

My Mother, Eating; or Dystalgia, A Memoir

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In Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1940's, one of my mother's many boyfriends was a salesman who used to stand straight as a board and then almost fall flat on his face—catching himself at the very last minute—just to make her laugh. A vivacious, green-eyed and very pretty high school dropout, she probably should have married him.

FAMILY DINNERS

When I was a teenager I'd ask my mother, "How can you aim *downwards*?" meaning that she looked much better without all the make-up; and her brown curls were nicer than her now-bleached and heavily lacquered hair; and why in the world would she want to copy her New York friends' accents, which sounded vulgar to me but at least were genuine. "What do you know?" my mother would say. "Your head's always in a *book*."

When she was nineteen she met my thirty-three year-old father, a general practitioner from Cleveland who'd become a New York psychoanalyst. As reserved and reticent as she was warm and outgoing, he must have hoped that being with a pretty and lively young woman would help him get over his shyness; she probably saw him as a sophisticated older man who could teach her about life. A year later they married; and a year later I was born. They both enjoyed his doing things like buying her a mink, introducing her to lobster, and taking her on expensive vacations, but by the time I was old enough to notice, there seemed to be nothing but tension between them. They must have loved each other at some point because when I went into their bedroom one evening when I was nine or ten to try to persuade her to come out to Sunday dinner with us, she was lying in bed in the dark and, too depressed to even open her eyes, she murmured, "Love dies."

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I grew up in 1950s Manhattan, where it seemed as if everyone we knew was in or should be in psychoanalysis. Like many of his colleagues, my father was socially

awkward, which may have had something to do with their choosing a profession that required only limited interactions with patients. The theory was that for fifty minutes, five days a week, the mainly silent analyst would function as a kind of blank screen upon which the freely associating patient could project his/her fantasies. (My father was so doctrinaire that he was probably pleased that his looks—average height and weight, glasses, thinning hair—weren't particularly distinctive.)

I was a Daddy's girl, although this tended to be one-sided since my father, no doubt worried that I had an Electra complex, certainly didn't encourage me. My fantasy was that with his degrees in both medicine and psychiatry, his knowledge of mind *and* body, he was just about perfect. And whereas he worked long hours both to accommodate his patients and to pay for the psychotherapists we all went to, my mother spent her days playing canasta with her "girlfriends" and buying what I thought were inappropriately low-cut and tight clothes. When she was in a good mood she'd sing the songs of Sinatra who, I'd point out, was practically a criminal.

She didn't talk about her unhappy marriage, but I knew she was always taking "tranquillizers" prescribed by her psychiatrist and supplemented by drug-company samples that my father kept in an overflowing shoebox in his closet. I sensed that she was insecure because she hadn't gone to college. And of course my constant criticisms of her and my always wanting "my *Daddy*" didn't help. But when she'd complain about little things like how drafty our apartment was in winter, I'd give her my stony, "I could care less" look. If she was hurt, she didn't show it. When we fought she'd say things like, "I'm the queen around here." "Then *Daddy's* king!" I'd hiss.

Our family dinners were grim. Our current cleaning lady (there was a frequent turnover) cooked and served. Doubtless eager to get home to her own family, she'd seem sullen and unhappy. We'd sit at the long table in our Upper West Side dining room with

its partial view of the Hudson, my parents at opposite ends, often not speaking. My mother would be wearing a filmy, loosely tied robe. “You’re exposed,” my father would say flatly. The room seemed to be filled with her many artificial smells—perfume, breath fresheners, hairspray; plus the smells of the sweet foods she favored, like ham with pineapple, sweet and sour meatballs, sweet potatoes with marshmallows. When she’d occasionally cook, her specialty was baked lima beans and honey. She worried about her weight—she could have lost twenty pounds—so whenever possible, things like our sweetish salad dressing would be low-calorie. As I ate I felt I was also tasting my mother’s smells.

My father thought it would be unethical for him to talk about the one thing he was interested in, his analytic practice, so he said little. Occasionally he’d murmur that my mother or I or whomever we were talking about was hostile, ambivalent, projecting, acting out, etc. He tended to be cryptic, but my mother and I knew that if we asked questions, instead of answering he’d say something like, “Why are *you* so interested?” Even Daddy’s girl found this annoying.

If she weren’t depressed, my mother would do most of the talking. She’d describe her latest purchase—“I mean, it’s beyond fabulous, it’s to *die* for”; or she’d “rave” about a romance novel she was “devouring.” Although I’d often find her gossip about her girlfriends interesting, I’d look heavenward, as if *my* mind, at least, were on higher things. My father either said little or responded to her chatter with a weary, “Yes, dear,” like some long-suffering cartoon husband with a ditzzy wife.

I particularly hated the way she’d use psychoanalytic jargon. “Daddy’s the analyst,” I’d say primly.

“I’m the analyst’s *wife*!” she’d say triumphantly.

My father would be silent.

For dessert we’d have something like canned fruit cocktail sweetened with saccharine. My mother would drink instant coffee out of a tall plastic glass that she’d sometimes hold high: “Here’s a toast to you and me,” she’d say, “and if by chance we don’t agree...” dramatic pause . . . “The *hell* with you . . .” pointing her glass in my father’s and my direction, “Here’s to *me*!”

I’d look heavenward; he’d be silent.

After dinner he’d go into his study to type up his

recorded notes about the day’s patients. As I approached, I’d overhear things like, “Patient fantasized that when I go away in August, she’ll masturbate with water from the garden hose,” or, “Patient dreamed that I ‘charmed the pants off of’ his wife...”

“Yes?” my father would say reluctantly when I’d knock, doubtless anticipating a litany of complaints about my mother.

As I went through my grievances he’d neither agree with me nor defend her, but at some point he’d murmur, “One day you’ll go away to college and then, as soon as you graduate, you can go into analysis.” It was his version of hope.

DINNER PARTIES

The guests were usually other analysts and their college-educated wives. My mother boasted about how she was the best looking. Despite her bleached hair, heavy make-up and being overweight, she was, but I’d either look exasperated by her boasting or tell her to wash off some of the make-up and change into something more “refined.” “You’re so ignorant,” she’d say. Looking in the mirror, she’d thrust out her chest to emphasize her cleavage, purse her bright-red mouth and, leaning forward, pretend to give herself a big kiss.

Although the food would be catered, she’d be so anxious about the party that she’d have our cleaning lady set the table days in advance; by the time the night arrived the ornate linens, china and heavy crystal would look dusty and tired to me. I wouldn’t join the guests but was expected to come out and say hello. Once my mother bought me fancy velvet lounging pajamas to wear for my brief greetings. “You’re *sick*!” (one of our favorite accusations) I said when she proudly showed me the outfit. When the big night came and I made my appearance—pale, thin, my long dark hair just hanging there limply; wearing something like jeans and a black turtleneck—“*You’re sick*,” my mother whispered.

Even as they greeted me briefly the analysts would seem anxious to get away, but their wives were warmer. Most had careers, often in social work; a few were artists. I’d note how much classier they were than my mother’s girlfriends. My mother liked to say that she was “famous” for her Brandy Alexanders, a cocktail that involved crème de cacao, half and half, coffee ice cream

and some spice I couldn't identify. I'd feel sorry for the guests, having to drink this before dinner. The analysts looked happiest talking to each other about their work. I admired their passion and dedication. My mother, interrupting them, would smile seductively as she'd say things like, "I'll be *such* a sad girl if you don't have more of these to-die-for piggies in a blanket." I'd imagine the field day the guests would have later, analyzing my parents' marriage. As soon as I could I'd go back to my room and put my head in a book, but sometimes I'd hear my mother's loud, phony-sounding voice, her tense, artificial laugh. Once, walking through the dining room as they were eating, I saw that one of her cheeks was puffed up like a chipmunk: she must have been holding some food there while she waited for an opportunity to interrupt someone talking about some serious subject to urge him or her—"Pretty please with sugar on top"—to have more of the sweet, rich food.

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After twenty-two years my parents finally went to a marriage counselor who finally asked, "When was the last time you laughed together?" and that was the end of their marriage.

Meanwhile I'd gone away to and graduated from college and moved back to the city where I taught English, wrote stories, had tempestuous affairs and, of course, went into analysis. When I met my future husband, it was easier to be with my now-single mother because I'd make sure Jim was always there. He didn't know quite what to make of her, and her seductive manner made him uncomfortable, but he'd point out that compared to my father, at least she was warm and vivacious. Giving him my stony "I could care less" look, I'd tell another sad story about my childhood. He'd say I was being "dystalgic."

THE MAGIC PILL

After her divorce, my mother asked her therapist, "Where's the magic pill?" "Work's the magic pill," he finally said, and she got a job as a saleswoman in the Children's Department of Lord & Taylor. It seemed to me that she used her employee's discount to buy herself a lot of clothes, but she clearly enjoyed working, and her metamorphosis from customer to saleswoman apparently didn't bother her. Although I admired her for changing

her life, I still found it difficult to be alone with her; and she must have felt that my belated approval was too little too late. Perhaps when my first child was born my mother would have been a devoted granny and she and I could have tried to make up for lost time, but not yet sixty—"young for Florida," she boasted—she moved to Miami.

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She rented a studio in a high-rise surrounded by blocks and blocks of other high-rises. She didn't have a car, but there was a small grocery store in her building that carried Weight Watchers frozen dinners. In the lobby of a nearby building there was a dress shop that sold things like pastel sweaters decorated with seed pearls, and my mother got a job there as a saleswoman. Her customers were mainly older women like herself, often "snowbirds" who were only in Florida for the winter. She enjoyed helping and chatting with them, and when she fell and broke her arm, she worried that her employers wouldn't let her work with a cast. They did.

She found new girlfriends to play cards with. They had cars and would drive her to the mall and to restaurants with early bird specials. She had an obese maid named Tiny. They'd send each other cards for every holiday. At one point my mother dated a younger man. I knew nothing about him until he called one night, said "Hi Karen" and, without explaining who he was, terrified me by making it clear that he knew personal details about my mother's life. When she finally came on the phone she said she couldn't talk long because they were going out for lobster and champagne. She sounded girlish and happy; I was happy for her. But a few weeks later he wanted to borrow money from her and when he discovered she didn't have much, he stopped calling. Then she was a sort of companion to a much older man. His daughter, who didn't live in Florida, would send her expensive presents that she'd spend a lot of time exchanging.

I'd call her once a week, and once a year she'd visit us. My children didn't quite know what to make of her. She'd walk around in loosely tied negligees and didn't know how to play with them—it was painful to watch her try. One day she insisted on making us her honeyed lima beans, but somehow she burned them. "I don't know how it happened," she kept saying

wonderingly. “I mean, I really wanted to make them for you, I wasn’t at all ambivalent.” She wasn’t demanding and was grateful when we took her out to dinner or to a play. But the whole time she was there I’d worry that she’d get sick and would have to stay longer. At some point she’d ask about my father, who’d remarried. I’d tell her the truth, that we tended to talk mainly about my children. “Does he ever ask about me?” she’d ask coyly. Although he never did, I’d say, “Sometimes.”

PLEASURE FOOD

When she first moved to a nearby nursing home—her broken arm never healed and she began to have trouble walking—she didn’t seem to mind. Elsie, a private aide, came a few times a week. They gave each other cards for all the holidays. Within a few years my mother was in a wheelchair and had a feeding tube. She was allowed a little “pleasure food,” mainly sweets. She never complained about her life. The only thing she asked me to send her was candy made with an artificial sweetener. Once when I visited I snuck in a cheeseburger for her, but as I kept trying to cut it into small pieces, she kept trying to grab it. I couldn’t stand it and left the room, leaving Jim to do most of the feeding.

A few years later she was in the Visitor’s Room, when and where she’d said she’d be, but she looked so diminished I walked right by her. Elsie told me to buy the few clothes my mother needed in a thrift shop, since they washed all the patients’ clothes together and tended to give back whatever looked as if it would fit. I thought about going to her favorite stores and buying something nice that she could at least wear once, but in the end I didn’t. She died in her early eighties.

MEMORIAL

I decided to scatter her ashes around trees on the rapidly gentrifying Upper West Side that she never knew. Jim and I did it at night, in front of stores and restaurants that I associated with her, like Zabar’s (where once she’d run into her psychiatrist on the lox line) and the Town Shop, which still had saleswomen who could tell your bra size just by looking. Tip Toe Inn—the dairy restaurant where she’d been too depressed to join us that night she’d said that love dies—had been on 86th Street and Broadway, but it was hard to remember just where other stores

and restaurants used to be. We scattered ashes in the general vicinity of places I remembered, like the store that sold and monogrammed fancy lingerie, gloves and handkerchiefs. My mother’s seamstress used to work there and would tell us that some of the customers were high-end call girls whose sexy underwear was “immaculate.” My mother loved that story. I’d cringe every time I’d overhear her retelling it and emphasizing, in her phony New York accent, “*immaculate*.” We scattered ashes near the spot where, on my way to her apartment one evening, I stopped and asked myself why I was going, since I knew I’d have an awful time. Of course she was expecting me for dinner and I went, but that was the first time I wasn’t annoyed at myself afterwards for not remembering *before* I was already there, how bad it would be. We ended up throwing most of her ashes in the vicinity of the sliver of the Hudson we used to be able to glimpse from our dining room window.

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A few weeks later I had a small memorial dinner to introduce my children to some of my mother’s favorite foods.

We started with Brandy Alexanders. I found a recipe online that sounded right, and I learned that nutmeg was the taste I’d never been able to identify. The drinks were a hit and tasted better than I remembered, but they were so filling that I worried we were spoiling our appetites. I was surprised when my children said they could eat, and it occurred to me that my parents’ guests might not have been as miserable as I’d thought. I’d baked lima beans with honey—not a hit—but unable to decide between ham with pineapple and sweet and sour meatballs, I finally just roasted a chicken.

ICE CREAM CONE

By the time my younger granddaughter was born on what would have been my mother’s eighty-eighth birthday, I thought of my mother so rarely that I hadn’t even anticipated or hoped for the coincidence. I was surprised at how pleased—and moved—I felt. I remembered a story Elsie must have told me before my mother died, that I must have immediately repressed:

Although by then my mother wasn’t “herself” any more (during my last visit she’d known who I was but hardly spoke), Elsie had thought she’d enjoy getting

out for a change, so she rented a van big enough for my mother's wheelchair and drove her to a nearby mall.

When they got there Elsie took her car keys and locked her purse in the van because she was planning to just wheel my mother around and let her window-shop. The walk through the huge lot was unbearably hot, but the mall was cool and my mother seemed to be having a good time. Then they went by a store that sold ice cream. People all around were licking cones, and my mother begged for one. Elsie cursed herself for not having taken her purse, but she wasn't about to go back and forth across the broiling lot to get it.

Of course I don't blame her, but I very much wish I could have been there and bought my mother an ice cream cone.

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Although for years she was very different from the mother who'd made me so unhappy, I can't say I miss her. The only time I did was when I was pregnant for the first time and, walking around the city I'd sometimes see other pregnant women arm-in-arm with women who looked like their mothers: although my mother hadn't yet moved to Florida, I'd feel envious and alone.

Sometimes I imagine that my mother married the salesman who'd made her laugh. They live someplace warm, like Florida. Made-up, perfumed, wearing a filmy negligee and singing along with Sinatra, she can't wait for her sweetie to come home from his latest road trip. Finally she hears his key in the lock and then just like in the movies, he takes her in his arms and tilts her way back for a lingering kiss. Later they go out for lobster and champagne. They love eating out and although they don't have a lot of money, do it often because they both work and, even in my fantasy, there's just the two of them; no children.