

Saying Goodbye to My Mother – A Music Story

Leanna Wolfe

I was raised in a family that loved music. The Victrola was always playing my parents' favorite tunes from the sexy songs of yesteryear like Dean Martin crooning "5 foot 2 Eyes of Blue" to ballads from Carousel such as "When you Walk Through a Storm." When Victrolas gave way to cassette players, each of my parents' vinyl discs were transferred, scratches and all, onto plastic cassettes!

Learning lyrics to new songs was of utmost importance to my mother – Every week the words to a new song would be neatly handwritten on a piece of lined paper that would be taped to the refrigerator door. My mother took her singing seriously. As a young woman in New York, she delivered singing telegrams and then in Palo Alto in the late 50s she joined the Mother Singers, a community choir.

In the 1960s, light opera companies would offer free Sunday afternoon concerts at Stern Grove in San Francisco. Beyond packing a delicious picnic lunch, my parents would prepare my sister and I for each show by teaching us the lyrics to the songs we would be hearing. In preparation for South Pacific, I learned "Gotta Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair." At seven, the message was a bit lost on me. My Mom typically washed my hair over the kitchen sink assisted by my Dad who would pour on the cream rinse. How anyone could get so obsessed over someone that they needed to be washed out of their hair was pretty weird!

Then in about second grade my parents decided I should take piano lessons. I would bike to Miss Pfeiffer's home for my weekly lesson. I was honestly more interested in finding out why she was single and didn't have children (or a husband) than in learning the songs in the beginners piano book like "March Slav." My parents, meanwhile, suggested that I ought to study the violin and become the next Jascha Heifetz. They tracked down Jenny Rudin, the best violin teacher around, and paid her top dollar to train me on the finer points of avoiding squeaking and generating a strong vibrato. Sadly, I was a pretty much of a failure. No metronome could give me rhythm and being rather tone deaf, I could not distinguish between in tune and out of tune. Once I arrived with excessively long finger nails on my left hand and Mrs. Rudin grabbed the worst

nail scissor she could find to massacre my nails. I came home in tears and told my Dad I did not want to continue!

Meanwhile, there was another girl, Susan Freier who also started violin lessons at 10 and studied with Jenny Rudin. The only difference between her and I was that she was a prodigy who ultimately had an illustrious career performing and teaching music. You can google “Susan Freier Violin” and find out everything. For years, my mother would send me news clippings of Susan’s successes. To me it was like rubbing salt into a wound. Sadly my mother was unable to support my strengths like being a social theorist, a master at conducting participant observation research and a globally conscious data analyst! If you google “Leanna Wolfe Polyamory” you can find out about my career!

Four days before my mother passed away, I came up to Palo Alto to sit with her. When I arrived she had been refusing all food and water for nearly a week and was down to just 90 pounds. The first thing I did was find YouTube on my phone and play “When You Walk Through a Storm.” Unbelievably she began to sing along. The attending hospice nurse was astounded. Tears rolled down her cheeks. As I sang along with my Mom I recalled how singing that song as badly as I did as an out of tune child, I nonetheless found strength in the message of holding one’s head up high and surmounting all odds!

I then dove into the American Standards and played Frank Sinatra singing “Fly Me to the Moon.” Again my mother mouthed every word with perfect rhythm. This music lives on in us and through us whether our days are numbered or plentiful.

Next I typed in “Oiften Pripetchik” and as soon as I selected a version on YouTube my Mom mouthed every word. I recalled when my grandmother was coming out to California to visit me, her first granddaughter, my mother taught me the words to impress her that I could sing in Yiddish!

We kept this up for the three more days. Every night I’d receive an e-warning from Verizon that that I had exhausted my data and every morning, I’d buy another couple of gigs. Whenever my mother was awake, we’d sing. I would cry and tell her that I loved her. We sang John Lennon’s “Imagine” (which she loved) and every song I could recall from “The Sound of Music.” I had no idea

how much I'd viscerally absorbed all the tunes and lyrics—they just tumbled out of me, too!

I played my Mom Joan Baez singing "All My Trials." As "Hush Little Baby Don't You Cry—You know your Momma was born to die" blasted out of my phone, I wailed uncontrollably. It can't be true! This lyric, me the baby of my mother crying her head off...because soon my very mother was really going to die!

On Saturday morning a Rabbi came to my mother's bedside. He invited me to forgive her for all the wrongs she had done to me. I did it. I forgave her for not allowing me to shave my legs and wear nylon stockings in the seventh grade...for not letting me wear white lipstick to school in the eighth grade and for refusing to peg my pants super tight in the ninth grade! I went onto forgive her criticizing what I wore on the Donahue show when I was invited to speak about my book "Women Who May Never Marry" and for yelling at me for arriving late following an eight hour drive in traffic from Los Angeles rather than hugging me when I arrived. Finally, I forgave her for not getting me for the strengths that I do have and for instead sending me newspaper clippings of the girl who became the violin prodigy. Then the Rabbi sang Kadish and she sang right along with him. The next day she took her last breath.