

My Mother and the Man Who Called the Ambulance

Karen Surman Paley

IT WAS EXACTLY THIS TIME THREE MONTHS AGO WHEN MY MOTHER'S BEST FRIEND, IDA, CALLED ME. EVEN IN AA YOU GET TO TELL YOUR STORY AFTER THREE MONTHS.

"Your mother hasn't answered the phone for ten days. I'm used to speaking with her every day."

"Ida, my mother is an alcoholic. She blacks out. She gets DT's. The next time she answers the phone, why don't you talk to her about going to the hospital?"

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"She'll never speak to me again."

I've detached with love long enough. I call a counselor on the alcohol unit at St. Elizabeth's Hospital. I tell her my mother is very sick. She put me out of the house eight years before when I brought a recovering alcoholic to talk with her about drinking, and she waved off the social worker I sent last summer. "I'm fine," she told her. "No, my husband isn't stopping me from getting medical care. There's nothing wrong with me." But I tell the counselor I want to try again. Would she be available at 2:30 the next afternoon if I can persuade my mother to just listen? Her name's Clara, by the way, not Claire, the name she copied off my mother-in-law. In her fantasy, Claire was happily married and she would be, too, if she copied

Claire's name. My mother even had a pink calligraphic version of the name stitched on diaphanous hankies.

The hankies didn't work. Home management issues are resolved in notes passed between the two of them as they have been for thirty years. Thirty years! There is a whole drawer full of them. She leaves messages in cursive on his night table when he is at work or down in the basement doing his exercises. "I need Kitty Litter." "Pay this bill or they'll shut everything off." "Leave my pay." I don't know where he leaves the ones he prints for her. "Tax time. Leave all your statements." Too bad they never entered the computer age. Think of what they could have done with a Mac and Pagemaker—the Newsletter for Estranged Marrieds. The logo could be a reduced version of the receipt from their honeymoon room at the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston in April of 1946, room key and all. But if they reduced it too much, no one would be able to tell they rented a radio for fifty cents. I don't care who knows I've got the room key now. Let them try to take it from me. Yes, it's all arranged. Someone will be there to talk with Clara/Claire tomorrow at 2:30.

I'm angry because my mother's anger scares me. And her rejection. Eight years ago she told me if I tried to bring her help another time she'd kill herself and I'd never see her again. I haven't seen her since. Blondie, my little girl inside, cringes but Teddy, my inside boy, says we have to go there and try one more time. I call a friend. She always knows when to listen and when to ask questions. I say I feel terror. I pretend it's only about a project I'm doing, the fear of someone getting into my files to track down who's telling secrets. We talk through this screen fear. We say good-bye. I don't even leave the chair before the phone rings again. It's my father.

He only calls when he hasn't received a note acknowledging a birthday gift, always money, but this year he didn't send one. He was angry at me because I wrote him it was only a simple act of human decency to dial 911, to call an ambulance, the next time he finds his wife unconscious. A few months ago he hired a couple named Ernest and Mary to empty rotting food out of the basement freezer while his wife, my mother, lay upstairs unconscious. She kept a freezer full of food ready for the day he would make up and start coming home for dinner every night. That food was rotten when I last ate there in 1965 and he just noticed. I told him if he didn't get her to the hospital, the next big smell in the house would be her rotting body.

Otherwise, I had written, he would be an accomplice in a suicide, that I will always think of him as the man who watched my mother die.

My father didn't like this. It made him so mad, he did something. For the first time in my life, he spoke real words. Well, he didn't actually speak, it was so out of character it just felt that way. His letter is worth reproducing. It represents my installation into NoteSpeak.

I find your recent long distance clinical observation concerning your mother disturbing and unfortunate. Her condition has been going on for the better part of thirty years. How many times should I have called 911? How many times would you have wanted doctors and nurses wasting their time treating a *drunken woman* when seriously ill people lingering between life and death cry out for attention?

I have sacrificed the best part of my adult life for her. Come what may my conscience is clear. How about you? Is your conscience clear? How much time have you spent with her?

"Love,"

Dad

P.S. I will accept your *apology*.

WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO TO PASS THE GUILT AROUND LIKE THIS? YOU KEEP passing long enough and the clock just runs out.

When my sister Arlene called Dad to ask for Mary's telephone number, the one who cleaned the rotting food out of the freezer, he gave her the number. He said, "Let Mary call an ambulance. I can't do it." Anyway, Arlene thought Ma just needed "somebody to talk to." She was going to have Mary "talk to her." That was her plan. Dad gave her the wrong number and she never asked again. When I heard what Dad had said, I knew that at least he wouldn't set up a blockade against Ma's leaving to go to the hospital. A man lives with an alcoholic that long, there's no telling what he'd do.

There was one more letter to write. Blondie had something to say to my mother and she asked Teddy to help give her courage.

Arlene told me how sick you look. She told me you are skin and bones. She told me you are not eating, that your ankles are swollen and you can barely walk. You told her you are letting your hair grow out to frost it. I think it is because you are too sick to go to the beauty parlor. Ida

said your teeth are all brown and she bought you toothpaste. You told her it must be the cigarettes. I think it is because you are too sick to go to the dentist or brush your teeth every day. Aunt Linda said you told her you saw Uncle Jackie's picture on the subway wall. You are seeing things that aren't there and imagining things. You are hallucinating.

I am having trouble typing because I am crying. I can't stand to think of you this way. You are my mother and I love you very much. I know you are going to die very soon if you don't let us take you to a doctor. You have been a very strong woman. You have suffered a lot of emotional pain. I know now how badly Dad hurt you. He is a very sick man who does what he wants and hurts other people's feelings. You are a fighter. You have fought all these years. Now the fight is with yourself. You have to allow yourself to accept medical treatment. You deserve help. Please let us give it to you. You could go to St. Elizabeth's Hospital where you had your gums done. You liked it there. They will take care of you and help you get strong.

I always put on a tough exterior. You said I had my father's temper. You are right. When I went to overnight camp at five, younger than all the other campers, I had to pretend to grow up fast. I couldn't even cut my own meat. You said I became independent then. I had to. Now I know there is a little five year old girl inside me. I named her Blondie. She is very small and scared. She loves her mother and misses her and doesn't want her to die. She wants her to get better so she can get to know her. Don't let her down.

She got the letter which I blew up to size 18 font because I didn't know if she could find her magnifying glass. Actually she has a lot of magnifying glasses; each one leads to the next. Clara/Claire told Aunt Linda she read it.

Linda demanded, "So what are you going to do? Are you going to let us get you help?"

"No, I'm not."

"Why not?"

"I'm waiting for him to straighten out."

"Him? You mean, your husband, the one who hasn't opened your bedroom door in years? The man who doesn't even know if you're in there dead or alive."

"Forget it. I'm waiting."

"Clara, it's been almost thirty years. How long are you going to wait?"

"Forget it."

I know about this conversation because my Aunt Linda is my friend now. She told me. But I haven't always felt she was my friend. Eight years ago when my mother put me out of the house, I called her. I thought maybe we could do one of those Interventions that even people like Mary Ellen Pinkham were writing about. Right on the cover of her book *How to Stop the One You Love From Drinking*, it says, "I know because Intervention worked for me." She wrote this book when she was six months sober. When she was drinking her books had titles like *Mary Ellen's Help Yourself Diet Plan*; *How to Become a Healthier, Prettier You*; *Mary Ellen's 1,000 New Helpful Hints*; *Mary Ellen's Best of Helpful Hints Book II*; and *Mary Ellen's Best of Helpful Kitchen Hints*. I'm not judging her. Before I stopped drinking, I had plenty of tips for my psychotherapy clients when I washed down Trail Mix with alcohol-enriched Robitussin during those wonderful ten minutes I thought were created for just this purpose in the fifty minute "clinical hour." Intervention seemed so easy; just get everybody together and lay the cards on the table. Do it with love.

Aunt Linda and Uncle Gerald thought it was unnecessary. I can't remember which one told me, "Your mother is not an alcoholic, she just drinks because she's lonely. Now if you visited her more...." They were blaming me for my mother's drinking. I got one thing out before the duct tape around my heart ripped loose.

"Linda and Gerald, when was the last time you visited my mother?"

"Ten years ago, but...."

Good-bye, Intervention.

So my dad called me on October 27, 1991, around 7:20 P.M., only a few hours after I had talked with Ida and then the counselor at St. Elizabeth's.

"I did what you told me. I called an ambulance."

I heard "ambulance" and I flashed back to the dream I had in August a few weeks after I wrote the letters to my father and my mother and after she dismissed the caseworker from Elderly Services.

I went to visit my mother. She was sitting in her cracked black Naugahyde chair in the den, the one in between the liquor cabinet she hasn't used in years and the free-standing ashtray with a cat nip mouse hanging by a string. Her face was white but she didn't look as bad as I expected. She was reading from the journal belonging to Blondie and Teddy, my little girl and boy parts. It's a black and white speckled school composition notebook. She kept leaning back and passing out. Later she was in her bedroom. I felt very close to her. Suddenly my sister Arlene appeared and I said, "What are you doing here?" She didn't really answer but it was clear she needed to come back home again. I tried to call the police but I couldn't get a connection. I asked my mother, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how mad would you be if I called an ambulance?" She said 10. Suddenly a police car appeared and two policemen arrived. My mother was very compliant. My father was home and didn't get involved but when I saw him I asked him if he had called the police and he nodded. I gave him a hug and told him, "You did a good job." I saw the paramedics wheel my mother out of the house and put her in the ambulance next to the protruding hind ends of two horses. They said they were taking her to an alcohol program in New Hampshire. I kept trying to get the hospital to tell them my mother was coming and give them a little history but I couldn't get through.

The dream gave me the only experience I'd ever had of my family working together. That's what I was remembering when my Dad called at 7:20 P.M. and said he called the ambulance. I forgot what my therapist had said when I told her the dream, how it was about my love for my parents and how I was all the parts of the dream. And I forgot what I said to her then, "Are you calling me a horse's ass?" I knew that the horses' asses were there to tell me I was a fool to believe it would ever happen anywhere but in a dream.

The call from my Dad seemed like a follow-up to my visit to see him just one week earlier. I hadn't seen him in five years but one day I just walk into his store to see if we can be friends. I don't like the idea of my father being angry with me. The store looks the same but he looks older hunched over the glass BVD cabinet reading the Boston Herald. When he looks up and recognizes me, I think maybe he is going to start to cry. He doesn't, but I do, right in front of all the customers and a couple of thirty

year employees. "You know," he says, "you're taking this too personally." I cry harder. I think it is the only time he saw me cry in forty-four years.

He takes me up to his office, a tiny open space up above the sales floor, filled with a rack of his personal clothes, a wooden desk, and a cracked maroon leather chair.

"You know," he says, "I didn't deserve that letter you sent me."

"She's sick. She's going to die unless you get her to the hospital. You are the only one who can get in the house when she's unconscious; she's got the door locked. And if she's up, she's drunk and you can't do a thing with her. You need to call an ambulance."

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"She'd die of a heart attack."

"Dad, how much time do you think she has left?"

"I don't know. I don't know how much time I have left. Do you know she has every closet in the house filled up with her clothes. I don't even have a place to hang a pair of pants. I have to keep everything here. And she owes me a couple of thousand dollars. I left her a note. The IRS came after me because she stopped paying taxes. I got a whole statement from the accountant. I left it for her. She better pay."

"Why pay it, Dad? Let her face the IRS. That's the problem, not letting the alcoholic face her responsibilities." He looks at me like I'm hopelessly ignorant.

"Look, take a ride over to the house right now. I want you to see that statement from the accountant. Go right now. She's there. You can see it. Right now!"

I don't want to get in the middle of their Tax War.

"You know, Dad, your staying there has been her big excuse. She thinks it means you are going to apologize." He's up now, pacing like a man in solitary confinement.

"Forget it," he bellows.

"I didn't say I believed it. No one does. Only her. It's her excuse."

"Forget it."

I'm uncomfortable. How did I get to be the marriage counselor? I leave telling him there's only one difference between us: I know what I'm

talking about and he doesn't. Later I realize he was asking me to help him do something with her and the 1040 review was the only way he knew how to engage me. He couldn't say, "You're right. Your mother is dying. You go and do something." Or better yet, "Let's go together."

I started to think then if I went back to see him maybe we *could* talk it out and work up a plan to go together. But I was afraid of his anger and his rejection. A week passed and then my mother's friend Ida called and said Ma hadn't answered the phone in ten days and that's when I called St. Elizabeth's. I knew there wasn't enough time to win him over. It was too hard anyway. So I just left the store that day and walked into a meeting at the Women's Resource Center and sobbed. They told me it was good I could share my pain with them. It was only the second time we had met. People tell me I'm a catalyst in groups.

My mother really did want to save her marriage. On my wedding day, June 8, 1968, she came sober and stayed that way. If I knew what gratitude felt like then I could have told you what the micro-choke meant that I washed back with desperate little gulps of Mateus. She took my mother-in-law Claire aside and asked her if she and her husband would try to get them back together. Nothing came of it, so she went back home and did her pedicure and had her hair bleached platinum blonde every Thursday and came home with it still in rollers. She put on green Face Mask and her pajamas and sat in front of the television replenishing her "juice" glass—the vodka got mixed into glass half gallon Tropicana bottles as soon as it came into the house—and waited. It was important. He might come home that very night and invite her out to dinner.

Aunt Linda and Uncle Gerald gave her advice for thirty years.

"Clara, get a job."

"I'm not going to work after what He did! Let Him support me!"

"Do volunteer work. You've got to get out of the house."

"This is my house and no one is going to put me out."

"You can come home before he gets there. He'll see you're doing something with your life and maybe he'll come back to your bed."

"Who wants Him in my bed?"

"We thought you did."

"After the filthy things He did with The Whore?"

"Clara, we can't talk to you when you've been drinking."

"I'm not drinking!"

"Yes, you are. Now if you only got out more..."

The same conversation, the longest running post-modern soap opera, repeated itself week after week, and never once did the players forget their lines.

So when I heard my Dad's voice on the phone that night, I blanked out so long he said, "Did you hear me? I said, 'I did what you told me. I called the ambulance.' She's gone. I want you to come right over. The police are here asking me questions. They say it's suspicious. Come right over."

The phone hangs up. I fall. I punch the floor. I scream, "No! No! No!" What happened to my last chance? I was going there tomorrow. I punch the wall. I get up. I have to put clothes on. I start taking things out of my closet. My husband's there. He doesn't interfere. I throw clothes on the floor. What to wear? I think of the movie "Ordinary People," how the wife tells her husband to wear different shoes, a blue shirt and how he starts to comply and then glares at her and says, "We're going to our son's funeral!"

The house is all lit up. I open the door and the stench slaps me across the face. I look straight ahead into the den. The room has a masking tape "X" across it. There's a tiny bundle under a white sheet shriveled up in the corner of the black Naugahyde chair. I head for it. A big policeman emerges with an offensive block. "You can't go in there. We're waiting for the Medical Examiner."

My father is in the living room. He and his store manager and this unkempt woman with long uncombed brown hair and a wispy nervous man are watching the Seventh Game of the World Series, the Braves versus the Twins. I think the woman must be Mary, the one who cleaned the rotting food out of the freezer and who my father said could call the ambulance. I go in my mother's bedroom and sit on the floor hunched up against what used to be my father's bureau when they roomed together. My baby picture, me in a pink shirt with ruffled sleeves holding a blue ball, is no longer there. The policeman follows me. He talks down at me.

"This is suspicious. Did your father have a motive? Did she have a life insurance policy?"

"She drank. My mother is an alcoholic."

"Well, didn't you try to get her help?"

Now there's a voice yelling, "Stand up and go for his throat." I ignore it.

"I begged her to get help. She refused. He killed her but you can't take him court for it. He broke her heart." Two months later Antonio E. Boschetti, the pathologist, backs me up after a fashion.

CAUSE OF DEATH: Hypertensive Heart Disease. The enlarged heart weighs 440 grams.

Her friend Ida knew too. She made a donation to the American Heart Association to honor the memory of my mother long before Boschetti's autopsy report.

The policeman asks, "Do you know that couple, Ernest and Mary? She was the last one to see your mother alive. She said she came here Friday, two days ago and she gave her four cups of coffee and left. I couldn't get much more out of her. They're both intoxicated."

Friday, I think, but today's Sunday. "She gave my mother four cups of coffee and then left? When did my mother die?"

"Your mother has been dead in that chair for two days."

"Is that the smell?"

"She let go her bowels when she died. They usually do."

OVER THE LEFT UPPER BACK there is a ½ inch patch appearing as a shallow decubitus having a pale base. Over the sacral region there is a 1½ inch shallow decubitus ulcer having a pale base.

I knew about the ulcers before the Autopsy Report came because I called Boschetti the day after they took her body away. He told me, "In order for those ulcers to develop, she would have had to have been in essentially the same position for two weeks."

The men come from the Medical Examiners office bearing a stretcher made of cracked maroon leather. I try to follow them in the room. They stop me with a look that says I'm being unreasonable. I see anyway. I see a man lift my mother's emaciated corpse, bend her over a forearm, and wipe the trails of watery brown excrement off the back of her thighs. And I see my mother's purple genitals. They lay her on the stretcher and cover her with the sheet. I'm quiet like a mouse. Maybe if I'm really good, they'll let me see her. In the background like waves breaking way off shore, something's

coming from the World Series room. It's my husband's voice.

"What I want to know, is how you could have let the situation deteriorate like this for thirty years?"

"How dare you speak to me like that on a night like this?"

I'm a good girl. I stay away from the tide.

"Please, she's my mother. I just want to see her for a minute."

I'm in. They pull the sheet off a face I haven't seen in eight years. I knew Dr. Jekyll but I never would have recognized Mr. Hyde: no rollers, no bleach job, just long thin strands of gray hair. With the back of my hand I brush her cheek. So soft and smooth I know the Face Mask has worked. I repeat what I heard her say when my grandmother died, "My poor mother!"

Two days later I ask my therapist, Elizabeth, "How am I going to get through my mother's funeral without strangling my father?"

She keeps it simple. "What would your mother have wanted?" Slam dunk.

I know better than to ride in the same limousine with him but when we arrive at Sharon Memorial Park, I take his arm and sit beside him at her graveside. When he cries, I put my arm around his shoulders. Back at the house when he's trying to pour drinks into everyone, I have to go in the other room. The spell is off. He has no class. Anyone else would know better than to drink alcohol openly in this house. I sit on her bed and browse through her night table. Deep inside I find *Blessing and Praise: A Book of Meditations and Prayers for Home Devotions*. Stapled inside is the Ketubah, their marriage contract signed on the 14th day of April 1946, the 13th day of Nisan 5706. There's a chapter called "Conciliation."

The longer a contention has lasted the harder does yielding become, hence the Scripture bids us "leave off contention before the quarrel break out." The best time for yielding is before the strife has made headway.

Did she read it? Did he? I'm going to let my rage burn as long as I god damned please. And then I will accept. I will accept because it is beginning to come to me that my father was as afraid of her as I was, that we were equally powerless over her drinking.

The next day I take out my black and white speckled school composition notebook.

Dear Mommy,

Yesterday we buried you in your steel coffin. We threw sand on your coffin with a steel trowel from a steel bread pan. I saw you go under but I can't believe it. If I had come to see you in these last few years would you have let me help you?

The communication is getting better. She wrote me back with my own hand.

Dearest Karen,

You did your best. You made me the angriest of all but I know now you loved me the best. You didn't go along with me. You knew where I was going and you tried the hardest to stop me. The ones who knew always yelled at me to stop but you did more. Oh I was so mad at you when you brought that recovering alcoholic to talk to me in 1983. I wasn't as mad when you sent that social worker to me last summer but I didn't want help. I wanted to drink until I died. I had to. If I stopped I would see what a big lie my life was. I would have seen what I had become, that I wasn't beautiful anymore. And if I wasn't beautiful I wasn't because beauty was all I was. If I had stopped drinking I would have felt so much shame that I, Clara Surman, daughter of Rose and Louis Yunick, was a drunken woman. I didn't understand what you meant when you said I had a disease. I had to drink to keep from realizing that I drank.

Karen, some day you will come to accept that I wanted it this way. Even if your father didn't apologize to me, he stayed with me. It made me think people on the outside believed we were still really married. Yesterday I heard the gardener tell you that he knew we didn't talk and that he had seen me fall in the street. At first I felt shame but then I understood what you tried to tell me, that this was the disease. I didn't want help because by the time I got that sick from it, I knew I couldn't get well.

I am very proud of you. You were so smart. I always told everybody about how smart you were. And you saw I had your son Derek's picture by my bed. Even though you couldn't see me, you always sent me pictures of your boys. I spoke to your Aunt Linda about them in Yiddish. I said, "They are as beautiful as the sky." You saw I carried both Sean and Derek's pictures in my purse.

You have gotten the help you needed from the pain my drinking caused you and I no longer feel guilty. I didn't want to get sober. Did

you hear me? I DIDN'T WANT TO GET SOBER. So *you* don't need to feel guilty any more. I know you loved me. I read your letter from Blondie but I was too sick. There was too much damage. I was having alcoholic seizures and my heart was failing. And I didn't want to be in a nursing home. I WANTED TO BELIEVE THAT I WAS STILL THE BEAUTIFUL CLARA SURMAN. Don't you see, Karen, if I was in a nursing home without vodka, I couldn't believe that and I couldn't face the shame.

I will watch over you now like I couldn't do when I was alive. I will be your spiritual mother. I will be with you as you study and take your exam for graduate school. I will be with you when you do research and write your essay on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. And I will watch over the graduate committees when they read your applications so they will know how much you want to go. And when you get into graduate school, the strength of my beating heart will be with you every minute. Because my heart no longer beats inside me but you. You know how strong I was to keep fighting off my disease all these years and I give that strength to you.

Go to sleep now. You are tired. When you begin to rest better I will visit you in your dreams.



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