barely any in mine. School had become a strange and terrifying social order with no rules and no security.

Such problems, I knew, were life. My mother's illness was a logical extension of my unpredictable outside confusion.

I transferred junior highs.

My new school, ethnically richer and drug saturated, tempted me into its crowd for about five minutes. I withdrew into the art and academic departments. I drew pictures during lunch and wrote poems about kisses that I had only read about. A girl in my math class got pregnant by her Mafioso boyfriend. I painted and devoured

Harlequins and Nancy Drews and took care of home as much as I could. I never thought about it, though. I painted my pastel pictures.

Grandma would bring Mother to my art shows and debate tournaments. Successfully, I moved to high school. I sold my paintings. I won my tournaments. Of course I made the honor rolls. Mother was pleased, but beyond this she couldn't say much about my activities.

Mother needed more help at home, and I never thought her condition unusual anymore. After school, while I fixed dinner, I obeyed her requests without speaking. She listened to religious and motivational tapes—never music anymore. Her realm and mine were so different, but I silently tried to make hers physically easier. But I couldn't respect her. In that way I was like any other teenager. I had to assume that she made herself weaker; how could I live in a world where this had just happened? One day, she was my mama and she had created happiness for us all. A few years later, my mother was crippled in every way imaginable.

How could it happen?

But I really didn't think much about it—just silently resented as I methodically wheeled her chair.

Grandma helped wheel too, and she wheeled it with optimistic chatter, trying to bond us and save us. Her image blurs through all my memories until the year she died. It was one of my last years of high school, I don't recall which one. I do remember her funeral— Grandma in a box, my entire family crying, and me in a bright purple dress, Seventeen *magazine in my hands. Grandma was dead, and I wanted the skirt on the cover of the magazine.*

At home this Christmas I tried not to remember as I just tried to help. For two weeks I could pay my penance for absence by doing everyone's work. I efficiently planned to clean the house, help the family, ease the work of my younger sister, and take over the care of Mother.

I was not good at caretaking. When I bathed her, her hands and legs twitched violently. My old techniques of lifting her ended with both of us on the floor—me underneath as a pillow to her crumpled body. My fumbling made her urine bags leak. But I did keep the house clean.

Instead of seeing my efforts with pleasure, Mother saw through my plan and sensed a competitor, someone who wanted to take over the family and destroy her role as mother.

Her paranoia as well as her slurred speech increased my guilt and my need for absolution. I, who had known Mother when she was well, could not, would not take care of her. I ran off to college instead. Karissa, fourteen years old, was doing my work and paying my penance while I read British literature in my quiet apartment. Karissa has never even known Mama.

But I wanted to forget, to have never known Mama. Mostly I wanted to hide and tuck my brain away as I watched a forty-year-old in a sixty-

year-old's body. I wanted to forget this woman who had given me my eyes and used to have my smile and my mannerisms. I wanted to pretend that I did not feel and would never cry.

Simultaneously I wanted to fix everything, clean the house, comfort everyone, and mostly forget. If I couldn't stop the pain, I wanted to feign that it didn't exist here, didn't exist anywhere. But I couldn't make it go away as I wished to. I remembered that Grandma used to tell me after I'd dreamily listed all of my desires, "If wishes were fishes then we'd all be very fat."

And because of this, I mostly wanted to hide at the library and read *Interview* and *Vogue* and *McCalls* and *People*. Anything unreal, that would keep me from wondering and wishing and remembering.

In between trips to the library, I did help, as I could, and I did continue to help. But I spoke quietly and without emotion while I perfunctorily made dinner and changed clothes.

The last night I was home, I began transcribing my mother's life history. I tried not to think of meaning or phrases as I typed in the old fashioned phrases. I tried not to think of the life she had planned. Her words sounded more like Laura Ingalls Wilder than Gloria Steinem. They sounded like the mama I remembered—the idealist who taught me to take chances. I typed as I thought of my homemaking mother who never had a career, but had a husband and four kids and dogs and plants. She had ideals and dreams and a secure world. I stopped. I did not want to think.

I did not want to question the whys and the hows and the whats. I wanted to type and read and shut myself off.

The computer screen glowed with blues and grays and hummed hypnotically. My comfort I found in the stoic machine. My penance I found in the service of typing for her. My guilt I eased by ignoring and typing.

In the other room, Mother called, no longer angry at me—her irrationality sporadic—and I interrupted my typing to make and feed her dinner. I moved unthinking, unfeeling, with the numbness not of familiarity, but the numbness I had created within myself—again.

"What would you think if I dated someone seriously?" I surprised myself by asking her.

"It would be very nice, dear."

No help. No contact.

I sat down after she ate, to say my goodbye before I went back to the computer. But more than that, I wanted to say my final goodbye before I went back to my comforts, to my books and friends and my church calling.

I told her I loved her. My words were soft, formal, and ritualistic. No response.

I went back to my computer. I went in to drown myself in its regularity and predictability and its mechanistic security.

Everyone gave me advice as I went to college. Dad told me to watch my finances. My Laurels advisor reminded me of my moral standards. Grandma had left a rose-perfumed letter written before she died urging me to make sure that my schooling didn't get in the way of my education.

Her last line read, "Take care of your Mother." As if I could do both—get an education and take care of my mother. As if I could serve without resentment or leave without guilt. I didn't think that I could do anything that anyone wanted; I couldn't satisfy Grandma or myself.

My mother had made a simpler demand in her slurring voice. "Be good. Pray." No answers. Just be good and pray. But I wanted to believe that she meant to add, be good, be happy, and live. Live and trust and grow and learn.

At first, I hadn't been sure if she had meant to add these words. Now I had to believe that these words would have been hers. I had to give myself permission to believe that these were her wishes.

Mother called for help again, predictably. At least I could count on her calls with regularity.

But this time, I turned off the computer and opened the washed doors into the front room where she sat. I used to dance in this room. I had my picture taken in this room, in my cross-stitched dress, with my sister in my small arms.

After I helped Mother I sat down for good, fingering the browns and golds of the afghan that Mama had made while nursing Karissa, done when life was secure. They thought.

Mama wanted some music. I put on *Fiddler on the Roof,* the loud and joyous songs that begin the record.

"I love you, Mama," I told her again and my tears finally fell. I cried for Mama and for Grandma and for us all. What did we expect from ourselves, from each other?

I was not sure, but I spoke to her again.

"Do you remember when you used to read to us? I do. I remember. Thank you."

She didn't say much—she just smiled—with her eyes this time.

By doing so, she welcomed me into the room, welcomed me to sit with her. I accepted, and I stayed all night.

I am back at school, my English and physical science classes. Most of my energies go toward my boyfriend and my friends, work, studies, and sleep. But I now enter that sleep more easily.

I don't have time to crochet or embroider for my old hope chest, and probably wouldn't do it anyway. My apartment stays cluttered as I work on literary analysis and talk with friends.

However, sometimes I do make lunch for my boyfriend—whom I now see regularly. He helps me take care of the plants that I have bought for my

apartment. When I am sick, he brings me dinner. I let him ease my guilt and my fear and I let him make me feel and live.

At home, Karissa alternates mornings with my father, and she helps my mother with a numbness that comes from familiarity. But I would like to think that Karissa understands her more than she used to. I have begun to write letters to teach her about Mama, with her hugs and her kinky black hair next to beautiful, smooth, olive skin. The letters will teach her about and also help me remember Mama's soothing smiles.