

Mothers and Terrorists

A monologue play

Contact:

Looking back at 9/11. And Mom. Almost twenty years later.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

RUSSELL, 60ish, reflective, circumspect

SETTING

Here

TIME

Now

SCENE 1

Bare stage except for one stool and one small table. On the table is a bottle of water and an envelope sleeve which holds an absentee ballot. RUSSELL enters.

RUSSELL

9/11 hit at a really inconvenient time for me. *(Beat.)*

The previous seven months had been consumed in *(making air quotes)* taking care of Mom.

That year, I turned 40. Two weeks before 9/11, I started a new teaching job and a doctoral program, both at the same university. Faculty and student, at the same place. Talk about schizophrenia.

New Year's Eve 2000. I was in DC, 800 miles away from Mom in Orlando, preparing for the party to usher in the *real* new millennium. *(Pointing to himself.)* A stickler for detail.

Lynn and I hadn't spoken in almost two years.

Twenty years earlier, after many glasses of wine, she asked me, in a somewhat derisive tone, if I was gay.

Actually, she asked if I was *(punctuating each syllable)* ho-mo-sex-shul.

I evaded the question, shrugged my shoulders, and gulped more wine.

Eighteen years later when I moved in with William, Lynn evaded my offer to visit for a few days to fix things around the house. Her eyesight had been deteriorating, and she often talked about repairs needed around the house, not having enough money for them. She was an artist. Blindness is death for an artist. She had been featured on the local news for Lighthouse Central Florida, outreach for the blind. I watched the VHS.

I wasn't shocked watching her navigate, with a blind cane, the sidewalk in front of the house I grew up in. She talked about her life as an artist, with cutaway shots of her paintings. She taught art at my Christian high school. Anyone in her orbit ended up subjects in her paintings. My gal pal Beth, dressed in Victorian garb, admiring herself in a mirror. My secret crush Billy, cradling a guitar and singing to a crowd. My older brother, over and over, portrayed as Christ--breaking bread, healing the sick, hanging from a cross.

I *was* shocked THE LIES! The lies she told! How grateful she was for her family. Lie! How good God had been to her. Lie! (Well, maybe He had, but she always complained about her lot in life.) I laughed because I couldn't believe the lies!

More evasion on the phone before she blurted out the truth in her catlike voice:

(in a catlike voice) "I just don't approve of your lifestyle."

Beat.

Without skipping a beat, I slammed back: "That's the first honest thing you've said."

And I hung up.

Beat.

Maybe I was egging her on. Either subconsciously. Or consciously.

Beat.

That was the last conversation we had before the start of the end.

On that New Year's Eve, my brother, who lived half a mile away from mom, called her several times to invite her over on New Year's Day. Every call, her phone was busy.

SFX: Busy signal

I rarely hear a busy signal now. A busy signal wasn't really unusual. *(Beat.)* Mom thought she'd be burglarized and raped at night, so she stayed up all night and slept during the day.

The next day, he called her again: "The number you have reached, 596-3338, is not in service at this time. 7-9-1." He yelled to his wife, "What's not in service 7-9-1?"

She worked at the phone company.

(In a female voice.) "Non-payment."

She had always paid her bills. On time. Or ahead of time.

He called the police and met them at her house. She was on the floor in her bedroom, awake, unable to move, her clothing soaked in urine and stained with feces, a gash on her head from falling into the doorjamb. And weighing 72 pounds. And her mind was gone.

My brother didn't call me for a week. When he did, he drawled, "If you wanna see your mother one last time, get down here now."

Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome. If you Google Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, the first hit is Caregiver.org. The fourth is Rarediseases.org. Then NIH, Alzheimer's Organization, and Alcohol.org.

Quote:

“Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome is a neurological disorder [dot, dot, dot] caused by a deficiency in the B vitamin thiamine. [Dot, dot, dot] Wernicke's encephalopathy and Korsakoff's psychosis, while separate conditions with different symptoms, often co-occur, especially in people who have struggled with long-term alcohol dependence and abuse.”

Unquote.

Let's cut to the chase. Lynn was a chronic alcoholic and drank herself into dementia.

From what the doctors could piece together, she'd had the flu, stopped eating, kept drinking, and the lack of thiamine caused her brain to snap.

On antibiotics and anti-depressants, fit with a feeding tube, and no booze, she was on the mend. Physically.

Mentally, some days she was quasi-lucid, most not. But it was clear she'd never live by herself again, and none of us were willing to put ourselves into her crosshairs again.

Into Conway Lakes Nursing Home.

From spending my summer break going between her house and Conway Lakes, I knew all the dementia patients, who were no threat to others, were wheeled into the common room after breakfast, facing a large-screen television. Remember: Lynn had moments of lucidity.

When I returned to my office at 10:15am on 9/11, my colleague and I watched the repeat footage of collisions and explosions. Mom sat in that common room at Conway Lakes watching 9/11's destruction, over and over. Nothing else was on television.

I willed her back to her room. I didn't want her to see that.

I called my brother.

(Frantically.) “Go to the nursing home, now! Make sure Mom isn't watching TV!”

He asked if we were okay in DC.

“Yes. Dad's in Scotland with Lillian. Go to the nursing home. Now.”

I don't know if he actually did. It was the only control I had at that moment.

A few hours earlier that day. Tuesday, September 11th, 2001. 8:40am.

A sunny, bright, brisk, late summer morning. Walking to my classroom with a smile on my face. A beautiful world! I had just finished a one-hour conversation with Hjeong, 12 time zones away in Seoul. Hjeong (which means "brother" in Korean) worked on the Sunshine Policy for the South Korean government, a policy of softening North Korea's attitude to its southern brother. Three years earlier, his boss sent him to the U.S. for six months to brush up his English. He landed in my literature class, soaking up every new word possible, using each diligently and often, hilariously, wrongly. He also took my intercultural communication workshop. One day, we ran into an old friend. She and I hugged. I introduced her to everyone, we chatted for half a moment, and hugged goodbye. Hjeong asked why we hugged. Hugging became an ongoing topic of discussion. His conclusion: if more people hugged each other in truthfulness, less conflict would occur. He hugged me on the last day of class.

Five days after 9/11, Hjeong sent me this email:

"It never occurred to me that 'How are you?' can sound so awkward and hackneyed. It was extremely traumatic and shocking, considering the brisk and cozy conversation we had several minutes before the tragedy. The sky was ironically blue and tempting (typical Indian summer). I came up with mixed feelings about this horrendous phenomenon. Humanity and politics. Fleeting exultation and downward spiral. I believe America, which might have started as a union of diverse nationalities and races a few centuries ago, is in the making. Thanks for letting me know how you feel, think and respond to this untold agony. It will take considerable time for me to figure out what's wrong with us. I have worked day and night since this predicament without respite."

His closing: "I give you long, big hug."

At 8:40am on Tuesday, September 11th, 2001, with Mom stabilized at Conway Lakes, my brother in charge of her life (and THAT's a whole other story), my first two weeks sailing into a new job and school, and having just spoken to Hjeon, I finally felt light and great.

8:40am that day is still crystalline in my mind.

At 8:45am, the world will turn a corner.

An American Airlines Boeing 767 will crash into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. It will leave a gaping, burning hole near the 80th floor of the 110-story skyscraper, instantly killing hundreds and trapping hundreds more in higher floors. Minutes later, television cameras will broadcast live images of what initially appeared to be a freak accident.

Then, 18 minutes after the first plane hits, a second Boeing 767, United Airlines Flight 175, will appear out of the sky, turn sharply toward the World Trade Center, and slice into the South Tower near the 60th floor, causing a massive explosion showering burning debris over surrounding buildings and onto the streets below.

Millions watching television will see events unfolding in New York when American Airlines Flight 77 will crash into the west side of the Pentagon exactly one hour after the first attack. Jet fuel from the Boeing 757 will cause an inferno which will lead to the structural collapse of a portion of the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense.

At 10:00am, the South Tower of the World Trade Center will collapse in a massive cloud of dust and smoke.

During this time, somewhere above Pennsylvania, United Flight 93 will be hijacked. The passengers will fight the hijackers. The plane will flip over and speed toward the ground at 500 miles per hour. It will crash in a field near Shanksville at 10:10am.

Twenty minutes later, the North Tower will collapse. Only six people in the World Trade Center towers at the time of their collapse will survive.

In 105 minutes, a total of 2,996 people will be killed on Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

My 9am class was in a 2001 computer lab, replete with PC towers, giant monitors, a constant hum, and heat. Fifteen minutes into class, Kevin, a lanky 20-year old, rushes in, interrupting:

(In the voice of a lanky 20-year old whose been rushing.) “Sorry I’m late. I was stuck in traffic. The radio said a plane crashed into the World Trade Center, and no one was moving.”

“Wow. Take a seat. We’re starting this assignment.”

I finished the lecture, put them to work, then started my computer. When Netscape opened, I typed in C-N-N-dot-com. A spinning circle. A new tab. N-Y-Times-dot-com. Another spinning circle. Another new tab. Washington-Post-dot-com. Spinning circles. Fifteen minutes later, a spinning circle stopped, and a page loaded. A report of the first plane. Then the second. Then the attack on the Pentagon.

“Stop what you’re doing. Go turn on a radio or find a TV. This is turning into a very bad day.”

I explained what I knew. Two students whose parents worked at the Pentagon became very anxious.

Sometimes I look at the emails from that day:

Horrific and surreal.

The German Parliament has stopped its work.

Good God!

Stunned and angry.

What a dark day.

They even closed the Folsom Dam Road!

Unbelievable, mind-numbing, and frightening.

What is going to happen now?

More violence and hate.

It was an inconvenient time. The plate had been plenty full before that day, but had evened out. It was fuller from that day. Forty years old. Old enough to know, too old to plow straight ahead, not old enough for reflection.

If I had been 20 years younger, I'd have my entire life ahead of me to do something. To join the military. The National Guard. Some truth and reconciliation movement. I would have had the youth and energy TO DO SOMETHING!

If I were 20 years older, I would be more circumspect. I would have studied global politics, psychosocial behavior, diplomacy. I'd be more willing to write my members of Congress than take up arms.

Mom was stable but still in decline. Dad wanted out of his alimony payments. My sister hated my mother. My brother hated all of us. George W. Bush had become president because the Supreme Court said, "Stop the counting."

A side note. *(Holding up the envelope sleeve.)* I found a 2000 General Election absentee ballot, unmarked, on Lynn's coffee table. *(Pulls the ballot out of the sleeve.)* She lived in Florida. She was a lifelong Democrat. Look. *(Turning the ballot around.)* No hanging chad. You add all that up.

Smack dab into forty. Looking back. Looking forward. And stuck in between.

September 13th. The passenger list for American Airlines Flight 77 appeared online. Scanning the list, I found a familiar name. Sarah Clark. *(Beat.)* Common enough name. Could be anyone. *(Beat.)* A few lines down: Joe Ferguson. I cocked my head. *(Beat.)* More lines down: Ann Judge.

(In a different trembling voice, definitely and defiantly.) "Yes."

That's all Vance said when he saw my name pop up on caller ID. (*Huge sigh.*) I slumped back in my chair.

Over ten years had passed since we'd all worked together. Vance and I cemented our friendship early, knowing it would be lifelong. Sarah, Joe, and Ann? Workmates. Drunken laughter after three drinks at Happy Hour. Might have seen each of them once over the ten years.

At that moment, I saw them clearly. Heard their distinct voices. Remembered their height relative to mine. Sarah and Ann's brown eyes, Joe's blue. Ann huddled outside the building in the winter, smoking her Marlboro lights. Joe swilling whatever was on tap. Sarah drinking, always, chardonnay.

One blip of relief: it was a different Sarah Clark. Nonetheless, a Sarah Clark was gone.

Fifteen months after 9/11, I visited the World Trade Center site in New York. Still gaping holes, scaffolding everywhere, covered streets with "walk this way" signs. And tourists. Some combination of parents and kids backed up to the fence with someone taking a picture. They smiled. Why not take a cheerful family photo outside the gates of Dachau?

Twelve years later, I revisited the site, by then the 9/11 Memorial. I found Joe's and Ann's names on adjoining panels.

I traced their full names with my finger. Could I remember their faces? For an entire year after 9/11, I couldn't shake their faces from my mind or my dreams. Not their regular faces. Their faces, full of fear. Their faces, knowing they had minutes to live. Their faces, eyes closed just before impact so they wouldn't see it. Their faces, unpurged from my head. I see them even now, though the horror is gone. I see their smiles.

Five weeks after 9/11. *Cloud Street*. A five-hour epic Australian play based on Tim Winton's novel about two families sharing a house in Perth starting in the 1940s. It ran at the Eisenhower Theatre in the Kennedy Center in Washington which sits on the Potomac River, along the flight path to Reagan National Airport. Airplanes follow the Potomac downstream and bank right just after the Kennedy Center on their final approach. They do this to avoid flying anywhere near the White House. You can hear the planes, a mere two hundred feet above the river, every two minutes or so. For five hours. I know I can't be the only one who's skittish when hearing the roar of a plane so close, even through the walls.

Those sounds. The dreams. Mom. The changes in work and school. Ties to the past. The entire thing became even more inconvenient.

Almost immediately, people started asking why.

President Bush was the eternal optimist. “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”

I’m not usually one to quote Deepak Chopra, but he did ask a lot of good questions:

Tribal warfare has been going on for two thousand years and has now been magnified globally. Can tribal warfare be brought to an end? Is patriotism and nationalism even relevant anymore, or is this another form of tribalism? What are you and I as persons going to do about what is happening? Can we afford to let the deeper wound fester any longer? Everyone is calling this an attack on America, but is it not a rift in our collective soul? Isn't this an attack on civilization from without that is also from within?

Then there was this: Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson lay partial blame for the attacks on liberals, feminists, homosexuals, and abortionists since they have pushed God away from the United States.

So as a liberal, a feminist, a homosexual, and by-God-yes! it’s a woman’s decision, I’m to blame for all this?

So inconvenient. All of it.

Before 9/11, I flew to Orlando once a month. My brother was working in Pensacola, and delegated his guardianship to his wife. I loved her. She gave me a nephew when I was seven. She was kind, funny. She also wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer.

By the end of summer break, everything was in order. I managed, somehow, to get her qualified for Medicaid. Her neighbor, Gil, whom I called Papi, worked for the Department of Children and Families. He told me to see Javier. Javier looked me straight in the eye and said:

“Your mother plans to return home when she’s better, right?”

I cocked my head and made, I’m sure, a quizzical look. Again, this time nodding as he talked:

“Your mother plans to return home when she’s better, right?”

Ah. Right.

We had to make sure she had less than \$2,000 in her bank accounts. With her social security, Dad’s alimony, and part of Dad’s military pension, she was bringing in over \$3,000 each month.

“You have to spend it down every month,” I instructed my sister-in-law. “Buy her services at the nursing home, pay her monthly bills, take yourself to an expensive dinner...whatever, just make sure it never goes above \$2,000.”

That summer, before 9/11, in a way brought me back to my mom. Every visit, she was happy to see me. Except when she couldn't find her children. I'd have to search Conway Lakes for them, then tell her they were in the playroom. Lynn was a looker in her day. She'd send me to the store to buy particular makeup, and a bottle of Estée Lauder's Youth Dew. I'd leave her room, chat with the folks at the nurses' station, then walk back in to the next topic. She thought I was married, to a woman, and had three children. She always asked about them. I played the game.

One morning, I arrived just after her bath. She was laying, naked, under a sheet. Lynn saw me, threw off the sheet, and said, "It's about time you got here! I've been ready for an hour! Take me to the dance!" I covered her back up, and told her the taxi was on its way.

Beat.

But I did notice her withered body. Her saggy, shriveled breasts. Two brown misshapened nubs that were her nipples.

When I was a toddler, she would take me into the bathroom while she bathed. I can still see her full figure, rising from the tub, her dusty dark nipples, her dark haired pubic region, missing what I had in the same place. That's what three-year old me remembers. It didn't jive with what I saw that day. It made me sad.

Once, she dismissed me the second I entered her room.

(As Lynn, yelling.) "Get out of the way!"

I moved forward. She craned her neck to see beyond me.

(As Lynn.) "Andy is almost finished mopping the floor. When he's done, we're going out and dance all night long. I'll see you later."

(As Russell, smiling.) "Have a ball!"

There were moments of lucidity.

(As Lynn:) It so good to see you!

You're looking good today!

(As Lynn:) I look like shit. I haven't had my hair done in weeks.

(As Russell:) You still look pretty good.

(As Lynn:) You're sweet. You lie, but you're sweet! *(Beat.)* How's your father?

(As Russell:) He's doing okay. Turned eighty back in January.

(As Lynn:) How's his health?

(As Russell:) Good for eighty. He's wearing a hearing aid now.

(As Lynn:) Does it work?

We laughed.

(As Russell:) When he remembers to turn it on.

More laughter.

(As Lynn:) I don't know why he bothered. He never listened.

Doubled up in laughter. Lynn was spot on. A clear moment before traversing the rings of Saturn.

(As Lynn:) How about you? How's your dental practice?

And just like that, she was somewhere else.

But I appreciated those days. The mom I knew as a youngster was back. She cared about me. She loved me. She appreciated my talents and quirks.

On that first visit, in January, I made a conscience decision. Forgiveness. Oh, don't worry. I haven't forgotten one thing. I haven't forgotten the disapproval. The threats. The late-night, drunken accusatory phone calls. Her black flat-soled shoe smacking my body. Her taloned fingernails digging into my skin. Her cutting words. The smell of vodka when entering her house. The vomit I cleaned up. Her mother I tended to at 3am when she was passed out on the couch. The tearful argument I had with Dad when he drove me to school in Texas.

(As Russell:) Why do you always buy her alcohol?

(As Dad:) It's easier than putting up with her rage.

Beat

I forgave him, too.

Cleaning out her house. Readyng it for a possible rental or sale. That was my summer of 2001. So much nostalgia in that house. Some much junk from a hoarder.

I found 14 unopened bottles of vodka in a cabinet. Pouring all down the drain was therapeutic. I called cousins to come by and take what they wanted. Papi commented on the dozens of trash bags I'd placed on the curb.

(As Papi.) What's all that?

(As Russell:) Trash.

Of course, I didn't tell him what I knew he knew. There's a collective silence around alcoholism.

During it all, every day at 1:30, I'd drive to Conway Lakes for a visit. I may not have had the closure I wanted, but it was some type of closure.

So by 8:40am on Tuesday, September 11th, 2001, life had leveled out.

BAM!

I was to be on a flight to Orlando on Friday the 14th. That was canceled. I canceled the mid-October trip; I just couldn't fly. I bucked up and booked a flight in December. The gate at Dulles was the one next to the gate where United 77 took off for the last time. I cursed Mohamed Atta, the terrorists' ringleader.

I resumed my trips to Orlando every four to six weeks. For a while, in 2002, I was often the random person chosen for a body search. I mean *(pointing to himself)*, I look like a terrorist, right? After the third random search, around 6:30 in the morning, with coffee in one hand and a bag slung over my shoulder, I annoyedly expressed my discontent with the entire process. That day, I learned not to talk back to TSA.

Lynn steadily declined, though we always managed a few laughs. Her affairs were supposedly in order. On the 22nd of March, 2003, with tens of thousands, I marched down Broadway in protest of the Iraqi War which had just started. Mom knew none of this. She was in her own world, unphased by the real world.

In April 2003, a phone call from Conway Lakes. "We've tried to get in touch with your brother. We haven't received payment in almost six months, and if we don't come to an agreement by tomorrow, we'll need release your mother. Where should we send her?"

Medicaid has audited her bank account. The balance was over \$40,000. No more Medicaid.

I got it fixed, ruining the day I had ever agreed for my brother to be her guardian. We had to sell the house.

She never went on Medicaid again.

My third of her estate: \$612.50. My two siblings got \$612.51. That penny still irks me.

On some visit, I made another conscience decision. Truth. Life is short. We learned that from 9/11. “The truth sets you free.”

Lynn asked yet again about my wife and kids. I simply said,

“Mom, you know I’m with William. I’m gay.”

A pause.

“Is he here with you? I’d like to meet him.”

(Beat.)

The last time I saw Mom before the day she died, she was mostly unresponsive. Something was off, but no one said anything was wrong. The following week, I was off to Milan. I held her hand, told her I was going to the Santa Maria delle Grazie to see daVinci’s “The Last Supper.” Lynn had always wanted to travel, see all the art. But she was afraid to fly, so she never saw art except in pictures. I told her I’d look at “The Last Supper” with her eyes. A slight squeeze of my hand.

The day before I left for Milan, my brother called: “Her blood pressure dropped. She’s in ICU at the hospital. They’re running tests.” I went to Dulles, and left for Milan again from a gate near where United 77 departed. I still cursed Mohamed Atta, but I wasn’t afraid any more. I landed at Malpensa, took the train into Milan, made it to my friend’s house, and checked my email. Stage four lung cancer. My brother made the decision, which I completely agreed with, for no treatment and palliative care.

“The Last Supper” took my breath away. As did the Montorfano mural of the Crucifixion on the opposite wall of the chapel. I wished Mom were with me to see it. Quietly, I spoke words of description, sending the words to her telepathically. I hope she got them.

I bought a round-trip ticket from Washington to Orlando for March 15, leaving early in the morning, coming back late at night. I was off to a conference in San Francisco on the 16th. I bought the ticket for the 15th because it was \$20 cheaper than a ticket on the 14th.

My brother called me at 5am on the 15th. “Nursing home called. She’s declining rapidly.” “I’ll be there at 10:30.” He picked me up, we went to Conway Lakes. I never got used to the persistent smell of death. We walked into her room. That raspy death rattle. I lifted the blanket from her leg. The lower half was white, a little pinkish above the knee. “Her circulation is slowing. She’ll be dead soon.” We were to meet with Hospice at 3. We went to lunch. We got back to Conway Lakes at 2:45 and her door was closed. She was dead.

I sat in the room with her. I pressed my finger against her forehead. Six years later, I did the same thing with Dad's corpse. I don't know where I got that. I sat in a chair and cried. What a hard life she had. At her funeral a week later, Dad, my brother, his son, my high school English teacher and I all shared a flask of Mom's favorite drink: vodka and white wine. We each took a swig, and poured the rest on her grave.

The next phase of life was to begin.

LIGHTS OUT.

END OF PLAY