

Volume 22 / 2023

# REAL WOMEN WRITE

## *Mothers and Mentors* **THE ART OF NURTURING**

FOREWORD BY  
Jennifer Smith Turner

EDITED BY  
Susan Schoch



*Sharing Stories, Sharing Lives*  
*in Prose and Poetry from Story Circle Network*





who stage-managed. She blossomed after that. I counteracted student criticism in a note to another student, and she posted a picture of the note I gave her 45 years ago. She'd kept it all these years.

Back then I didn't realize that drama class was preparation for life. In the late '70s, I had no idea that two of my girls would do voice-overs in France. I never imagined that two boys, who were competing to be the funniest, would become screenwriters or another boy with the right looks and ever-increasing skills would have over 90 roles to his credit according to his IMDb.

Nor did I know that one outstanding tenor would die from a series of strokes in his late 40s, a 16-year-old ingénue would lose her life when the car she was riding in flipped over, or an award-winning actor would die of AIDS when he was 27. No more curtain calls for those three, though their skills and talents will live in my mind. Forever.

## LIKE MOM

*Rosemary Keevil*

Do you ever have one of those moments when you do something that is so similar to your mother (or father, for you males out there) that it startles you in a deer-in-the-headlights type of way? Sometimes, when I look in the mirror at my puffy blonde hair, poke my bangs out of my eyes, lick my upper lip, and hold my hands together in front of my waist, I get scared because I am the spitting image of my mother.

My body is similar to hers, as well. I am, like Mom was, of average height and fairly slim, with a protruding rear end. A girl in high school once said, "When Rosemary walks into a room, her bum follows."

Sometimes I truly think I am becoming Mom.

Picture this: 1969, three in the morning, a fluffy-blondemopped, 50-year-old woman sitting at the kitchen table in her flannel housecoat, sipping strong orange pekoe tea with skim milk out of a china mug, click-clacking away on her Olivetti typewriter, writing nonfiction.

Picture this: 2023, three in the morning, a fluffy-blondemopped 68-year-old woman sitting at the kitchen table in her flannel housecoat, sipping strong orange pekoe tea with skim milk out of a china mug, tip-tapping away on her MacBook Pro, writing nonfiction.



That would be Mom and me. She wrote a syndicated newspaper column for *The Toronto Telegram* called "Suzannah's Family Fare." Her name was Helen, but she wanted to be anonymous. Her column offered household hints, such as using gritty toothpaste to remove the white-ring stains on wooden coffee tables caused by wet teacups and moist drinking glasses. Thing was, she was not domestic at all. I am also not domestic, and I am a journalist who has written for newspapers (often in the middle of the night). The reason for being creative at this ungodly hour is because life is less cluttered at this time. But Mom's life was cluttered in a different way than mine.

She was bombarded during the day at home. She ran my father's small real estate appraisal business, which operated out of our house, where it was a bit of a zoo—four kids, two cats, and two St. Bernards. My mother loved dogs. So do I. I love dogs more than children (except my own, of course).

But the king of the chaos was my father. He raged a lot, often about money. Mom had to hide the mail as soon as it arrived so Dad would not find it, and the inevitable bills it included, which would ignite the fury within. He was an alcoholic who would come home drunk at night when we were all in bed. Mom hid from him, with me in my bed, while he threw pots and pans around in the kitchen. Then he would go on the hunt for Mom, yelling her name, "Helen, Helen, Helen, Helen ..." Each "Helen" got louder as he drew closer. He opened the door to my room and gesticulated wildly, silhouetted in the dark doorway. He spat and screamed at Mom about how hard he worked, that there was never any money, and some such other thing. He never came any closer than the doorway. When I was an adult, I did ask Mom why she never left him. To which she replied, "Oh, he never hurt me, dear."

While Mom fielded an array of fly balls at home, she painted a brilliant "we're well-off" picture of us for the outside world. She scrimped and saved diligently in order to send all four of us kids to private schools. Mom wanted us to blend in with the upper class and marry "well." (If you asked her, she would say, "Mission Accomplished.")

When I was a teenager, she was president of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's Women's Committee, when there could be such a thing. As such, she not only dragged us to the symphony, but also entertained the symphony-going types at our house and hence had us hobnobbing with the right sort of people, people from "good stock."



But what to wear to such a do when you could not afford a new dress? She would buy one, wear it, get it dry-cleaned, and return it. Maybe the tags did not need to be attached to the garment, in order to return it, in those days. I'm not condoning this activity but handing it to her for both her ingenuity and balls.

Instead of sending us to summer camp like our colleagues at our exclusive schools, she had us get summer jobs. When I was 14, I worked as a waitress at a summer resort, along with my older sister and brother. It was indeed a lot of work, but it was also a lot of fun. Plus, I made money!

While Mom struggled hard on the frontlines trying to prove our prestige to the world, she did not neglect the back end of the combat zone. Mom planted the seeds of the potential power of women at a young age. When I was in grade six (1966), I was given a school project to write an essay on a world leader. My mother decided I should write about Indira Gandhi, the woman who had just become the prime minister of India. For another assignment on a Canadian politician, my mother had me write about the fiercely outspoken Judy LaMarsh, Canada's second female Cabinet Minister.

In terms of what I wanted to be when I grew up, I learned from Dad that I did not want to be a workaholic or an alcoholic. I accomplished the former but wasn't as successful at the latter, although I am now 21 years clean and sober. What I learned from Mom was that I would be slave to no man, which I am not, and that women have the power to accomplish whatever they want.

Besides the blonde mop, protruding bum, and hand and lip gestures, I have Mom's resilience and *joie de vivre*—all this despite life's challenges, mine being different than hers. That's another story, which is all drawn out in my 309-page memoir, *The Art of Losing It: A Memoir of Grief and Addiction*.

