Five Decades

by Anne E. Noonan

I didn't like the way she sounded on the phone – the shortness of breath, her report that oxygen tanks had been delivered, the discouraged words. She didn't seem to be in any immediate danger, and my sister, who was visiting and had brought dinner, confirmed that. We agreed I would visit the next day, a Saturday. But as I was getting ready in the morning, the phone rang, too early for good news. It was another sister. "Mom's at Baystate" she said. "She had a heart attack late last night. They did a catheterization, and she's resting now in intensive care."

I drove the 100 miles to Western Massachusetts and arrived at the hospital around 10. The scene in intensive care was an active one. My mother was connected to several different monitors, each making a chirping or beeping noise. Medical staff were in and out of the room, checking the monitors or tending to her. As my sister and I stood in a corner, doing our best to stay out of the way, she brought me up to speed. All of the monitors reported bad news, with numbers either too high or too low.

Over the next few hours, though, things began to look more promising. At one point, my mother and I sat alone together. She apologized for not being able to talk much through the oxygen mask, and told me to go back home to my family. "Why just sit there," she said, "when there are things you could be doing at home?" So I left. She continued to improve over the weekend, and was well enough to discuss assisted living facilities with my siblings, having made it clear years ago that she had no intention of being a burden to any of us. But around dinnertime on Monday, she found out that her heart was in much worse shape than anyone had imagined. She was told that she wouldn't live much longer.

I said my goodbyes on Tuesday, in a visit complicated by the weather. Two separate snowstorms were expected to hit that day, one in the morning and one at night. Trying to get ahead of the first one, I left my house at 4:00 a.m. and arrived at the hospital at sunrise when the first flakes had begun to fall. My mother was aware of the forecast, and was annoyed that I'd be driving in it. Remembering that I'd been there on Saturday, she told me to "stop all this back-and-forthing." She said she knew she would die soon, and that she was ready. "I've had it," she said, making reference to the decade of serious health problems that she'd had to endure. Then she told me she loved me, I told her the same, and she turned her head away from me, to rest. And that was the end of our visit. There was no drama. I didn't sob and beg her to hang on. She didn't clutch at me or plead with me to stay. She knew she would be well cared for by her four children who were around, her A-team. I was a B-lister, non-essential personnel. She was getting down to the business of dying, and she needed to keep things simple. She died on Thursday, at the age of 85, with a son holding one of her hands and a daughter holding the other.

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My mother left behind a two-bedroom apartment full of things. She was tidy

and thrifty, but she liked having things, and the task of sorting through them fell to my seven older siblings and me. Most of the work was done by the three who live near our hometown. The other five of us – from the Boston area, upstate New York, Maine, Vermont, Ohio – helped when we could. For me, living two hours away and being fully immersed in a new semester of teaching, this meant twice. Both times, I left the apartment with things, some just to get rid of them, to make room on the floor for something else. Some things came my way because no one else seemed interested, like the heavy glass bowl with etched oak leaves. Some things I took because I liked them or knew my mother would he happy for me to have them – silky scarves, DVDs of the *I Love Lucy* show, jewelry from my father who had died fourteen years earlier.

It had always seemed tacky and disrespectful to me, this idea of combing through the possessions of the deceased and – worse – claiming items for oneself. But the process at my mother's didn't feel that way. One of my siblings commented that our mother hadn't earmarked things for people because she trusted us to handle it all tastefully. That may be true. For my own part, I vacillated between wanting nothing at all, because none of it would make up for the loss of her, and a crazy greed that felt sticky and stunted, wanting as much as I could have because every object was a piece of her. And that feeling was most powerful when it came to the rosary beads.

When I was a child, the beads were always in my parents' bedroom, a quiet room just off the kitchen. Sometimes, I would tiptoe in when the room was empty, and sneak one of the Canada Mints my mother hid from us in her nightgown drawer. Other times, I'd go in just to gaze at the small pots of perfect African violets in the window, counting the different shades of purple and patting the fuzzy leaves. When I was upset or didn't feel well, I would rest on my parents' bed and would slide my hand into the cool space under my mother's pillow. There, seemingly giving off its own cool air, would be the string of crystal rosary beads, the color somewhere between turquoise and the blue of eucalyptus candy.

I had been bold enough back then to tell my mother that I wanted the rosary beads when she died, and I repeated the request so much that it was a joke between us during my adulthood. After we had all moved out of the house, though, my mother lost the beads. She broke the news to me gently, ending with, "Maybe they'll turn up after I'm gone." So during one of the cleanout days at her apartment, I alerted my siblings to be on the lookout for them. Over the course of several hours, they brought me every string of rosary beads she owned, nearly a dozen. Finally, someone came across a blue set, but they felt different. They seemed less substantial somehow, and they brought no comfort. When I was nearly ready to accept that these were the beads I remembered, another sibling brought another blue set, and I had the same reaction. Still unsure, I ended up taking both sets, convinced that one set was darker than what I'd remembered, and one was lighter.

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I have not said the rosary in years, and won't. I no longer call myself a Catholic, and I only go into Catholic churches for the occasional wedding or funeral. My mother's funeral was held in the church I was raised in, a grand urban cathedral. One of my sisters, still a parishioner there, designed a service that my mother would have loved. It was formal and beautiful, and

the booming voices of the priests and the grandeur of the organ music reminded me of the awe I had felt there as a child. My husband whispered to our children that this was where we'd been married. I discretely pointed up to the balconies where my elementary school classmates and I would sit when allowed to witness some large event, like the installation of a new bishop.

There were several times during the funeral when I was reminded of how my siblings and I had different experiences of being raised by the same mother. One of my brothers, in a eulogy, shared memories of coming home from school and having my mother listen, "really listen," he said, about his experiences during the day. By the time I was old enough to come home from school with stories, my mother was in her forties and tired after twenty-plus years raising children. I rarely felt that she was eager to listen to me or my stories. When I was ten, I had purchased with my own money a paperback called *See It and Say It In Spanish*, part of a book series for people teaching themselves a language. I had worked hard all afternoon on the first chapter, had aced a self-test, and was ready to share my accomplishments. I picked my spot, waiting until after dinner when she'd be sitting at the table quietly with my father drinking tea. "Do you want to hear me translate this list of words into Spanish," I asked, ready to jump right in and impress. But her answer was, "No." Not "No, not right now." Not "No, maybe later." Just "No."

Of course she did listen to me some of the time, and of course she was loving and tender at other times. When I had a cough, she would pin a square of flannel fabric on the inside of my pajama top before she'd kiss me goodnight. The cloth would have been heated on the radiator for several minutes, and I would fall asleep enveloped by the warmth. During the days, I loved being at home alone with her, when everyone else was off at school and I was still too young to attend. While she ironed huge piles of laundered clothes, I would set up my toy ironing board next to her and toil away, chatting all the while, assuming that she felt exactly as I did about our time alone. I didn't know then that her silence and her unwillingness to indulge my imagination would eventually erode that belief. "What would you do if you had a billion dollars?" I'd ask, running my plastic iron over a doll dress. "I'm never going to," she'd say. "How long would it take you to walk to China?" I'd ask. "I'm not much of a traveler," she'd say.

Indeed, one of my most lasting memories of growing up is how much my mother seemed to need my silence. Unfortunately for the two of us, silence was not my strong suit, not in childhood and certainly not in my teen years. My mother was quiet and matter-of-fact, even-tempered, and not prone to volatility or emotional outbursts. I was the opposite: loud, attracted to complexity, emotionally uneven, and frequently wounded by my mother's indifference. In my pre-teen years, when I was upset about something, she'd tell me to "snap out of it." When I had a problem I wanted to talk about, some issue with a friend or a boy I had a crush on, she'd cut me short with a "don't dwell on it." If I felt a sense of dread or anxiety, she'd say, "It's all in your head," which only served to make the feeling bigger.

When I was in high school, many if not most of our encounters were negative ones. I'd sit next to her in church on Sunday mornings, not caring that I was ruining her most cherished time of the week by refusing to recite prayers or join in the hymns. I was tormented by her refusals to allow me to go out with friends when my presence at home only seemed to annoy her. I would scream and accuse, and she would withdraw further. When I fell in

love, I was incredulous that she seemed not to care. She showed no interest when senior prom time rolled around, so I did the necessary shopping alone or with friends. When I realized that my dress needed to be hemmed, I refused to ask for help and went to a seamstress, an hour away by bus. Even though we lived in the city and there were plenty of tailors around, I wanted to show just how far I'd go to be done with her. On prom night, when my boyfriend arrived to pick me up, both of my parents continued eating their dinner. They didn't get up to take pictures or to see us off.

Perhaps if I had been her first child, when she was in her twenties and more energetic, things would have been different. Maybe she would have seen our mismatch as an interesting challenge to overcome. But I was the last of her eight, and our difficulties spilled out into the rest of the family. My siblings came to resent me for causing her so much trouble, and I entered adulthood with a feeling of being different from them, a vague sense of being lesser. Instead of going to them for advice or encouragement, I turned to friends. I sought people outside of the family as role models. I moved my things back home after graduating from college, but never bothered unpacking. The next week, I signed my first lease and moved an hour away.

Things changed, gradually, once I was established – married, a mother, and occupationally successful in a career none of my siblings had pursued. I felt that they respected and even admired me, which allowed for more connection. But it was always on my own terms. I attended holiday dinners or celebrations only when I chose to, never feeling obligated. And although I was in charge of the rules of engagement, as I'd yearned to be for years, I could never fully enjoy it. I was always aware that this was a posture sculpted from emotional scar tissue. It was the same with my mother. Even when we achieved a good relationship, a peaceful and mutually respectful one, I kept a certain emotional distance. I could never have imagined denying my mother anything, though that's easy to say because she never asked me for much. I could never have been cruel to her. But I do know that I always held back a part of my adult self from her. Who knew when that dismissiveness of hers might return?

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The distance between my mother and me surfaced on a day three years ago, when we first learned that she had heart troubles. She collapsed outside of the YMCA in my town after my daughter's basketball game. At the hospital, the diagnosis was atrial fibrillation. While the medical team worked to stabilize her and then arrange for her transfer back home – to her hospital, her doctors, and her children to whom she was closer – she and I had long stretches of time alone. As had become the case in our weekly phone calls, she needed to chat more than I did, but she eventually ran out of topics, and I was too tired to come up with new ones. Every so often she would interrupt the silence and apologize for ruining my Sunday afternoon, then night, and I would tell her not to worry about it. At one point she looked at me, with a face that had a stirring of something in it, as if she wanted to say something. She wasn't in pain. She didn't need anything brought to her. But in her eyes I saw some kind of want. Maybe it was to tell me something. Maybe she was frightened and just wanted me to do something to make it better.

Whatever the case, I could have done or said something, but I didn't. On the one hand, the feeling was so foggy and fleeting that anyone would have

been hard-pressed to follow up on it. But on the other hand, surely there was something I could have said. “You look like you want to tell me something,” or, “What’s up? It just looked like you were going to say something.” I had long imagined a conversation we might have some day. “I wasn’t always a very good mother to you,” she’d say. ‘Well, I wasn’t always a very good daughter,” I’d reply, laughing. Then one of us would say something about all of that being in the past, and the other would agree, and it wouldn’t go any bigger or deeper than that. I could have tried for that kind of conversation, even initiated it. But I passed. I sat on my vinyl-seated stool and did nothing. A moment later, a doctor came back in, and whatever stirring I had noticed was gone.

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My mother’s death could have happened in any number of ways, and I was by no means guaranteed a chance to say goodbye to her. But since I did have that chance, our goodbye could only have happened the way it did, with her needing to keep things simple and with my feeling dismissed. It was set into motion prenatally, or on the day I was born, or whenever my temperament kicked in. It was pre-ordained every time I delighted in annoying or shocking her, or every time she pulled away from my hunger for her. In these four months since her death, I’ve spent more time than I would have liked remembering this goodbye. I’ve spent more time than I should remembering the emotional distance between us – the part from childhood that I would never have chosen, and the part from adulthood that I knowingly created and recreated. It’s gone on too long, this fixation on the negative. It seems immature and self-centered.

I’ve tried different things to change the tone of my mourning. Sometimes I pretend that the distance wasn’t there, that I’d only imagined it. Other times I try to mourn only certain facets of her, mainly the tender and supportive mother, the one with the warmed squares of flannel long ago and the one I saw so frequently over the past two decades. But those attempts never last long. That kind of mourning is false and empty, and my mother wouldn’t want that from me. I can almost hear her telling me, “Anne Elizabeth, stop the nonsense.” So I do.

But her possessions, those things that are now my possessions, continue to be complicated. I still feel the ambivalence I felt that day in her apartment when I wanted nothing and I wanted everything. There are days when I need to wear a necklace or a scarf, or to look at the glass bowl for a few minutes, because doing so makes me feel better. And there are days when her possessions bring an old unsettled feeling, that Sunday night stirring of anxiety and dread. When I was very young, the Sunday night dread was simple. It involved knowing that I’d be back in school again the next morning, separated from my mother. As I grew older, I’d feel the old dread still, but it became intermingled with a new one, the unfolding realization that our separations brought relief to my mother, a reprieve from me.

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Memorial Day comes. My neighborhood is quiet, people away for the weekend, and the air is heavy and humid. Alone in my bedroom, I look at the rosary beads on my dresser top, the ones that seemed a lighter color than the ones I remember, and the ones that seemed darker. I’ve kept them in plain sight since I took them home, in a small tray that also belonged to

my mother. The tray is in the same place on my bureau that she kept it on hers. The beads have caught my eye a couple times a day. As the weeks have passed, the lighter-colored ones have begun to look less and less like the beads I remember, and the darker ones have become slightly more plausible. I take the darker set in my hands and look closely at them.

There's a small crucifix at the top, then a single bead, followed by a set of three, another single, a metal medallion, then five sets of ten beads, called decades. Each of these is separated by a single bead. I don't remember the meaning behind the arrangement of the beads, what prayer is said as each bead is touched, but I did know the rules once. As I hold them, I notice a speck of yellow in the first decade and discover a small twist of wire holding together two of the tiny links in the chain. The chain must have broken at some point, and my mother must have repaired it. Although it's hard to picture her, with arthritis, twisting the yellow wire so tightly, it's not hard to understand her decision to repair the beads rather than throw them away. The beads had no doubt been blessed by a priest, and she probably believed it sacrilege to throw blest items away.

I sit on the edge of my bed and place the beads under my pillow. Then I lay on the bed, waiting a few minutes to slide my hand up towards them. When I do, I find that they're not cool and slippery to the touch. They feel a little sticky, muddy somehow. I want to cling to the possibility that these could still be *the beads*, that their texture could have changed in over four decades, as the texture of my hands surely has. But then I notice that the beads, because they're round, can be twirled and rolled under a finger. It's fun, almost mesmerizing, to do this, but it removes all possibility that I have the right beads. This rolling and twirling would have captivated me – owned me – as a child, and the memory of it would have locked in my brain forever. I remember now, clearly, that the right beads were flatter, larger, and more oblong. Each bead was slightly indented, creating a perfect hollow for a small fingertip. Those beads would still feel slippery and cool, even in humidity, even to my older hands. It's clear now that those beads were never found during the cleanout. They really are lost, as my mother had warned they might be. But it doesn't take me long to see that the beads I am left with, these darker ones, are exactly the possession I need to represent us. They are not the beads I wanted them to be. They got broken somewhere along the way. And then they got put back together, imperfectly.

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