

MANILLA ENVELOPE

On May 3, 1997 I went to see Mother after a year of therapy and confusion in hating and loving her I have finally resolved to accept the past. I don't know if it is possible to be with our mothers without blending the past with the present.

The old house where she has lived for over 40 years is showing wear and tear. Wild flowers fill the cracks in the cement steps left by earthquakes. They are bright yellow and die each year to be born again in spring. Mother pays a gardener who barely touches anything. He has offered to remove cardboard boxes and rotting pieces of wood that are propped against the house, but she won't allow it because she feels she might need them someday.

On this particular evening she is sitting at the dining room table shredding papers. She was at one time an excellent artist. Some of her paintings are propped up in corners while others hang askew on the walls. Each room of this rather large house is filled with cardboard boxes of papers, of clothes, of gadgets and whatnots --many were purchased from TV. Nothing seems to be ordered or to follow a pattern. It is like so many pieces of so many jigsaw puzzles scattered around the rooms.

There is a room just off the dining room where she keeps her cat confined so he won't get away. The cat is desperate to get out while I'm here. The smell from the room is overwhelming. I peek in a crack in the door and see piles of kitty litter inches thick. This is the same room I once had as a child. I am no longer affected by the drama of the past. I do, however, feel sad for the cat.

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Mother is a small woman who is a collage of European and native American. Her face is clear and comely. Her once dark hair is white and her eyes are green. She doesn't look at me when she talks.

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"I want you to decide what happens to me if I get sick", she says, "look over there on the buffet. There's a big yellow envelope. I got a new lawyer to make it all up for me."

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The buffet is stacked with everything. I see a number of manila envelopes. I also come across note pads that are filled with biblical concordance: row after row of shaky writing, John: 4, 7, Mark: 11: 25 and so on for pages and pages. I don't know what the Scriptures say. Mother rights down Scripture the preacher shouts out in church

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I sigh. "Does the envelope have writing on the outside? What's the lawyer's name?"

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She is shedding junk mail. The shredder is a new toy. "I don't know what his name is," she answers me and her three-year-old voice.

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I want to shake her and screen "look! If you want me to help you to do something, then you need to help me! And don't give me that shit about Jesus will take care"

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I would never, never talked to my mother like that. However, there is a limit to my patients. But we are locked into the same story and can not leave until the end.

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We have an ongoing discussion that goes like this: "Linda do you know anyone who helps pack rats?"

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"I could call someone, but you know that you will have to throw some things out?"

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"Never mind. Goodbye." At that she either hangs up the phone or leaves the room.

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I finally find the envelope. Inside is a durable power of attorney. It gives me the right to look after Mother's affairs if she is too sick to do it herself. I already hold a conservatorship for my mentally ill sister.

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How sick do you have to be before you let someone clean out this firetrap? Don't you know that I freak every time I hear news about a house burning to the ground, killing everyone?

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"What will you do if the house catches fire?" I asked carefully so as not to offend. She reminds me that when the Oakland firestorm destroyed thousands of houses and many acres of land, her house didn't burn. She is convinced it is because her sisters prayed for her. I hope there is a heaven.

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I find a photograph of me on the floor that fell out of one of the photo albums stacked in a corner. In the picture I am 11 years old and in the cat's room. I can remember the stench from the body cast that was used to keep my broken hip in place. Strangely enough the photo doesn't affect me. It was from some other planet or some other girl, one in a Dickens novel maybe. I show mother the picture and ask her what album it belongs in. "Oh, just set it on the table. Umm, I remembered this," she says, looking closely at the photo and turning it over in her hands. "Joe gave me the film. That's when all the flowers were blooming in the yard and we got watermelon."

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Her memory is so different from mine: another confirmation that this is our story-- not just my story.

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In 1956, our next-door neighbors were Mr. B., the chief probation officer of the county, and his wife. They had no children and lived with Mrs. B.'s mother. During the heat of the summer that year when we had all the windows open in our house, mother and I were arguing about the television. At some point she jumped on me and pummeled my face with her fists. I screamed and screamed. She felt awful later when she tried to bring down the swelling with ice packs. I had two black eyes, one swollen shut. That night she went out and left me with her husband, who used me to masturbate. The next day Mrs. B. sent a county social worker to investigate. The social worker asked me to sit on the steps with her, and then she came right out and ask me if my "father" molested me. I answered, as casually, yes. Within a matter of days my stepfather was in jail, my siblings were in separate foster homes, I went to add a school for delinquent girls, and mother it was left in shock alone in her big empty house, the house right next door to the chief

probation officer.

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In 1977, a book about my life, thinly disguised as a novel was published. I began writing it after I'd been to a few women's liberation meetings. I knew I felt a rage, but at the same time women were just beginning to create a language defining our lives. I rarely heard stories of the child abuse that must have been deeply buried in our souls. I Must Not Rock was added to other books that made the personal political. I felt compelled to write my personal experiences and hoped we would find a common language. But I didn't want my mother to know about the book after it was published. When she and her sisters asked me about it, I lied. Of course, she found out anyway and was hurt by my words. When my brother went to pick her up one day in the locker room of the city College where she worked, he heard her shrieking and crying out so loud that he called an ambulance to take her to the hospital. I had turned into that awful busy body, Mrs. B..

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I told and now I am afraid to speak. I have taken responsibility for her artful behavior because I am stronger than she is. Today she looks so small and her little pink dress with the flowers on it in her hair like feathers moving with the slightest breeze. When I lived with her, she made my dresses with underwear to match. She cooked all the meals carefully, following food plans of the day. But the state took all of her children away and assigned them to institutions and foster homes. She never drank, swore, or used drugs.

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In 1955, my mother had three small children and me. I was disabled from a fall and spent nearly a year in a body cast. She used her hands to remove impacted feces from my rectum after someone told her I would die if I didn't move my bowels. Before we lived in a nice house on the nice street, we lived in housing projects near a shipyard and naval air base in Alameda. It was an accepted fact that Navy planes were allowed to swoop down and dropped fake bombs on the buildings, playgrounds and schools. The projects are crowded places with angry people. On hot days, mother would sit outside and talk with the other "ladies," and I spent hours alone in a dark room and a body cast.

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"Hows your car runnin?" Mother asked me today.

"Great! Thank you again and again," I say. "I don't know what I would have done without your help. Now I can visit the kids and your little great-granddaughter." I am not only glad she bought a car for me but because acts like these confirm our relationship to one another. Â It was expensive and a financial sacrifice-- one she was not obligated to make.

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I live alone in an apartment in San Francisco that is arranged just the way I like, with a computer as the dominating motif. When I drive home I leave the past behind. It wasn't always that way. I had help from friends and therapy. Some might ask, at what point did I stop obsessing about the misery of my childhood and come to the reality of my maturity? I don't know.

I once allowed these memories to torment me. Now when I'm alone in my apartment, the dawn moves me to my balcony with a cup of tea where I enjoy pine trees full of songbirds. I watched people with their dogs in the park below, and way off in the distance, passed a body of water, is the land my mother occupies. That is her land and this is mine.

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Tonight in mother's land, I opened one of the albums and see a picture of me in the projects. I

seem happy enough, with cut out pictures of dogs the wall. Mother and her mother documented everything with photographs. Now she gets up and hands me a collection of snapshots of my little granddaughter. "Those are for you," she says.

"You sure are a good photographer." I am not only impressed with her artistry but also fully warmed by this loving gesture. It is moments like this one that reminded me of the time her neighbors complained about the color she painted her house. She called the painters only six months later and asked them to paint the house more compatible tones.

I hate those busy bodies. I swear if I outlive you I will paint the house many shades of green, just like you wanted.

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I love the stories my mother tells about her childhood. She has told me the story of her birth many times, but I want to hear it again. "So Mama wouldn't stop cannin food when she was having me. The midwife kept saying, go on and lay down Mrs. you going to have that baby in the kitchen. So when I was born mama was too tired to give me a name. Sides she wanted a boy. She was tired of having girls and I was number four. So then my sister's name me." Mother looks up at me as I rest my elbows on the table and my chin on my hands. "And when you was borned the nurses named you-- yep, named for that soap opera star on the radio."

I could see her in my minds eye--- that young woman giving birth in the home for unwed mothers, asking the nurses for help in naming me. She named my older brother, Mickey. I barely remember him growing up. The first time the state "step in" to save Mickey and me, our clothes were stuck to the sores on our bodies, we were hungry and frightened. He had filled my bottle with his urine and fed me so I wouldn't cry. The police saved us and we wept because we missed a mommy.

Mother's grandfather sexually abused her as a child. She was considered to be "a little slow." She was also considered morally corrupt.

But kind of god damn mother would leave her little children starving in a room alone? What awful mother would leave her daughter with a man she knew was sexually abusing her while she was out carousing? What kind of woman lets her husband beat her kids bloody and even holds them down so he can?

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After I was growing, I ran away to Mary, then to leave my husband, then to leave my children and then to leave lovers-- to leave and leave until I felt too tired and wounded it to run anymore.

I stopped talking to my mother for three whole years. It was a time for pulling away and redefining myself. It is what people do when they leave the area where they were raised. Only for me, I stayed here-- nearby. I could look out of my window and see Oakland where mother lived -I could drive down the street with friends who left their birthplaces and imagine what it was like for them.

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I watch my mother shredding the junk mail. "Whatja gonna to do with this stringy paper?" I asked. "I don't know," she says playfully. "Guess I'll have to get more boxes to put it in."

I finally stopped asking if I could help her clear out some of the junk in the house. Other family members have offered to help. Sometimes when I take care of her house when shes away, I bring garbage home with me to dispose of it, otherwise, she'll recover it from the trash bin and carry it back inside. A nurse at the clinic called it a "hoarding syndrome."

Occasionally she will put the boxes haphazardly on the front porch. One of my brothers will

sneak up the stairs and throw
the stuff out before she realizes it's gone.

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Part of me believes this collection of little value is meant to fill the void when we left-- were rescued from her. Â Bad people took her kids because of something I said to Mrs. Buckleys social worker. If only I kept quiet. Now I must fend off any other bad people, like the fire department and the health Department. This responsibility for her care should she become ill is a large weight on one hand and a way of showing her I care on the other.

Yes, mother, I care enough not to throw anything away without your permission. You can trust me to keep this one more secret sacred.

She stops shredding and the shredders sticks. I don't know where to put the papers from inside the manila envelope, so I balanced them on my lap.

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These papers give me an incredible amount of power. I can dissolve the trust, sell the house, put mom away-- on and on. I don't think my younger brothers will like this. When their father-- my stepfather-- was alive, he set up the trust to exclude Mickey and me. The power his widow is handing me while she pulls the junk mail from the shredder is overwhelming. I have also been made executor of her trust should she die before I do. The money does not add up to millions, it is possibly only a few thousand dollars at this point. It is the trust in my ability to love and be fair that she is giving me. Is it from guilt? I would like to believe we have now forgiven when another.

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When I was 12 and lived in an institution, I could hear my mother called me, "Linda, Linda." I heard her voice in the wind calling mournfully, and I'd feel a terrible longing. I wasn't allowed to love her. She was a bad mommy, so I was assigned to other mommies in foster homes and institutions to take her place.

There is something no substitute mother or caregiver could give me, and that was a common history. Regardless of how difficult the stories may sound-- or even fanciful-- I had only one past, mine, and that passed the shared with mother, my siblings and our ancestors. Because of mother, I have a love of history, writing and mystery. Because of a mother, I also have a fear of failure, speaking out loud and being discovered.

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She never missed visiting days to see her children, even when we were scattered to the winds. She was burdened with a loss, and I was responsible. It was my duty to comfort her. Our drama was written into forms, page after page, by the State of California.

"Nobody understands how it is when your kids get taken away." She says that as though I was someone else.

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Why did you have to say that now, you idiot! You know you blame me, so what the hell are you, some kind of masochist? Aren't you damn afraid of what I might do with this power?

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"I know, Mama, I know how hard it must have been for you." I tell her this and kiss her forehead. I love her. When I was a little girl I was afraid of her. Now I'm afraid for her.

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The last time her kids were taken it was my fault, but not the first time. Not when Mickey was

three years old, but after, later on, when I was 11. I told on her husband. I told about his violent rages and about his sneaky sexual proclivities that included me. Now I'm afraid no one will love her as much as I do, and I am limited in what I can do for her. I am middle-aged and still afraid of her. I'm afraid she will abandon me, wound me or expose me for loving a bad mommy nobody understands how it is when you get separated from your mother, no matter what she's done.

I never told mother this. It's not like being abused as an adult. Parents are our very arms, legs and brain cells. After the first time the state "stepped in," I went back to her and her husband, and my big brother Mickey disappeared through a door and wasn't seen again for 17 years. Then it was an awkward meeting. He had come back from the dead and was on his way to Vietnam.

In 1948, Mickey was taken by his father to live in Florida. Mother and I mourned his loss. He may as well died of some dreadful disease. We shared this hurt. I remember when a small picture arrived to confirm that he had not died. After all, he had been a sickly child. I was the strong one, the one mother leaned on. We looked at the photograph with a magnifying glass. We studied every bit of the not dead boy's face.

"Please don't ever call anyone mommy except me." I remember her asking me-telling me. It hurt her so much that Mickey called his stepmother mommy.

Last year, mother sat next Mickey's hospital bed with his wife and watched him die a slow, agonizing death. He was wounded in Vietnam and left with serious lung damage that he never overcame. She told me it hurt to see him suffer so much. But his actual passing affected us less because we had already mourned his death for years.

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There is a large photograph of mother's husband on the wall. He looks mild, half smiling down at us. He is wearing a gray sweater with a bow tie. He has on horn rimmed glasses that don't disguise his blind eye that was the result of attacks from a brutal father. Because of these attacks he was blinded in his right eye and lost the hearing in his right ear. There is no excuse for bad parenting. Well I don't believe being abusive is genetic, but it can be hereditary if not caught in time.

"I wish he was here," Mother says, looking longingly at the picture.

She had four children by her husband, my half siblings. She was married to him for nearly 50 years. He was autocratic, cruel and abusive to all of us. But what is remembered is this: I told. I talked, expose the family in the big house on a quiet street in a respectable part of town. I told about the raging woman who chased me with a knife and left bruises on my younger siblings. I told what her husband did to me while she was out dancing.

"I dreamt about him last night," she says to me. "He was never very handsome, but he was sure good-looking in my dream. Isn't that funny?" She chuckles and the feather hair bounces on her head.

I had a dream for many years. I was standing on a hill and I saw you in the distance. I could mouth the words, "Mommy!" I could feel the blood rush from my neck to my head. I was screaming and no sound came. If only you could hear me you would run back and save me. But you could not hear and then you disappeared into the distance.

In 1943, my mother was an unwed teenager, and I was her second child. She sat in the reception area of the adoption office, waiting to fill out forms to hand me over-- but she didn't. I cried because I wanted to nurse, so she left. She breast-fed me and the story began.

She was there with my husband when my daughter was born in 1966. She cried and said she couldn't stand to see me in so much pain.

Now when I bring her a pile of new and old mail from the basement, she says, "Naw, whaja bring this all stuff for? I just want the new stuff. Here you throw the rest back down there."

I obey.

"Would you like to put the shredded things in that bag?" I asked, trying to be helpful.

"No, but you could put them in that box over there. See. No, not that one, the one with the blanket sticking out. Yes, yes, that one. Just throw the stuff out."

My sister walks in the back door. She has been to the park, walking the dog, and just put him in a pen in the yard. She grunts hello and goes up to her room. I hear the door close. I know better than to take it personally.

My sister brought mother and me back together. R. had been running the streets for years as a bag lady--you know, the kind of person you step over and laugh at. I couldn't bear it. If anyone thinks there's no such thing as mental illness, walk a mile in my moccasins. A dear friend helped me get R. and to a hospital. Now she and my mother lived together. I put my sister first for several years until she was stable. It was my duty. And now it is good for both of them to be together.

I stopped going to mother's house when my children were very young. I refuse to go while my stepfather was alive. Then, in 1980, I moved and change my phone number and tried to imagine I was without a mother. I was getting in touch with the fear I had of my stepfather and realizing that mother chose him over me. One image that has haunted me was mother in the courtroom sitting next to her husband while I sat on a cold bench with strangers. I was 12 years old.

It was during the time I removed myself from mother that I decided to go into therapy. Then, when one of my brothers called me to say our sister was mentally ill, I went to support him and help. Mother was there, and when she saw me after three years we hugged and cried, and I was left feeling I had abandoned her.

a few months later my stepfather died and left my mother money enough to see her through decades. She misses him, and I must accept that. She cannot allow herself to feel the damage he created in her children's lives. She was a child of the Depression. And he inherited money.

Some want to know how mother could live with her husband after what he did to her kids. In my version of her life, she had no choice but to return to him after he got out of prison. After all, not everyone is a hero. There are some who take what life gives and others to challenge and fight back.

We go over the power of attorney papers.