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Annick Smith

Mother and Me

How do you speak truly about your mother without deceit, with open loving eyes? Why speak at all? I am a child who was born in the Great Depression, came of age under Eisenhower, and was born again after age forty into the wide open spaces of widowhood and choice.

My parents are immigrants who arrived in America to start a new life, carrying the baggage of the Old World. Family was primary, patriarchal, powerful. We lived in a house full of women—Mother, Grandma, three sisters and my father. He was the star around whom we revolved. He was the person I identified with, wanted to emulate. I thought I was his clone until I grew old enough to understand that the person I most resemble is my mother.

When I tell tales about my mother, I'm telling tales on me. It's a way to free myself in some degree from the family myths that helped shape me, and gave me cause for a lifelong struggle. I want my children to be part of new myths, in which Mother and Father are not godlike in their largeness. In which women are equal players who don't have to resort to the old feminine deceptions that ultimately diminish and degrade.

Mother comes from Transylvania. When she lived there in the early 1900s it was a place of vineyards, feudal estates, and peasant culture—rich, rolling farmlands in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Transylvania was Hungary then, Rumania now. Who knows what tomorrow.

Before the era of politically correct language, Mother identified

herself as a "white Jew" because of the German blood on her father's side. White Jews, like light-skinned African-Americans, enjoyed a higher status than the swarthy "black Jews" from Russia and the Near East. She has always been proud of her even features, soft light hair, and unlined skin, which could allow her to pass for Aryan any place on Earth. If you ask the secret of her skin, Mother will laugh and say, "Pond's Cold Cream."

My mother's real name is Ilonka Beck, which should be translated Elaine. Her first name, and at least one year of her age (a fact she too-vigorously denies), were left behind when at eighteen she got a visa to emigrate to France. To the Hungarian-hating Rumanians who had taken over her country, Elaine sounded like Helene, so what the hell, you're changing countries, you may as well have a new name.

My grandmother Beck called her Ilush. My father calls her Petite (pronounced Peti). Mother is petite, under five feet. At 86, humped from the common female calcium deficiency, osteoporosis, the child she once was has emerged like a small white butterfly from the trappings of adulthood. I see a petted, laughing child, capped these days with milk-white hair. Other women may become what she disdainfully refers to as "old ladies," but she, never. A son-in-law used to call her Bride of Frankenstein. When we want to get Mother's goat, we call her Zsa Zsa.

After a long day at the hospital where my father has undergone surgery to replace a useless and arthritic knee, Mother and I sit in the living room of my parents' apartment in Chicago. The couch where we lounge and the padded Eames chairs have been upholstered by Mother. We look out the bay window to Lake Shore Drive and lights glinting off Lake Michigan. In her old age and my middle age, Mother and I have come closer than ever before—she

less strident and willful, and me less rebellious and strident and willful. We have come to accept who we are, and thus can accept the reality of the other.

It is an intimate moment, a time for storytelling, and if Mother likes anything better than cooking and eating, it's telling stories of her childhood. She spins tales, I ask questions. We talk about Transylvania. When they were my age and had been divorced and remarried, my parents took to traveling the world. They went back to Hungary. The streets of my father's home in Budapest were somber under Soviet rule. Liberation had been hibernating at that time, but the reconstructed stones of the city remained familiar. You could walk amid memories.

Not so in Mother's home town of Nagyvarad (meaning Big Fortress, after the ruined towers which once held back the Turks). Mother's birthplace was beyond recognition. It had become victim to Rumania's destruction of all things Hungarian, Catholic, old. Victim to a Soviet-inspired idea of progress.

"I tried to find the house we lived in," she said. "I could not even find the street. They have built cement apartments there. It is ugly."

There were tears in Mother's eyes. Ugliness is sin number one. "The beautiful river where we swam—I wanted to show your father."

A river ran through Nagyvarad, a town I imagine as an Old-Country version of Missoula, Montana, where I have lived some thirty years. Mother used to go swimming in the town pool, which had been built into the river. You could dive into the clear waters and see boulders on the sandy bottom. The river was so swift, she says, only the strongest could swim upstream. In winter my mother and her friends would skate on the river.

"It was gone." Mother's voice drops as she remembers. Age diminishes all things. It has softened her voice to a whisper. "Brown. There was oil, like rainbows on the top. The trees are gone. The fish. It is polluted."

I barely hear her last words. "Destroyed...destroyed, destroyed."

The Beck family lived a bourgeois life in a spacious house, near a park. My grandfather, Henrik, managed an insurance brokerage, but because he was Jewish, he could not own it or advance in the company. Still, the Becks were middle class as anyone and they always had a maid. Each room in the Victorian household held a hand-painted tile stove. My great-grandmother Beck would sit in her rocking chair in front of the stove and knit. She told Bible stories in German to my mother and her older brother, Jean.

When I try to imagine my mother's childhood I see it in embroidery, fine and delicate, like the lace tablecloths my grandmother stitched in our living room in Chicago—those long evenings before television, when we gathered around the hi-fi to listen to Bach and do our homework. I see hand-sewn ruffled dresses and long curls, an image to match the sepia photograph that hung in my mother's bedroom: young Ilush in her party gown—pretty, pristine.

I imagine my grandmother's white-washed kitchen redolent with odors of her fine Hungarian cooking, like the kitchens she ruled in my childhood: chicken paprika; veal goulash; stuffed peppers; apple strudel; and a fragrant yeast bread something like American Indian fry bread, which Grandma Beck called *langosz*.

"Now, eat." A litany passed from generation to generation. It must have been a gentle, overstuffed, sensual life.

Mother's best friend in Nagyvarad was Catholic. The girls attended the *gymnasium* (private high school) and spoke fluent German. They ran with a crowd my mother calls "the golden youth"—children of doctors, lawyers, businessmen, the intelligentsia. In the 1920s, Jewish children were accepted into this crowd, but in the wider culture there was a cruel edge of discrimination. My mother recoils from two Jew-baiting incidents that touched her.

"I used to sleep over at Maria's house," she says, "just like the other girls." But one evening, when a visitor arrived, Ilonka Beck discovered to her everlasting discomfort that she wasn't quite like everyone else. Maria's mother pointed to my mother. "That is Maria's little Jewish friend."

Nearly seventy years later, Mother's hazel eyes light with triumph. "You know," she says, "Maria married a Jewish doctor."

Mother doesn't know what became of her friend. I don't speak my next thought. I wonder if Maria and her husband met their liberal-minded ends in Auschwitz, with the rest of the 500,000 Hungarian Jews who were rounded up in 1944, during the last days of Hitler.

The second incident involved a boyfriend. Mother was a charmer, and she had many boyfriends. As she tells it, her one great lapse in taste was to fall for a tall, dark, handsome Rumanian. "He was very attractive. Very sexy." Mother has always been drawn to good looks.

"He thought he owned me," she shrugs. "Once he said to me, 'You are my little, freckled, Jewish girl.'"

"I told him," she says with a self-satisfied grin, "I told him, 'You are a big Rumanian lout.'"

That was the end of that romance. Mother hates her freckles.

She hates being called little. And most of all, she hates being patronized as Jewish.

My sister Kathy and I used to speculate about the sexual life of our mother and father. We played out scenarios with our paper dolls, whispered and giggled, trying to figure out the secrets of married life, figure out what a woman should be. We wanted to be sexy, like our father.

He slept naked. I remember staring at his genitals those mornings I caught him walking down the hall from bedroom to bathroom. When he kissed me, I pulled away, the touch too dangerous. All my friends had crushes on my father, Stephen Deutch, the photographer who took pictures of long-legged models and movie stars, also voluptuous nudes. When we were teens my sisters and I came to believe he had affairs with some of those women. We didn't know how our mother could stand it. And when we were grown, he confirmed our suspicions by running off with a blond named Zee, who had southern accent.

I never could pin down my mother's sexual nature. There was a kittenish, playful side to her—teasing rather than sexy. At the cocktail parties we had at our house, I could see that men were attracted to her. Sometimes our parties ended in drunken dancing, my father wild as anyone, my sisters and me getting high on left-over Scotch and sodas in the guests' forgotten highballs. But I can't remember Mother doing anything rash or indiscreet. She kept her admirers at a safe, admiring distance.

Mother's personal daintiness made her seem squeamish and Victorian to a liberated daughter in worn jeans and white men's shirts and bare feet. I couldn't imagine her abandoned in the sweaty, smelly contact of sexual passion. Still, photographs from

her Paris high-jinx days, and photographs my father took, show a young woman with a come-on look—a woman who flaunted her round breasts and flashing legs. What do I really know about that woman? Nothing.

What I do know is that my mother was fearful of male genitals. Her fear goes back to a day when she was five.

"I was playing with my cat," she tells me, as we continue to talk about Transylvania. "The cat ran into a small shed behind our house where the man lived who tended our yard—the gardener, you know—that kind of man. He was always nice to me. But he was old and dirty. And he smelled."

Mother wrinkles her freckled nose. If ugliness is sin number one in her lexicon, bad smells are sin number two.

"I did not think. I followed the cat. The man was sitting in a chair right in back of the open door. His pants was open. He was pulling his penis...up and down."

Mother stops a moment to catch her breath. She makes a terrible face. "It was big. And sticking up out of his pants, like a snake. It was moving. He called to me. 'Come here,' he said. 'Come and touch it. It won't bite you.'"

Eighty years later, she shudders, the fear tangible. "I ran away. I never forget that."

Sex may have been ugly to the girl, Ilonka, but death was a greater horror. Mother has always been haunted by mortality. Her father died of sudden kidney failure when she was thirteen. She has witnessed the deaths of friends, two sons-in-law, the slow arthritic crippling of my father. When her ninety-three-year-old mother lay dying in the hospital, Mother stayed faithfully at her side until the nurse and doctors and my father convinced her to go home and get some rest.

Grandma Beck died in her sleep that night. "I let my mother die all alone," she says, the guilt so strong it makes her weepy. The question in Mother's eyes makes me want to look away. You won't do that to me, she is asking. You won't let me die by myself, with no one to hold my hand?

All her life, Mother has struggled against the domination of others. She resorts to female strategies of the powerless, passed from mothers to daughters in the old days: charm; humor; manipulation; willfulness; hysteria. She perfected these weapons in an underground war first against *her* mother. Then against her husband. Finally with her own girls.

Before and after my grandfather Henrik died, Grandma Beck was in charge of raising my mother and my mother's older brother, Jean. Grandma's name was Serena, but she was a far way from serene. A widow at forty, she was still handsome at ninety-three. Her mind was quick, her hands skilled. She bundled her long, white hair in a bun, and died with her natural teeth.

The one person I cannot imagine Grandma trying to boss was my stolid and studious Uncle Jean. After his father died, Jean went to France to study at the Sorbonne. He earned a doctorate in biology. He married a French girl of peasant stock and had a daughter named Helene, after my mother. Jean Beck would become a Frenchman and a professor of science.

As soon as Mother finished high school, Grandma Beck packed all their belongings and set off with her daughter for Paris, so they could be with Jean. They went poor because the Rumanian government had cheated my grandmother out of most of her husband's insurance; and money from the sale of their house was not allowed to leave the country. With her small savings and a hat

full of bitterness, Grandma left her homeland and never went back.

Mother went to the Sorbonne for two years. She loved student life; she had boyfriends; she skied in Switzerland and was a white-water canoeist. Then she discovered photography. There was a chance meeting with a Hungarian photographer friend of her brother's. The young man needed money to start a business. My grandmother invested 5,000 francs. When no profit came of it, Mother was sent to La Place d'Etoile to investigate.

The business failed, but during her inspections, Mother learned about cameras and lighting, developing and retouching. Retouching would be her specialty. Mother was a retoucher for *Vogue* during its Paris heyday. At twenty, she worked under the fashion photographers and became an assistant, then a full-fledged shooter. She posed models in Chanel suits; retouched negatives to create the illusion of perfection.

Beauty has been my mother's specialty. She is a master of beautiful surfaces. I remember watching her bend over a print; she used a magnifying glass. With a fine brush or pen, she could white-out wrinkles, the blemish on a woman's face. Her hand never faltered. Mother taught my father the art of photography and they opened the first Studio Deutch in Montparnasse.

Grandma Beck could have married again. Many widows remarried. But for her, such a choice was unthinkable. I remember the day she lost her gold wedding ring down the bathroom drain in our Chicago apartment. I was eleven. Grandma Beck held my hand. Her skin was soft as butter. I remember liver spots.

"I wish you could have known your grandfather, Henrik," she said. "He was so nice to me." This was a reprimand. My father, my sisters, and me—we were not so nice. I tried to pull my hand

away. Tears ran down her wrinkled cheeks. Fifty years had passed since Grandma's husband had died, and still she wept when she spoke his name.

"Annickam, I miss him always so much," she said in her broken English, but there was little sympathy I could give her, for my heart had already hardened. A precocious eleven-year-old bookworm, I despised sentimentality, thought Grandma's nostalgia was a poor excuse for real emotion. I vowed never to fall into that trap.

Looking back, I'm afraid I judged my grandmother too quickly and too harshly, but I thought then, and I still believe that it is safer to weep for the past than to risk the changes and disappointments of creating a new persona—taking charge of your life. If Grandma Beck wanted to remain faithful to her husband's memory and live celibate, well that was all right, but she could have done something more fulfilling (say less frustrating) than being a live-in nanny, cook, and manager of her daughter's household for over half a century.

Now I realize it was not so easy to declare independence when custom and experience dictated such caretaking was the proper role for a widow. Mother explains that from the moment I was born she depended on her mother for support. Mother worked with my father in their photographic studio in Paris. When they came to Chicago, she continued to work. Grandma, who lived in her own apartment in Paris, came to live in our home in Chicago. She traded independence for security and connection—a lifetime of being the third wheel in our small contentious family.

Grandma Beck should have been an entrepreneur. I think of her running a dress shop—buying and selling, bossing the young girls. I think I'm a bit like her—bossy by nature. I bossed my

sisters. Tried to boss my mother. I can hear Grandma's nagging to this day: "Come here, Annick. Pick up your socks. Wash the dishes. How can you go out, like a gypsy—in blue jeans?"

Seren-nani (Aunt Serene) swore in Hungarian. We learned good stuff: *Oy yoy Ishtenem* (Oh my God); *bidush kutya* (you are a stinky dog). When all else failed, she put us in the broom closet. At dinner Grandma quarrelled with my father, and losing whatever battle it was that day, would run to her room, weeping. Then Mother would quarrel with my father over his fight with Grandma. The quarrelling extended into their work. Mother had her ideas. My father had his ideas. Mother was not like Grandma Beck. She might turn hysterical, but she couldn't be boss. When she became pregnant with my sister, Carole, her third child, she made a deal with my father. Mother would quit work if he bought a big house and moved us to the suburbs.

From the middle of my eighth-grade year until I went away to college, I lived in Wilmette on the North Shore of Chicago—part of the first Jewish family, I'm told, to break into that exclusive lily-white burg. My little sisters joined the Congregational Church. I was a stubborn outsider who found it impossible to join anything. Mother had worked all her life. Now she devoted her considerable energies and creative talents to living the suburban life of the 1950s. She learned to garden, play bridge, to cook and to sew; and she decorated our three-story white stucco house in high modern style, with hand-woven fabrics and Danish furniture.

Mother wanted us to fit in, too. She sewed our clothes from Vogue patterns—designer dresses we could never afford to buy at Marshall Fields. Her stitching was immaculate, but I always felt different from my blond classmates in their cashmeres and

pleated plaid skirts, so rich and so casual. I wore braces to bring my jaw forward and push back the slightly buck teeth I'd inherited from Mother. She had her teeth fixed, also. Then she started in on my large Deutch nose.

"You should get a nose job," she said. I was obstinate. "If you fix your nose, you'll look like Elizabeth Taylor."

Elizabeth Taylor had blue eyes and big boobs. "Don't touch me," I said. I did not want to be improved.

My sister Kathy was a dancer. She wanted to be an actress. Before she went to college, Mother convinced her to have the nose job. With her streamlined nose, Kathy was perfect enough to be a model, but never felt perfect enough to fit into the myth of the beautiful family that my mother created in place of self-esteem.

Maybe it was part of the immigrant experience in the aftermath of World War II, this wanting to fit in—the desire to look like your blue-eyed neighbors. Or fear of being persecuted by Senator McCarthy and his Red-baiting minions. Fear of being liberal and Jewish and vulnerable. Until my father fell for another woman and divorced my mother, causing the family myth to come crashing down on her, she believed in the story she'd created. And so did her children.

For years I ran away from my mother because, like her mother before her, she had wrapped her life in mothballs for the sake of her children—for me. A person who perceives herself as the object of someone else's sacrifice cannot bear the responsibility inherent in that obligation. I knew I could never be the ideal daughter Mother needed me to be, or deluded herself into thinking I was. I ran away by marrying at nineteen, having my first son at twenty, moving to Seattle at twenty-one. I had to live my own life.

Now I have grown children and know what it is to live in your offspring. I understand Mother's desire for sacrifice, although it's not my *modus operandi*, and I am able to appreciate—even express appreciation for—the help she has given me and my boys when we needed mothering care. I see myself in her—the virtues as well as the faults—for the first time in my life, and I can smile at the likeness.

Mother has lost both her breasts in radical mastectomies. Her heart is over-worked. She has high blood pressure. She sneezes. She takes dozens of pills and sees doctors for every ailment. She loves to walk beaches and woods on her strong and shapely old legs, like I do, and she has become wiser. Mother is more passive now, more honest, more resigned. She accepts life with a shrug, and is still scared to death of death.

When I look at the pictures my mother created in her Paris days, I forgive her the excesses of willful love and self-serving denial: there is a nude, like a doe in deep grass; and my father's backlit Egyptian profile; and a bald baby (me) in a wicker cradle, the lawn starry with daisies. My mother has always been an artist. Her people float in sunlight. When she goes, I hope to be there to hold her hand.