

Aunt Mona

By Julie Showalter

May 13, 1996

When I pull into the driveway, everything is shabbier than I remember. Cows are penned off next to the side of the house. Two dogs, nondescript black mutts, mid-sized, sit on the porch. One of them comes toward the car as I park between two other cars, both Kansas plates, both also nondescript, one dirtier than the other. I get out, consider patting the dog's head, decide better not, say, "Hi, dog." His head lowers.

Brian comes to the door. I had expected Aunt Mona to be bald. I hadn't expected him to be. He has a five-day growth on his face and head. He speaks to the dog, "You go over there." Then to me, "He knows he's being punished." We half hug as he holds the door open and I walk past him into the house.

She is lying on a hospital bed in the living room. There is no smell of illness as I had feared. Flowers are everywhere — it is the day after Mother's Day — but there is no smell of flowers either. She is bald, she is thin. Would I have known her? Her face is in there but it's hard to find. She doesn't raise up, but she holds her arms out. We hug and she holds the hug, hard and strong. "I thought you'd never get here," she says. *I'm an hour earlier than I said. Does she mean I should have come sooner, weeks ago, months ago?* "I get my days mixed up. I kept thinking it was the day. Do you get your days mixed up?" This is something she has done on the phone. She assumes our situations are the same. She is assuming bravery and fortitude for me that I have yet to need. She is assuming someone is with her in this. Later, when she says we have a special bond, I

will wonder if she means all the moments of my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, or does she just mean this disease? A special bond.

There is a very bright mylar balloon tied to the railing of her bed. She can see it without moving, unlike the flowers which she has to lift her head to see. It is silver, covered with purple and pink pansies, and in bright pink letters, "Happy Mother's Day." She studies the balloon off and on. She mentions it several times. "I like my balloon."

When I comment on the flowers, she says, "You can't grow them like that in Texas. You can try and try, but it can't be done." They are, of course, florist's flowers which can be grown in a greenhouse anywhere. This is the first time she doesn't make sense. There will be many more.

Brian lowers her bed so I can sit next to her and brings me a chair. Most of the time I'm there I hold her hand. I rub it, forgetting that she's never liked to be touched. But now she likes it.

She tries to tell an anecdote, but she can't concentrate long enough to finish. A distraction, a wandering. She speaks fiercely about Mack leaving Tommye. "Tommye deserved better," she says, her voice strong and angry. "I told her when I was there last week (it wasn't last week, it was months ago). I was sitting there and there was a piece of hair right here (she points to her forehead, shrugs with her eyebrows) and then it was gone. It was right there and then it was gone. Can you explain a thing like that?"

I tell two stories about chemotherapy hair loss. The woman whom I could imagine being Aunt Mona being told, "You're going to lose your hair to chemotherapy." "No, I'm not," and she shaved her head. She laughs. She laughs and I realize that she wants me to talk. Wants to listen, comment, follow along, laugh, but she doesn't want to

bear the burden of the conversation. This isn't the experience of being at a sick bed where the person is too weak to talk, where you have to do all the work yourself. It's not that at all. She follows, she comments. She laughs and laughs. When she's not laughing, she smiles. When she closes her eyes to rest, she smiles. Would I know her? Yes, I'd know her. I'd know her smile. I tell her about the boys in a nice restaurant. She laughs and says, "I can just see it." She closes her eyes, and I believe she sees it.

She is seeing many things in her head now. Morphine and who knows what else have freed her imagination. "There are angels all around my bed," she says. "Is that true?" I ask. "That's for you and me to know," the eyebrows raise and she gives half of a knowing nod. Brian and I talk about when I taught English. Her eyes are closed. When she opens them, I say, "I thought you were asleep." "No, I was just teaching English for a while."

The phone rings, the first of several calls. It's the sheriff. The dog has been biting people. He acts friendly, wags his tale, but once you walk past him, he bites your ankle. They've had him for years, but this started six months ago. "When you got sick?" I ask. "No, it was before that," Brian says. "Maybe he knew before we did," Aunt Mona says. Maybe he knew. The question on the phone involves dates of rabies shots. If the dog's shots are current, he can be quarantined at home, if not, at the jail. Brian goes to check. "We've got to get rid of that dog," Aunt Mona says. "Tell him we'll get rid of that dog."

The dog becomes an undercurrent for the afternoon. When Brian answers the phone, he takes it into the dining room and speaks softly. "I'm trying to hear him," she says. "Tell him we're getting rid of that dog," she yells to Brian. Later, she will whisper

to me, “I like that dog more than a lot of the people he bit.” Later, she will say, “Brian really loves that dog.” Later, she will say, “You know, I can see the dog’s point of view (Long pause), but you know, I can see the dog’s point of view too.” A joke? I don’t know. When the sheriff calls again, she shouts, “Tell him we’re going to put the dog to sleep.” To me, she says, “We’re going to put that dog to sleep.” No one ever mentions the dog’s name.

There are many things that might be jokes — “I’ll get up and do that tomorrow.” Does she think she’ll be up again, or is this a joke she and Brian share?” A story about my mother and exploding black lotion — did it happen? Brian follows along, it’s hard to tell.

“This lump,” she points to an area just below her ribs, “It’s big. It’s . . . Kansas.”

“Do you name your lumps,” I ask.

“Yes. Do you name yours?”

“I don’t have any lumps.”

“That’s good.”

Am I becoming a better person? There are glimmers of the old feeling — I’m better than my sisters, I come to see her, I can cope with this. But mainly I feel, I wish they could see she’s not so bad. I wish they could enjoy being with her. I’ve been around this before with women in my support group who were dying. She’s not so bad. She’s happy. She’s enjoying having me here. She’s herself. Over and over, I marvel that she smiles when she closes her eyes. Whether she’s seeing her balloon in there, teaching English, or seeing angels, she’s happy. And when she opens her eyes, she sees me and she’s happy.

Brian is a riddle. Can he really be as unconflicted as he seems? Does he really love his mother with such total devotion? I love her, but she's not my mother. The petty irritations, her overbearing nature, are idiosyncrasies in an aunt. How can a 27 yr. Old son be so unambivalent? He holds water to her mouth. He screens visits and phone calls. He's there, out of the room maybe 15 minutes of my 2 ½ hour visit. When the nurse comes, he and I sit in the dining room and talk. "I'm sure I'm blocking out a lot of the pain," he says. He's obsessive about being the one to care for her. "Mike offers, her friends offer. Get out for a while, they say, and I know I should, but how do I know they'll take care of her right? I know I shouldn't get angry at my sister for being loud when she talks to her. But nobody else knows what she likes, how she needs to be treated." He tells me, "The hardest part is in the morning when I have to put her on the commode. Before she had enough strength to help me. But now, she's dead weight, and I'm scared I can't do it. I can't sleep at night for worrying about lifting her the next morning. I don't want to hurt her."

How can he not be ambivalent, this artist whose paintings are displayed on the wall next to his grandfather's oil copies of picture post cards, his father's cowboy drawings, his sister's straw dolls?

It was different when Daddy died. I swept in for the day in my mink coat and business garb, bringing a breath of fresh air, I thought. Bringing just the thing, I thought. Everyone thought. Terri said, "I'll bet he can walk today with you here." The doctors knew he was dying and they forced him to walk every day, implying he'd get better, telling us he'd get better. We had no idea he was dying. They were still planning operations. If this doesn't help, we'll take out his gall bladder. He was dying, and

nobody told us. There's no name for total body failure, no name that stops you cold like cancer. There's no name for hepatitis we've given him in a transfusion but won't admit we've done.

I thought I knew so much. I was so clever, so beautiful, just the tonic, just the thing to get him back on his feet. He tried to talk to me, but did I listen? "I dreamed your mother and Aunt Mona and Jack Kirby and I went on a trip. Your mother and Aunt Mona got out to get a coke and Jack and I kept driving." Poor Daddy, his subconscious thinks he's dying. I'll protect him from that. I'm smarter than he is, I know what his dream means even if he doesn't. What does it mean to be the daughter he told this dream to? To be the daughter who ignored it? Who didn't give him the chance to talk?

I'm better with Aunt Mona. I'm older. I've seen a lot more. When she mentions the angels, I say "really?" When we say goodbye, I don't pretend that it's not goodbye. I don't say, "When you're up and around." I don't say, "I'll be back this summer." I cry and I hold her. I say, "You have made all the difference. I wouldn't be who I am without you." She says, "And I wouldn't be who I am without you. All you girls were special, but you and I. There's always been a special bond. A special bond. It'll always be there."