

Mother O' Mine

A Legacy of Remembrance

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Preface

I BEGIN my journey of remembrance with my mother's leaving on February 17, 1996, for that is the way memory works—from endings to beginnings, from death to life. Memory is a resurrection on the human level as well as a divine promise. And, although I now leave her to heaven, as she would have wished, I do lay claim to her memory, especially to those *shared* memories that often follow death like bright shadows of solace and redemption.

When I think of mother I think of *home*, a home she spun, spider-like from deep within. I think of a house of breath, a house of love. Not a *place* so much as a way and an aura . . .

A lover of things as they were, my mother will never be remembered as a housekeeper: she loved a sweet disorder of her own creation. She loved antiques, dust and the musty odors of time. She loved the delicate pattern of cobwebs that festooned the ceiling and wafted from the corners of things. They were, to her, memories made visible. Flimsy and gauzy they were not only reminders of neglect, but also of endurance and patience. They moved to the prevailing currents of draft and breath like fragile signals from yesterday.

"Cobwebs are stronger than steel," she told me more than once, not so much as an excuse for not brooming them down as an explanation for their preservation.

Cobwebs are stronger than steel!

Characteristically, she never explained her words. She left them hanging, a paradox on the sill of reflection. Perhaps her words were a cryptic statement about the past and its constant intrusions on the present. Perhaps a measure of the strength of memory. Perhaps a mystery not to be solved but to be celebrated. Perhaps words to make my sister and I see cobwebs in a different way, not so much as evidence of neglect or laziness but as time's art, a tapestry of yesterday.

I remember especially the only home our family owned, the home she lived in and loved for almost sixty years. The mother of homes! Today strangers occupy it and when I visit my hometown I drive by slowly for a look-see. It is re-modeled now, brought up to date for the new millennium. The leaning birches and crooked maples are gone from the front yard, allowing a flood of sunshine to nourish the new lawn. The driveway has been re-surfaced, covering the cracks from which aberrant yet persistent flowers sprung. The natural look of the backyard ("Mother's Wilderness", we called it) is gone in favor of neat, geometric patterns. The dogwood, planted by the wind and nourished by hope, has been uprooted. The woods that filled the adjacent lot has disappeared and a house now stands there. The flowers that bordered and sometimes overhung the driveway are gone. The sundial I made no longer translates sunshine and shade into hours and minutes. All gone!

After the take-over by well-intentioned strangers I never set foot on what had once been ours. I never dug for the treasure I buried as a boy-pirate. Never looked for the eagle that decorated the peak of the garage or the flag flying beneath. Never planted another bush or tree or carved a set of initials for *always*.

But memory requires no illegal trespassing, knows no boundaries. Like a night visitor memory returns to sift the past for clues. I feel certain that mother is a visitor there too. Where else on earth would she choose as a place of sweet return? Where else except the place where the memories of a lifetime were made? And sometime, I am sure, there will be a meeting of memory and spirit—perhaps beneath a certain dogwood tree.

We who once shared the same heartbeat believe it to be so.

The End of Something



BEFORE 1939 I thought of our driveway as my mother's domain for, up to that time, it had served only as a gravel path separating flower gardens. Then there were no ugly oil spots, no grease drippings; no heaving or buckling macadam. Just a length of flowers segregated according to sun, shadow and an ardent gardener's caprice. Even the sounds of the driveway were gentle sounds—the crunch of footsteps, bikes, scooters and wagons. The sound of birds too in the arch of over-hanging limbs. Wind chimes bellling the day. The sound of people-talk and laughter.

The garage at the end of the drive was little more than a spacious tool shed for garden supplies and lesser machines. It stored folding lawn chairs, lawn mowers, sprinklers, bird baths and burlap bags. Summer things mostly. In winter the driveway was not shoveled up to the garage except where it met paths like the one leading to the burner out back or the places where deliveries were made—where the oil was piped into a tank in the cellar and the path that the neighbors used.

Up to 1939 our driveway was a feminine place; a beautiful place; a natural place; a living place.

But, in 1939 a car came into our lives, the very first we owned, a '39 Ford V-8, bright blue and wearing its New York World's Fair 1939 license plates in yellow and black. And, after that, our driveway became a macho place, a black-topped slab for squealing tires and grinding gears. Things were removed from the garage to make room for the car and before long a basketball hoop decorated the front of the garage, just above the doors. The blacktop soon became stained with oil and grease and there were residues of white foam from frequent car washings and waxings.

I, of course, was delighted with my father's belated burst of insight and wondered what took him so long to recognize the obvious—that automobiles were the best way to get around. Almost a necessity. And, more importantly, for a 16-year-old, a car was a symbol of prestige, an important part of the rites of passage. A car attracted the opposite sex. It won the respect of peers and elders. It radically altered the dimensions of time and space. A car was freedom on wheels. And, to top it all, gasoline was only ten cents per gallon in 1939.

But, even with a car in the driveway, my mother's claim to life and beauty was still honored. The crocuses continued to break through the crusted snow beside the house. Yellow trumpets of daffodils played the silent music of spring. Tulips, those perennials from ten or twelve past Mother's Days or Easters, unfolded once again to the morning sun. Other resurrections followed: jonquils, hyacinths, tiger lilies, daisies, black-eyed susans, mums, roses, yellow and red, sunflowers, wild, pink azaleas. And, overlooking it all, a dogwood and lilac bushes sweetening the air. Even the weeds had their place along the driveway. Some were useful—dandelion greens for salads; milkweed leaves for the silver chrysalis of the monarch butterfly.

Looking back almost sixty years I can see a symbolism that no one could possibly have seen then. For in a little over a month from the time we got our new car the world began to fall apart, the center no longer holding. Nazi Germany invaded Poland; Britain and France declared war on Germany and President Roosevelt proclaimed U.S. neutrality. The world was on its way toward a hell of its own making. There was a new and terrible word that the frightened world learned—*blitzkrieg*, the lightning war; the machine war.

But in America, we still had a few good years left and life went on much as it had. The Great Depression was slowly giving way to a wartime economy. We didn't know how

much was ending in 1939, that indeed, for millions, it was the beginning of the end. We didn't realize that a world's innocence would be lost, never to be regained, not in all human history. We didn't know that evil would eclipse the sun. We didn't know that machines would crush the flowers. . .

In 1939 life expectancy was 59.7 years; the jet engine aircraft and the helicopter were invented; the best picture was *Gone With The Wind* and the best songs, "Over the Rainbow" and "God Bless America." The New York Yankees won the World Series. The War was still an ocean away.

The machine had come to our driveway and all of us were glad—all except our mother. She had a fear of machines. She preferred things that had a heart. Friends had been killed in automobile accidents. Her favorite grandmother had been killed by a train. She was fascinated by the idea of flying, but airplanes frightened her. She could not know at the time that before long her only son would be a member of the Army Air Forces.

Years later, after my father's stroke, he would ask: "Am I going to spend the rest of my life in this driveway?" For he was once an athlete and a traveler with no boundaries to his life. But now there was no car in the driveway or in the garage, just a lawn chair and a walker beside it—and the answer to my father's anguished question was *yes*, his world *was* reduced to the size of the driveway. And my mother was his caregiver then and the machine was gone, but the flowers were still there. His tears were my mother's tears as well: she felt his pain as her own. But she did not miss the series of shining machines that came after the '39 Ford. Her garden was a garden again.

Then, after my father's death, there were no more automobiles except those of visitors. In the good weather my mother lived outside in the driveway, tending her flowers and probably dreaming of the time when the blossoms com-