

## *The Deep Blue Fugue*

Quail Bell Magazine, February 2024

Sarah Harley

My mother was a woman with pretty glinty eyes. Pale green, sometimes flecked with silver, depending on her mood. The eyes lighted on sights that made her smile. The passing dazzle: summer flowers filled with petals then run to seed; slants of blue and yellow light. She knew about distances that were not connected to the visible world. She saw things others did not, things just beyond. She possessed a predisposition, acquired through fire and bombs falling through the roof.

Everything is fine, she told herself each day. To settle her nerves, the dishcloth was wrung out for the five millionth time, hung over the edge of the chipped enamel sink. The dishcloth had been used to soak up the nightly antiseptic liquid, poured from its small brown bottle into a small circular pool, which spread slowly over the white wooden kitchen table. My mother knew the rate of the liquid's expansion so she could attend to putting away the teacups and teaspoons as the pool continued to spread over the surface of the table. Then it was time: my mother deftly wiped it all away, as if she wished she had never poured it in the first place.

The room was filled with the strong fragrance of terpinolene, an oil extracted from pine. Terpenes are found in various plants, naturally present in lilac, rosemary, sage, and other woody perennials as well as conifer and tea trees. My mother kept her supply in the small brown bottle that was returned to the windowsill.

The dishcloth would not dry. It never had a chance to, only reaching the driest edge of dampness.

The dampness was everywhere: in the walls, in the clothes, in the blankets that were folded over the beds of each of her four children. My mother fought a losing battle against the dampness, the tiny black dots on the walls, my father and his secretive ways.

She kept her own secrets including the one about the lump in her breast, hardened over time like a stone tumbling in a river. The cells from the lump eventually broke free, themselves tired of living in secret, embarking on a journey through the bloodstream, traveling to far-flung corners of her body. In these distant territories, they found a foothold and began to take root.

“It’s too late,” the doctor explained. “The cancer has spread.”

In the end, she fought a losing battle she waged upon herself.

Along with the small brown bottle, a yellow matchbox also lived on the windowsill. They were Swan Vestas matches – ‘The Smoker’s Match’ – with the bright red and green cheerful graphics, a pretty swan with fluffy feathers. The names of four cities were printed on the box: London. Liverpool. Glasgow. Leeds. I would stare at the box and wish I was in a place that had a name, a place that was somewhere.

When it was time for my mother to light a cigarette, a match was taken from inside and struck against the side of its damp box. No spark. Nothing except a soft dragging tear. One more time. To my mother’s relief, a spark caught and the match held a flame. Puff of sulphur. Closing her eyes, she held the flame to the crackling end of the cigarette, lit up like a torch.

She returned the trusted matches inside their box to the windowsill.

Deep inhale followed by slow exhale. My mother blew the smoke through the open window. Even so, the air filled with the mild and fragrant smell of her Park Drive cigarettes, made from a new sweetened tobacco, promised to be the delight of all smokers including my mother.

After a few puffs, she rested the cigarette on the edge of an ashtray, round in shape, soldered down from a green gold metal.

A thin tendril of smoke like a silvery-grey ribbon drifted through the air.

The smell would be gone by the time my father got home but my mother kept the window open anyway because smoking in the house put her marriage in jeopardy. By the time my father got

home, if he even came home, the kitchen would carry the mildly sweet starchy smell of the potatoes that had been boiling for most of the afternoon.

My mother had gone to her room to lie down. I had to watch the small blue flame and make sure all the water did not boil away. When the water level was low, I filled a teacup and poured it slowly onto the potatoes. They had started to break apart and turn the water cloudy. I would wake my mother before they dissolved altogether.

\*

Other ashtrays lived around the house. The mermaid ashtray lived on the small end table next to the brown threadbare chair in the living room. The mermaid wound her body around the edge of the ashtray. I thought it was a shame for her body and especially her mermaid tail to be covered in ash, even burned when the cigarette was stubbed out close to her body. I wanted to take it from my mother when she wasn't looking and wash it in the sink with the fairy liquid, then hide her away in my small room.

The figurine of the mermaid was lifelike and intricately detailed, carefully etched into the soft silvery metal. I ran my finger along her edges. You could see each thread of the mermaid's hair, still damp from swimming, wrapped in long tangled strands around her small shoulders and over her pointed breasts. You could see the shimmery scales of her lower body, although ash and tar had deepened their way into the grooves, smudged deeply into the metal. Finished cigarette ends lay in the ashtray's center, sometimes stained with my mother's red lipstick, worn for a night out with my father. The white carbon filter of the cigarette contained dark brown stains, indicating the passage of tar from the cigarette into my mother's lungs.

\*

My mother was still sleeping so I went to her room at the end of the hall to wake her. Curtains drawn against the day. A blue haze wraps itself slowly around my mother's small body on the edge of her bed. Brown corduroy trousers. Mouse brown sweater. Soft brown hair on the pillow. Always the same. Her knees are tucked in against herself like a child.

“Mummy. Mummy. The potatoes are dissolving.”

My mother flies upright as if she had never been asleep at all. I don’t like the feel of her mood so I steal away down the hallway, into another area of nothingness of the house.

\*

When I reflect on the childhood house, the magnitude of its emptiness becomes unfathomable: stripped of occupants—relatives, friends, neighbors—and drained of events: birthday parties, gatherings of any kind, friends popping in for a cup of tea to say hello. There was none of that. Just a vast and hazy nothingness like a fog. There’s me, trying to navigate my way through it, trying to find some semblance of meaning, something to hold, touchstones to help me understand the world.

But the only substance is my mother: ethereal and vanishing, gone like the strike of a clock.

\*

In my younger childhood, up to the age of seven or eight, my mother left the house each day. She walked to town each morning, carrying the string bag. She would buy an onion from the market along with some potatoes, perhaps a cabbage. Always a loaf of bread. The items were dropped into the bag with a muted sound.

She saved whatever she could for the day’s supply of Park Drive cigarettes: a white box with elegant red letters just above a gold stripe. Everything about the cigarettes was from an era she wanted to go back to, a time when she twirled all night on a dancefloor in one of the dresses from the wardrobe in her bedroom, her eyes carefully made up, her neck sprayed with perfume.

Her body was childless, shaped like an hourglass. Her hair was platinum blonde.

Back then, she didn’t know the drudgery and sorrow that awaited her, that she’d live out her days in an empty house taking blue pills the doctor had prescribed.

“One for sorrow, two for joy” my mother said to herself as she popped them one by one onto her tongue, watching a single magpie alight on the roof of the house across the street. But there was never any joy, just a deepening blue fugue that waited for her at the end of the hall.

Through the window, leaves wheeled in the air against a dark grey sky. I felt afraid. My mother threw her colorful dresses from the wardrobe onto the bed. She told stories, in a sing-song voice, all a slur.

\*

I learned how to walk in and out of the fugue that surrounded my mother when I was seven. It was edged with a shimmery iridescent light, which marked its end and its beginning. The lights mixed a palette of turquoise-blue and sea-green, tinged with crimson-pink, deepened with cornflower-blue. I am a child so I am learning the names of all the colours I can see. I learned to hold my breath and step in and out of the shifting colours. Even though I hated to leave my mother lost in her room, I liked it best when I took a deep breath and quickly rushed out of it. The fugue went up to my chest like a wave in the sea.

I felt bad leaving her because I knew her nights in the room were never gentle.

\*

Before nightfall, my mother walked back to town, to the small window with a latch at the Market House pub where she returned the brown bottles from the night before, getting new ones filled with pale ale. My mother found ways to bookend the emptiness of her days before the nights that awaited her in the bedroom at the end of the hall.

Back at home, she would pour the contents of the brown bottle into a glass and drink it by herself in the fading light of the living room, sitting alone in the threadbare brown chair, next to the table with the mermaid ashtray.

How had her life become so small?

\*

The blue pills were prescribed at the end of an era in which my mother had been convincing herself there was nothing to regret. Not even cancer. They say you should live life without regrets. She sang a song about it in French.

On the stage, her body made a tiny silhouette, the spotlight lit up her platinum blonde hair. Although she was in a pub somewhere in northern England, my mother pictured herself somewhere else, in a cafe bistro, or a brasserie, somewhere in France. She knew the place in her mind well, just a short walk from the harbor along the medieval ramparts in her dark blue raincoat. As the space filled with smoke, both wooden doors were swung open. Their once glossy blue paint, weathered by the ocean air and high gales, had long ago begun to chip and peel. Through the doorway, my mother could see the swaying golden lights of the harbor from the stage, faraway shimmering orbs, evoking a place other than where she was. Her voice drifted through the streets toward the sea.

Inside the pub, the men huddled around the old wooden bar. Low beamed ceilings above them, dark stained oak floors beneath their old work boots. My mother stood alone on the stage and sang a few songs. The men rested their broad shirted backs against the bar, swilling back pints of bitter, running oil stained hands through oil slicked hair. My mother's voice could hardly cut through the noise. Still, they all looked in her direction.

The words to the song she sang were a lie. The irony was well established and understood.

\*

The song "Non, Je ne regrette rien" was recorded by Edith Piaf, in 1960, just three years before her passing at age 47. Much like my mother, Piaf lived a tumultuous life of heartbreak and sorrow. They shared a physical resemblance: a tiny stature and shiny wide far set eyes that saw something beyond what was right in front of them. In parallel with the singer, my mother harbored a desire for a life free of regrets but reality proved otherwise. I wonder what she regretted when she sang the song about not regretting anything?

Her body's betrayal. The demise of her marriage. The neglect of her children. The loss of a sketchbook she once carried under her arm. A lost box of charcoal and graphite drawing pencils. Losing her one true love whose love letters she kept hidden in a shiny black handbag in the kitchen. True love, as it turned out, was perishable, charred like a match.

Most of all, she grieved for the life she had surrendered to addiction, to the deep blue hazy fugue provided by pills and alcohol. On some days, I regret not spending more time with her in her room at the end of the hall. I could have sat on the edge of the bed and provided a presence. I could have given her more than the cup of tea I made each morning, stone cold one hour later.

She was gone by the age of 48. I was 13.

My mother, the little waif sparrow, governed by self-loathing and shame, a rooted not-enoughness that was her existence. Like her, I see more than the things connected to the physical world: the passing dazzle, yellow lights across the harbor, starlight and glimpses of cornflower blue, a love that lasts a lifetime.