My Mom - Gerry Scott-Moore (2/14/24)

I can't know who my mother or father really were; I only have guesses. By the age of 20, my father was 4 years dead and 10 years gone. My mother managed to acquire another breadwinner when I was 15, but he and I shared a cold and contentious relationship. After I left for college, I was no longer welcome in his home, so my relationship with my mother was conducted through the occasional phone call or letter. As might be expected of a young man, I was good at neither. Our relationship was warm, cordial, loving, ostensibly normal. Nevertheless, I'd be hard put to say I understood her thinking, her life, her choices, what thoughts filled her head on a quiet Tuesday afternoon. I can only present her through a simple outline of our first 18 years together.

Born in Oklahoma City, her father was the owner and operator of a small grocery store. Her mother was a passionate and devoted member of the Church of the Nazarene, in which both she and her own mother, my great-grandmother, were founding members. Nazarene doctrine forbade dancing, drinking, smoking, immodesty of dress, games of chance, makeup, movies, and once television was invented, forbade that too.

My grandfather was quiet on the topic of religion. He played guitar in a few country duos, including occasional performances on local radio. My mother's siblings all played musical instruments, and my mom sang. She was generally a believer, I suppose, but only begrudgingly acceded to the severe edicts of the Nazarene as she grew up. She was brunette, 5'8", and always slim, elegant, and pretty. She wanted to be an actress. When she was 16, her Uncle Charlie, her father's brother, was a dancer on Broadway. He was summoned to Hollywood to play the lead in RKO's "The Dancing Pirate" with Frank Morgan, now best known as The Wizard of Oz. Uncle Charlie was a movie star.

After attending Bethany Junior College in a suburb of OKC, she was hired as a secretary at a radio station where my father was a writer and on-air talent. They flirted, courted, and wed with big dreams for lives as artists. Instead, she got pregnant and he got drafted. When the war ended, he joined the US Foreign

Service. They began traveling the world and birthing children. Art became secondary before turning to mist and drifting away.

1961 is a year that reads the same upside-down and backward. As my father devolved into an abusive alcoholic, life too became progressively upside-down and backward, and their marriage ended in divorce. She had a skinny resume, only that year as a secretary in 1939. She had never learned to drive or swim, and had no money, so was compelled to return to her Nazarene mother, who was now five years widowed and working as a pediatric nurse in Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Mom, we four children, and my grandmother shared both sides of a duplex with a newly installed door between them. Each was a one-bedroom. After continual acrimony between the kids and our controlling grandma, we moved to one side, and the door was closed. Mother worked three jobs at a time to feed the family and pay the rent. Her primary job was as a secretary for the local unemployment office, but she also did freelance typing for a local psychologist. On weekends, she was a hostess at a fancy steakhouse with a tiki theme. So now her time-drained life was demanding but stable.

After staples were in the pantry, her next priority was to find a stage, in this case, the Ardmore Little Theater. She was in every performance that had a viable female role for the next 10 years. She also directed a few productions. In 1964, she met Joel, a salesman for oil field equipment, a suitable candidate for marriage. We moved two blocks away to a more appropriately sized house for six. She soon ended her secretarial career and learned to drive.

Until I left home, whenever there was a part for a boy, I would get recruited. Even when we were small children, she had led the neighborhood kids in variety or talent shows, with skits culled from books or written by my older sister, Jenni. Mom was good with a sewing machine and quick with a costume. We had a black steamer trunk hauled from the closet, fully stocked with stage gear: a yarmulke, a straw conical Chinese straw hat with faux pigtails attached, a three-cornered hat, capes, plastic daggers and sword, a passel of fake mustaches, beards, sideburns, and wigs. Halloween was a thrill, and show business was a lot of fun.

In the late '60s, she initiated the Children's Summer Theater. She taught dramatic technique, selected a play, and rehearsed it. At the conclusion of the season, a full production was staged locally. It was successful enough to become an annual tradition. Many students, now grown to adulthood, have told me of her influence on them through these classes.

In 1972, she was rehearsing "The Lion in Winter" as director and lead. It was to be the inaugural play at the modern new Ardmore Arts Center. Contentious discussions with the conservative new board of directors demanded revisions for naughty words, racy ideas, and unacceptable scenes. The play, eviscerated one organ at a time, morphed into a confused theatre of the absurd. A few weeks before the performance, Mom canceled the production and resigned from all posts at Little Theater. Thus, her acting career concluded. She was depressed for a few months.

Not one inclined to the absence of momentum, she leased a small shop downtown and opened a used bookstore. It did well enough that she moved to a larger location with consistent plumbing. She operated this bookstore for 15 years. Several people have told me that she helped to shape their reading habits with her thoughtful recommendations.

A lifetime smoker, in her early seventies, she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Staying in my sister's home in Princeton, New Jersey, she endured the chemo and radiation treatments, and when finally in remission, she began her recovery. Unexpectedly, a month later, her lungs began filling with fluid, and she was rushed to the hospital and put on a respirator. Wired up and festooned with pumps and hoses, she looked like an astronaut. She left our orbit at age 73.

She repeatedly told me I was smart and capable and could accomplish anything, praised me for minor accomplishments, and bolstered me with fresh hopes after small failures. There was a universe of information she didn't have about how best to raise a son. I doubt my father, had he been present, would have fared better at the task than any other "father-of-the-'50s." I've come to think the best any father can do is be a role model for changing times. A son can then use the model as a goal, or a cautionary tale, as circumstances demand.

She wasn't clingy. Perhaps that's inescapable for a woman with four children spaced roughly three years apart. After the age of 9, I was free to come and go as I pleased. If I got in trouble, I got disciplined. I learned my own lessons in my own way. I started smoking and drinking clandestinely with all my other friends around 15 or 16. My mom drank and smoked. These things weren't bad, per se; they were simply "adult".

After I was dropped off at college, my mother was never a touchstone for me. I didn't seek her guidance when I needed some, nor did I feel compelled to periodically spill my guts. I liked her a lot, but I didn't need her. After her new husband dissolved my membership in the family, independence wasn't simply important; it was critical; I had survival to consider. I had to eat and find a place to sleep, and experience had provided me with few skills or direction in this pursuit. If it had not been for dumb luck and generous girlfriends with paying jobs, I can't imagine how I would have survived.

I try to summon an image of a whole person to relay to others, but it's difficult. In my mind, I wander through the last home I shared with my family in 1969, but after fifty years, I can summon little detail. My mother, Joel, and my brother Billy, the last sibling remaining, moved to a larger home with an unattached garage apartment. Billy had this apartment for the remaining three years of his high school years. I didn't see Billy or their home until two years later, while my parents were gone on vacation. By then, my old home was torn down to make a parking lot for the library.

In that old house, there was always a pile of subscription magazines on the coffee table in the living room, including the New Yorker and National Geographic. On the walls, there were paintings that Mom had done in various art classes, some of which predated my arrival on the planet. A small 4-octave organ with a button panel for chords was against one wall. Mom had always encouraged the kids to play it, and I taught myself to play it, as did my brother. That pleased her. There was a shelf full of the mighty Encyclopedia Britannica. My parents bought them in 1958 at considerable expense; they hoped their children would become learned. When I asked her any question that might have

a higher authority, she sent me there, and I actually read them, dictionary in hand. I'm sure that was satisfying to her as well.

There was a TV in the den, which we didn't often watch together, but Mom and I were there when the late election results came in; Hubert Humphrey lost to Richard Nixon. She cried a little and tried to explain it, but after searching for words, she could only choke out, "He's such a crumb." Sitting on that same couch some years earlier, my brother and I had been looking through her old yearbook from Bethany Junior College, when she sat down with us. There was a jock, Whitey, who autographed his every appearance in the book and wrote a few notes to her. Her girlfriends, too, wrote their sincere dedications. We asked her what they were all doing now, and she laughed, saying she couldn't imagine. When Billy said, "You ought to call them and talk," I saw a change in her eyes as she stared at the pictures. She looked amused and sad, nostalgic and resigned, all at the same time. I could sense she was walking around that campus in her mind. It hurt me in a strange way to see her look like that, and I turned away.

In my mind, I wander to the kitchen and remember there was never a salt shaker on the kitchen table, only pepper. Many years later, when I no longer ate her cooking, I incidentally encountered the taste of her culinary style: plenty of cracked pepper on everything.

I have tried to avoid recounting family lore or set pieces about Mom, but here's one: While I was in training as a juvenile delinquent, I got drunk periodically on whatever we could buy from a hoodlum with a fake ID. I also sampled several things from my parents' well-stocked booze cabinet. I tried drinking some of Mom's vodka and replaced it with water. Sometime later, when they were out of town, I did this again, now with a buddy and more vigor. A few weeks passed. One night at the dinner table while eating a ham steak, my mom said the ham was salty. She asked if I wanted some water. Sure, I said. She brought out a bottle of Smirnoff from the cabinet and poured the remainder, glug-glug-glug, into a tall glass and pushed it in front of me. "It might taste like vodka", she said. She then tasted it herself, "Nope, doesn't taste remotely of vodka." I was grounded for the rest of the month.

She was always entertaining.