

REMEMBERING MOIRA.

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My mother lives in St Andrew's. My strong, funny, frightening mother lives in a nursing home. Her rage to live has been gentled by age, injuries, illness and dementia, and possibly by having her immediate needs met immediately: she was always demanding. I love her. I am like her, and we always clashed, but she is only sometimes the fiery mother I remember, though she seems to notice no difference. My mother lives in a nursing home in Western Australia, because she has lost and is losing those parts of her mind and memory that make us socially adaptable: her recollection of the recent past, the manners that smooth relationships and let us share dining rooms and public space. My mother lives in a nursing home in Western Australia and talks constantly of New Zealand, which we left nearly 40 years ago.

My mother has often told the same stories about her family and childhood. Her father, my grandfather, used to tell me about his, and I am sorry now that I can only remember flashes of them, not the whole once-familiar tale. The staff always laugh in the right places at my Mum's stories. They say, and I think they mean, they love her. My Mum seems happier here, in the place she fought not to enter, than she has been for years. She has, I think, decided to accept what she can't change - she never lacked courage - but she is also getting medication now, for the chronic sadness, anxiety and confusion that blighted the last 18 years of her life, before the dementia crashed in. My mother is in a home now, partly because she would not let it be treated. Angry, irritated, anxious, confused and losing judgment she began to fall over, again, and again. Each broken bone and torn skin took longer to recover and a greater emotional and mental toll. Finally she broke a hip, and lost her mind and her independence. In a Perth nursing home she talks sometimes about her childhood and her sisters and brothers, and of the New Zealand where we were all born and her family settled 162 years ago. Her memories are why she would not contemplate, let alone consider being treated for, a mental

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illness, which chronic sadness is: because of the family legend about the psychiatrist who married her sister.

My mother has always told family stories. Sometimes she doesn't remember what she did yesterday, or is unsure about who we are or where we've been. She often greets me with enormous joy, for instance, because she thinks I haven't seen her for months, and that I still live in London. Some memories are intact: she remembers with exquisite exactitude how to infuriate my sister. Some are lost: she doesn't really remember where she and my father lived, though she remembers to be angry with him, but not why. My mother still remembers the family crises; her wedding day; the words, but not the meaning of the Welsh she learned (and to be proud of her mother's Welshness) and the words and tunes of the hymns she and her (Scottish Presbyterian Minister) father sang in the Presbyterian Church that doesn't exist now. Yet when Jocelyn, the only daughter of the family's legendary psychiatrist who married Mum's sister, visited my mother in St Andrew's, Mum not only had no idea who Jocelyn was: she denied she ever had the sister who gave her birth.

My mother would 'never trust a psychiatrist' because the sister who married one, was the first in the family to die, pitifully young and in peculiar circumstances. Her husband, a man not much liked by the other sons-in-law, took her away and – so the family story goes – controlled and manipulated her, deliberately alienating her from her brilliant, sarcastic, clever, competitive and close-knit siblings, from her saintly father, her sensitive, sensible, managing mother. My mother's abiding, superstitious fear of falling into the hands of a 'Svengali,' a practitioner of psychiatry, comes from this story.

The story goes, that her older sister, Hope, made the long journey to her married sister's distant city and telephoned the young wife and mother, who was sitting alone in her home, unable to leave it because she had hurt her foot, which was being treated by her husband. They arranged, by telephone, to meet the next day, but when Hope called that morning, her sister's husband shockingly told her that she could not see her, would never see her, because

his wife had died overnight and was not only being privately cremated, but that very morning. He had not told her family, and would not tell the shocked and grieving girl where her sister's funeral was to be. So Hope called the city's undertakers and found the church and the funeral party: the bereaved psychiatrist husband, sobbing over an open coffin where lay his young, beautiful, dead wife in her wedding gown, supported by the medical colleague who had signed her death certificate. She was cremated an hour or two later.

When he learned of this her father, my grandfather, made a single, emotional telephone call to the widower who 'killed his daughter': there was a single family discussion about 'calling the police' and a policy decision that 'it wouldn't bring her back'. Not surprisingly, the uncomfortable widower – if not actually accused, he must have felt it - cut himself and their only child completely off from my mother's family. He married his nurse some months later, and a few years on died himself, a quite young father, of a drug overdose: leaving Jocelyn.

Suspicion: a sudden death: an almost surreptitious funeral: a quick remarriage: the absence of a grandchild. This family myth has been taught me for nearly 50 years.

My mother, in her nursing home and living in her moment, now does not remember the blonde young mother who died in her early twenties; nor her middle-aged niece, who as a child grew up cared for by a well-loved father, whom she also lost, who in his turn passed on to his child another legend, in which my grandfather was the villain. There is no absolute truth.

I am the present owner of my living mother's dead sister's name: Moira. Moira is supposed to mean 'mother of God', as Mary does, and Morag, Marie, and May, a common sort of name, really, though rarer in distant Western Australia than in the land where I was given it. My mother, in her nursing home, remembers my name, but in her mind I am absent, even when I am sitting at her table watching her read as I am today, writing about what I remember about my mother.