

Honor thy mother

I wrote this story of mothers and daughters and sisters after my husband and I walked the Camino de Santiago this summer. Standing in line at the pilgrim office to get our certificates, we met a woman who had raised six daughters in a farmhouse with one bathroom. I immediately thought of the chaotic Bennet family – although this woman, with her Madonna-like serenity, was utterly unlike Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennet.

1

Sally Bennet sat on edge of the fountain at the pilgrim office. Her feet hurt, but she was smiling. She’d have been happy at something less grueling to celebrate her 70th birthday than a pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela – essentially, a five-day hike. But from the moment they were born, her daughters had surprised her.

When Sally got home, her friends would be impressed by the trip her daughters had given her. They would envy the fact that three of them could afford to go, and take enough time off to go. And wanted to go. And wanted to go with each other. Jane, Lizzy, Mary. And Kitty and Lydia, of course, she added with a sigh. Her daughters.

Sally was thinking about beauty. It seemed to her that people had a misplaced idea about it: a symmetrical, unblemished face – a figure of slim and pleasing proportions – hair in the current style. Sally thought this was a lowest common denominator – a beauty with the least to distinguish it, a blank paper on which little was drawn. She had been that way once, and she remembered it not with fondness as much as satisfaction in having moved past it. It had been enough for Burt to find her attractive and want to marry her. But it was, she knew even then, a callow sort of beauty, owing much to DNA and little to character.

She was beautiful still, but in a more satisfactory way. She knew, as she perched on the edge of the fountain, that her breasts sagged, and her stomach protruded, not to

the point where they touched, but so that if she were holding a baby, that baby would be cradled in three agreeably soft pillows of live and loving flesh. The simplicity of her bobbed hair – now silver – had suited her for decades. Her eyes, once arrestingly blue, had taken on a milky softness. The lines on her face showed her smiles, even when she wasn't smiling. They showed a lifetime of encouragement, and more contentment than not. Her still slender legs ended in feet gnarled with age, with twisted toes and bunions that, she feared, appalled her daughters, especially when she wore, as she did today, practical sandals. Likewise her hands protruded with arthritis, and her wrists and lower arms and upper chest and face were covered with age spots. Her body bore the etchings of her life.

The angular hands that had once been graceful now had the muscle memory of competence. From thousands of hours of washing dishes, casting feed to chickens, changing sheets, and hanging out laundry, they knew how to be helpful without fuss. Her arms knew how to hold without expectation, how to comfort a crying child or a dying husband without attempting to direct fate, but merely to be present.

Her life was simple. Her girls would call it deprived, just as she would call theirs frenzied. Her refrigerator was clean and nearly empty. She fed herself for sustenance more than pleasure, but when needed, she could cook a meal full of love – a pot roast with a dark tomatoey sauce and more salt than her daughters approved of, although they always asked for seconds.

The Camino had been the latest way of putting her body in the service of the people she loved. Her daughters had anticipated that she would like it, being outdoors and spending time together. Jane with her blonde hair and angel face and kind blue eyes – Lizzy with her curly black hair and quick brown eyes and the smile playing at the corner of her mouth – and Mary. Mary with her pinched face and pursed lips and glasses that she liked to peer over. Sally sighed. Mary had actually wanted to have glasses as a child. She might not be as smart as Lizzy, but she tried hard to look it.

How much more would she have liked for them to all come and visit her and Burt at the farm! But they had dismissed that, quickly and unanimously. The official reason was that they didn't want her to do all the work that would involve. The real reason was that they regarded the farm as a level of privation. It would only merit one star on that travel website they were always quoting. It had no wifi. And maybe they were a little afraid of what they might find, falling asleep at night in their childhood beds, in that passage between waking and sleeping where truth happens in the guise of dreams.

2

She and Lizzy had left from Chicago, meeting Jane in Madrid. Mary had joined them at the last minute in Sarria. It was the night before their first walking day, and they wanted a good night's sleep, but Mary dragged them all to the pilgrim supply store and lectured them on what they already knew they would need, and then spent another hour revising all their plans.

Mary annoyed Lizzy with her proclamations and Jane with her judgments. Then realized she'd gone too far. Jane Instagrammed everything, saying she wanted to share the beauty of it. Mary Facebooked everything, insisting that Facebook was superior, allowing for comments and counter-comments. Sally resented having her birthday be used as fodder for their social media lives. She regarded her daughters' phones and tablets as doors through which they disappeared, transformed in ways she didn't understand, like a science fiction movie where you go into the time travel chamber and get split in a million pieces and travel the universe and then come out and fix yourself a cup of coffee. She just wanted for them all to be here, at the table with her, looking at each other and not their little rectangular things.

At first she didn't think she could ask for this, but she mentioned it to Lizzy, and the next day they didn't bring them to breakfast, or at least didn't pull them out until after their first coffee. By which time they had squabbled and she was happy for the

silence. Later that day, Mary sent them in the wrong direction, and although Jane found it beautiful, Lizzy was grumpy. Jane arranged a forgiveness session and everything ended up fine except Sally's feet. Forgiveness on top of fights, blisters on top of blisters.

She had another reason for shunning phones at the table. She had her own phone, and Burt had her number of course, although in his thrifty way he wouldn't call. If he did, she would know from the cheerful bluegrass tune that had always been his ring. But the respite nurse also had her number. Sally had instructed her not to call outside a real emergency. In honor of Burt's navy days, when he had been a sonar specialist, Sally assigned the respite nurse's number the sonar sound – a dense, reverberating ping. Sally knew it would find her one day.

3

There were pictures of them every morning of the hike. Setting out from Sarria with its mosaic-embedded column and stone cross and scenery in the background, Jane suggested that they should have a picture daily. And so they did, every morning, in front of scallops or statues of St. James, in sun or rain, vexed or happy.

The pictures made her think back to other pictures. In her mind's eye they were all lined up. Maybe it was the first day of school. They looked serious, their smiles instructed. She saw the photo, which she kept in a frame on her bedside table, but she also saw the scene before the photo was taken, as she lined the girls up while Burt fiddled and fussed with the camera. She saw Mary imperiously instruct the others about how to stand and what to do with their feet and hands for the photo. She saw Jane comply good-naturedly, and Lizzy make a face. She saw Kitty grumble and resist and say "you're not my mother." And those were the captured faces: Mary self-consciously setting an example, Jane compliant, Lizzy ironic, Kitty resentful. And Lydia, sprung like a coil to run after something. Do we make our children what they

are, or do they do it to each other? Of course, they are the artists of themselves. But still.

These morning pictures would punctuate the glossy photo book each of them would inevitably make. But what Sally would remember most – more than these, or even the meals – were the evenings, before or after dinner, when they gathered in one of their two rooms and lolled around on the beds and talked.

4

Lizzy was the one who laughed the most readily. Sally knew that she could also be the sad one. But the others didn't, and competed to see who could get her to laugh the hardest, the longest, the most genuinely. Now it was Jane's turn, her eyes softly excited, her golden hair in the woodsy humidity like a halo.

“So my colleague Amy is a sleep therapist. For babies.”

In the anticipatory pause they all looked to Sally for the obligatory rolling of the eyes at how the younger generation found complicated and expensive ways to do such basic things. She gave it to them, but made it brief. She wanted to hear this story, too.

“What a job!” Jane continued. She says to the parents, ‘Put the baby in the crib. On her back. And then she will cry. And then she will go to sleep.’”

Lizzy laughed. “No, really? People get paid just to say *that*?” Lizzy had no children, and Jane's work as a pediatric occupational therapist fascinated her. It was as exotic as pandas in the wild.

Jane went on. “Well, first there are the counseling sessions. Amy says when parents are sleep deprived, they hang on every word.”

Lizzy nodded as she laughed, imagining the air of desperation.

“So she gives them step-by-step instructions – and handholding. That’s where she says, ‘Here’s my cellphone number. Call me any time. I can’t do this for you, but I’m here for you.’”

Lizzy laughed more. “I’m here for you in my jammies and my bunny slippers, billing you at God-knows-how-much per hour!”

She was now a full participant in the story. The others always thought they were winding Lizzy up, but she was the one winding them up, inserting herself completely into the stories they told, like a Greek chorus or an omniscient narrator, sympathetic and observant, drawing them out. Sally had seen it a million times.

As Lizzy and Jane threw their heads back in a long guffaw, Sally saw Mary circling, looking for her opportunity to insert herself. She had just put her tablet down with an accomplished air, and Sally hoped she was in a benign frame of mind. She was.

“OK, full disclosure.” They all looked at her. Transparency was not Mary’s usual thing. “When Amanda was two months old, Thad and I had a sleep therapist.”

“You’re kidding!” Lizzy exclaimed.

“You poor things!” Jane said.

“What was it like, really?” Sally asked.

They were all looking at Mary, just the way she liked it.

“Well of course we’re the perfect clients, right? Busy professionals. Used to being in control. If money can solve a problem, we’ll spend it.”

The others accelerated their laughter at this honest self-appraisal.

“And it’s just like Jane says – when you’re sleep-deprived, you’ll do anything. And now this tiny tyrant has taken over your lives, and is torturing you. So Thad and I – well. We’re used to making twenty-somethings quake in their boots! But now we’re hanging on every word this person says. This person who says, ‘like’ and ‘you know?’ a lot. And we’re writing her checks for whatever she asks. Anything to make Amanda sleep. Anything.”

Lizzy and Jane threw their heads back with laughter. “What was her secret?”

“Well. I’d always thought I should nurse Amanda into sleeping and then slip her in the crib. But that, apparently, was wrong. The therapist said, imagine what it’s like. You go to sleep on the breast – and then you wake up in the crib. You might as well be on the kitchen floor. Or the middle of the desert! Scary!”

Lizzy nods. “Flat! Empty!”

“And you’ve just been in the land of milk and honey!” Jane adds.

“Exactly,” Mary said. “You need to go to sleep and wake up in the same place – the crib.”

“Go to sleep in the desert... wake up in the desert. So you know where you are.”

Lizzy is giggling. “It’s very biblical. Maybe milk and honey means left boob and right boob. Maybe honey is a mistranslation for ‘right boob’...”

They laughed and laughed. Sally lay back, surrounded by her girls: Jane sitting on the end of her bed, Mary sprawled out on the other, Lizzy in the armchair, where she would alternately perch on the edge like a bird about to fly or sink back into it, as if suddenly exhausted. Sally shut her eyes with a smile on her face.

5

Sally had seen the paper floating around the room she shared with Mary (no one else having the patience). It was about eighteen kinds of financial risk. Some of them made her wince... Financial elder abuse risk? Frailty risk? Long-term care risk? Mary was a financial advisor and had to think about these things, but Sally wasn't sure it was always good for her.

One of these nights while Sally rubbed her bunions, Lizzy caught Mary chewing on a pencil and tried to get her to laugh. Mary wasn't having any of it.

"I'm thinking about risk."

"What's so risky?"

Mary looked up at her sister. "What's so risky? Lots of things. Eighteen, to be precise."

"Not 17? Or 19?"

Mary was annoyed and went into preachy mode. "What kind of financial risk can *you* think of?"

Lizzy shrugged. "OK, I'll give you five. Living too long for your money. Unexpected expenses. Bad market. Giving your money to a charlatan."

“That’s just four.”

“Well give me your 18 and I bet they’re all part of my four.”

“It’s maddening to be lectured by your sister on something you’re an expert in. Okay. First, you could outlive your money.”

“Well, yeah, sure. I mean, Granny Pam lived to be...”

“Second, there’s inflation. Remember Weimar Germany?”

“Well, not personally, but I get the point.”

“Then there’s excess withdrawal risk.”

“Isn’t that sort of related to the first one? I mean, you live too long, you take too much out.”

Sally decided to take her tired feet into the Jane’s room. She was probably working, too. Sally never stopped marveling at Jane’s work. She worked with children who had what she called developmental issues. They were three or four or five. Their chubby little fingers weren’t able to do the things other chubby little fingers could do. Sally thought of Amanda’s three-year old fingers as they encircled her gnarled thumb, cuddling over a book. But of course those same fingers had work to do: picking up Legos or blocks or puzzle pieces and fitting them together. Holding a crayon. She remembered Amanda’s first self-portrait – it looked like a preying mantis with long wires attached to its head. But it had a pink skirt.

This holding a crayon thing: crucial. Problems there might keep them out of Harvard, if you work backward to high school, grade school, kindergarten. Or so Jane had explained it, in one of her rare cynical moments. Sally had listened intently

as Jane described the exercises she took her tiny clients through, and how it helped them.

Pretending to be pirates, they walk a plank (for balance) and pull themselves up with a rope (for confidence) – dig in heavy sand to find coins, beads, and shells, or pick them up with tongs (fine motor skills) – and drop them into a treasure chest while scooting down a ramp. They build paper ships by cutting straight lines, drawing circles lacing a string through holes. Ending up with yoga – a paper shark swims under them while they hold the down-dog pose.

Sally was humbled by this. As a young mother, she might have stumbled over some exercise a child needed just at the time they needed it. She remembered playing Scrabble with Mary long before Mary was old enough to spell. Picking up the tiles and putting them in the rack developed fine motor skills. But Sally didn't know this, and neither did Mary; she just knew that her sisters could play Scrabble, and she wanted to be a big girl. So Sally pretended to play as serious Mary filled her rack with tiles.

6

Sally had always been good with numbers. She had excelled in Home Ec, which was really all about numbers when you thought about it. Cooking – amounts and time. Household finance – interest rates. Sewing – buying fabric, measuring, and so on. Running a farm – even more. The cost of equipment and feed. The cost of livestock and their vet bills, and the price they would fetch on the market. The prices changed all the time, and you had to make decisions a year or more out. Burt would look at the price that day – or remember a price from the last season – and think that was that. Sally knew better. You were always buying, and planning, and guessing, and hoping. Early on in their marriage, Sally realized that she should do the guessing and the planning, and let Burt do the buying and the hoping. It was better that way.

Poor Burt, she thought. He wanted certainty, and thought it a mean trick of the universe to go on changing the price of things.

Her girls had never understood the farm. When they were little, the older ones had kept animals, but as they grew older they got interested in things they learned at school, mostly that there was a world beyond Longbourn Farm, and they couldn't wait to see it. Sally was proud of her girls – they always got good grades and didn't get in trouble and went to college, not just the state university, but good schools back east. Well, most of them. Lydia had married young and moved across the state, and when her husband had left her with three young children, Sally had started to send her money. Lydia took the money but resented it. Kitty did enough college for both of them, not leaving until she was Dr. Bennet. Sally could never remember the proper name of her field, but it had to do with insects – and took her all over the world. Currently she was in New Zealand. She told Sally she didn't mind being single, and Sally hoped it was true.

7

Hanging over Sally's head throughout the trip had been a conversation she knew must be had. While Burt's primary concern for his daughters had always been security, Sally's was that they get along with each other. She avoided anything that could jeopardize that. But this couldn't be put off.

On their last night, Sally asked Lizzy to arrange a private room for their dinner. They said nothing to the others, which made Mary grumpy, but that dispelled soon enough in the face of curiosity.

Sally spoke. "I'm so happy you girls took me on this trip."

They smiled at her and at each other and prepared to make kind remarks, but Sally wasn't done.

“You all know the farm is entailed so that we can only do certain things with it. Your father and I have seen the lawyer about it, and we’ve decided what to do.”

They all stopped eating.

“We’re going to sell it now, and have a life tenancy, which means we don’t have to move off until – well, until we come out in a box.”

They all looked at each other and at her. They’d discussed this before, and that had seemed like the most sensible plan. There was no surprise. Why was their mother announcing this like it was news?

“And.... well.... two boxes.”

She had their full attention.

“Your father. He doesn’t have that long now.”

The penny dropped. Handsome, frivolous Burt – with his schemes for them that were all wrong – had been sick for a long time. They all loved their father, but not like they loved her. And she knew that.

Mary spoke first. “Mom, come and live with us after Dad – is gone. You don’t need to be alone out there.”

This is what Sally expected. She sat up tall and went on. “You can all squabble over which nursing home I go into, if it comes to that. But until I can’t get myself out of bed, I’ll stay at the farm.”

Before Mary could launch into a lecture on the economics of end-of-life care, Lizzy refilled all four glasses: “To our Dad – and our dear Mom.”

The girls drank, and Sally watched them, all smiling at her and each other, happy at the same time. She wanted the moment to last forever, without complications, just faces emanating love from their unique, imperfect selves. So she moved her gaze fondly from one to the other, and tried not to hear her phone with its barely audible sonar pings, taking its soundings of her heart.

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