

**Fragments of My Mother**

**ROSEMARY HALLILEY**

**13 November 1921- 3 November 2005**

## HERE LIES MY MOTHER

She died a year ago. She was 83.

It would be easier not to speak of her last months. But it has to be right that people can know how it was. This was six months of her life, a significant chunk of her time on earth, and surely by far the most bewildering, painful and traumatic. For that time she lay in valley of the shadow of death, often trying desperately to express what she was experiencing, like a young child trying to describe a menacing stranger, or a nightmare. The reality of it all will haunt me to my own death. So I feel bound to bear witness to it, and honour it.

She will soon have a gravestone. But these few pages can be another little gravestone, on paper. Perhaps just one more headstone in yet another cemetery. But special to me because it says:

*HERE LIES MY MOTHER.  
AND THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED TO HER.  
THIS!*

Till last spring, she had remained pretty much who she always had been. Warm-hearted, generous, selfless, kind, hospitable, humorous, prone to anxiety, in love with flowers and paintings, always delighted by the slightest achievement of her children or grandchildren, always thrilled to see us, always putting those around her first. She had had breast-cancer in recent years but the doctors were apparently pleased with her progress. Her mental horizon was shrinking and she was alarmed at her increasing vagueness. But even the dawning of mild dementia was something she feared more for its sinister implications in the long-term.... several years, perhaps many years from now.

So nothing prepared us for the shock of the transformation that shattered her life last spring. And nothing can have prepared her, either. She was initially taken to hospital with a severe bladder-infection. She never came home again.

Suddenly our mother, the consummate home-maker, the carer who had nurtured me and my brother and sister, the natural nurse who had cared for her own sisters right to their early deaths- suddenly this person who had always been the pivot of home and family as we knew it, was almost unrecognizable. And permanently so. Bed-ridden, stones of weight stripped off her forever as if in an instant, leaving a tiny frame of bone with her flesh stretched across it, so tight there was hardly a wrinkle.

Mum, the healthy eater who'd cooked for us for decades and been mildly embarrassed by her relative plumpness, suddenly looked like someone in a concentration-camp, withering from starvation. She could barely eat more than a few mouthfuls of food, and this soon had to be mashed up to be digestible. At first she could still manage to get the little spoon to her mouth but later, this too was beyond her. My sister and I would feed her ourselves.

By then the woman who had bustled around the house and garden could hardly lift a finger to help herself, let alone turn in her bed. There were attempts, in the early months, to keep her “mobile”. This involved nurses giving her an aided stagger from bed to chair and back again, a distance of a yard or two at most- but a perilous journey for Mummy, with all strength and co-ordination gone, and a look of fear in her eyes as if she was someone with no head for heights who’d been forced to the top of a very high building. She found it so overwhelming and painful to be moved about in this way that we did not repeat these forays out. The world shrank to her bed-room.

Her mind, which had wandered a bit, now wandered a lot- long journeys, it seemed, in and out of our shared reality, through worlds of dream, fantasy, reverie and memory, descents into underworlds and distant places, a paradise or two perhaps- of which we would get glimpses through her words, facial expressions, groans or murmurs.

Most distressingly for her, for the last six months of her life she suddenly found herself totally and doubly incontinent- and powerless even to clean herself. This she found utterly degrading, often complaining of her shame at being “smelly down there”.

How terrified she must have felt at all this- that it should have happened so suddenly and without warning! She never even really knew where she was, in that little room, but had a regular fantasy that the home she had made and loved had somehow been burnt down. She longed to return there whenever we assured her it was still standing.

It is a frightening thing, to want your mother to die because you feel that is the best thing for her. At the same time as you want her to live, because you love her and you vainly hope for some sort of recovery. It is painful when she asks, “What should I do, darling?” You cannot answer truthfully, because it would be unspeakably brutal. It is terrible - as the last day gets closer and closer, though you never know if this it or the day before it, or if it is still a year away – terrible to find yourself unable to give your own mother a straight answer as she repeats the question, a look in her eye like a wounded animal’s fleeing the hunt, desperate for help, for comfort, for a way out- out of the little bedroom that is not even her own. That strange disembodied capsule of a bedroom, where she lies, day in night out, nursed by people she has never seen before in her life- a new doctor, a new priest, different voices from the corridor, different shadows playing on the wall, strange sounds from the garden she cannot even strain her neck to see.

She was no longer Mum and yet she was, more so than ever. In my visits over those months, I grew to love and admire her more than ever. The more helpless she became, the more her character radiated out of her- sometimes unmediated by the material world but often grappling with it, trying to endure it, understand it, resist it, change it, escape it. Wherever her mind went on its travels, she always seemed to know us when we entered her room and we could feel her tiny heart leap with joy in that fragile frame (she was just under five feet tall) lying

taut on the bed. Right to the end, she would always try to raise her hand as I stood at the door about to leave, making a tremendous effort to get the top half of her right arm up off the bed- so that the emaciated hand on the end of it could do an imitation of a loving wave.

When we were with her, she would drift in and out of silence. When she spoke, she would say funny or outrageous things. Strange or mundane things. Wise, sad, or confused. You never knew what to expect. She could be witty, absurd, profound or incomprehensible. Indecipherable, beautiful, poetic. And we often thought, even when she sounded as if she was talking nonsense, it might just be because we just couldn't understand the references or decode the symbols. Perhaps it all had the deep logic of the deepest dreams.

Whenever I could, I used to jot down her words surreptitiously, on unused napkins and Kleenexes, scraps of notepaper, fly-leaves and newspaper margins. I knew that these fragments would soon be all I would have to remember this time by- this time that seemed so preposterous, it had to be some dreadful slippage from reality, which would soon readjust and shoot us all back to where we were before. I knew as she uttered them that these words were so unusual and so very much hers, delivered in a way so her own, so wet with her life-blood, so imprinted with her special touch, that even an hour or two later, I would never be able to bring back the image, intonation or phrasing she had used. They would go and with that, she go too. She sometimes seemed to catch me scribbling away. But I don't think she ever asked what I was up to and I don't believe I ever explained. I felt a bit furtive, guilty that she might feel I was writing down her words because they might be her last.

One day, early on, when she could still sit up, I took a few photos, with her permission. I immediately felt very awkward about it, and she was sick soon afterwards. But I treasure them as they remind me how she looked, just in case I am ever tempted to forget. Months later, one day I took a few others she never knew about and I treasure them too.

But it is her words that define her. I soon began to try and make something with them, some kind of poems. So the fragments could *be* something, some new thing. So her words could have a little setting, a little digital life after death.

And now, she does come back to me through her words to tell me how it was. And I know that it all did really happen. That she fought for lucidity and life. That right to the end she loved us far more than she loved herself. That she was always dignified even when utterly bereft and lost. That she finally died in that very room, where she had always welcomed us as if we were the most precious thing, her cracked lips smiling- that room where she'd groaned with pain and almost chuckled at jokes, where she lived and suffered the long last months of her life.

Mark Halliley

Winter 2006, London.

## **FRAGMENTS OF MY MOTHER**

## 1. THE AIR FIELD

*“Daddy goes to the post office sometimes.”*

“Yes”.

(Yes, that’s right, Mum).

*“He goes by the air-field”.*

“Yes.”

(Does he? It’s a very long way round).

*“But it won’t be open today.*

*Never on a Sunday.”*

“Haven’t we seen people get their papers there on a Sunday morning?

Didn’t we go there together once?”

*“Oh no, I don’t think so-  
it can’t be-  
because it’s closed.”*

“I’ll see if it’s open, Mum.”

*“Yes, thank you, darling.”*

The courtesies still intact, the last to go,  
like flecks of glitter still there  
on the cheekbone days after the ball.

*“I’ve got some medicine coming through  
to the surgery, on the way to the post office.  
Can you see if it’s there?”*

“But won’t it be closed?”

(Look, the eyes beady with panic now  
like a crazy searchlight in the dark!)

“On a Sunday, I mean?”

(Disconnections, disconnections, like Hal  
singing *Daisy Daisy*).

*“Oh I think they’ll be open.  
They usually are.  
They’re very good there.  
Can you see for me?”*

“Of course.”

Mum, I see a closed door  
and myself going past it.  
Mum, I see you dying.

*“Daddy goes by the air field.”*

“Does he?”

No, he goes past the A12 turn-off.  
The air field is two miles away  
in the other direction  
but that’s where you see yourself  
walking the dog  
beneath all that Suffolk sky.

“I’ll be off then, Mum.”

As I turn,  
from the other side inside this one:

*“When we get there,  
I sometimes wonder  
if I’ll ever get back.”*

*April 2005, written the last time I saw Mum at home in Raydon.*

## 2. THE PHONE CALL

*"We've been having an odd evening".*

The voice bright and assured  
As heavy face-powder.  
*"Very odd".*

"Have you, Mum?"

*"Yes. I keep closing the curtains  
and Daddy keeps opening them."*

I can see her in her arm-chair,  
the eyes rotating fast in their sockets  
as dusk approaches the other side  
of the velvet curtains.

"Really. Why's that?"

*"Lately, everything suddenly goes black.  
Outside. Just like that.  
First it's day. Then it's black."*

"When, Mum?"

*"In the evening. Round about now.  
So I'm waiting for it to happen, you see.  
And I keep closing the curtains  
To keep the blackness out.  
And Daddy keeps opening them.  
And we find, it hasn't gone black yet."*

"No?"

*"No. But it will. It'll go black,  
Suddenly. Without warning.  
It does every day now."*

"What colour is it now, Mum?"

*"Now?"*

"Yes."

Her eyes intense  
on the window as if I'm the glass.

*"Now, it's... "*



Stretching forward from the cushions,  
swinging in the abyss between  
what was and what is,  
then a momentary return.

*“Now, it’s- blue.  
But it won’t last.”*

*18 April 2005, written after my last phone call to Mum at her home in Raydon.*

### 3. THE BOAT

*“The Irish stew here is **very** good!”*

The voice deep, possessed:

*“It’s made by the lady, down the way.  
The lady with the lambs...”*

“She raises them?”

*“Yes! She raises them, and it’s all **very** good.”*

Ma, these fragments I shore up!

*“The dark man comes.  
I like my dark man-  
**He** doesn’t have any time for the bits  
and bobs with black hair!  
**They** belong to a bigger organisation.”*

Quite undone you are.

*“One has had some quite unpleasant examinations  
of one’s internal affairs.  
They have some sinister methods.  
I just go along with it  
and keep my counsel.  
**I know when they’re lying.”***

Against your ruin.

*“You took a boat,  
You took a boat up the river.  
It was late, it was dark,  
it was midnight and the moon shone  
on the water...”*

“Where did I go, Mum?”

*“Ah, **that** was very interesting.  
You went-  
you went....”*

Gone again, gone beyond,  
reaching back like a hand  
clawing the waters of the deep  
for answering fingers.

*“You came back, very gently,  
you came back again,  
in your boat.”*

Yes Ma, I came softly back  
from I know not where.  
I went up the river,  
someone went up a river,  
and it was dark but moonlit.  
and then he came back-  
the oars making little circles  
in silence, watched  
by the wide-eyed frogs and otters,  
and he docked gently.  
I see him too, I see him,  
I do, and he was me,  
he was me!

*“It’s very annoying  
being tired all the time.  
And there’s all that smelly business-  
down there.  
I’m so **horrid**.”*

“No Mum, you’re a very sweet-natured lady.”

*“Am I, darling?”*

“Oh yes! Yes, most certainly!”

*“Are you sure?”*

“Totally.”

*“Oh thank you, darling!  
What a **relief!**”*

A glittering smile back  
through the night.

*“I’m very lucky.  
Thank you for coming all this way...  
Is this my button?  
Must I press it?  
When must I press it?”*

***Written following a visit to my mother at her nursing home, June 21 2005.***

#### 4. THE LILIES

*"I woke up to find everything had gone.  
And yet, I didn't mean to be here."*

In my mother's room this July  
there are many lilies about to bloom.  
My son delivered the bouquet to her  
wrapped in white paper  
like swaddling clothes,  
the green storks long and gracious  
as her life, the buds soon to let rip.

"And what colour will they be, Mum?"

*"I should say they will be creamy-coloured.  
Beautiful lilies, only half-out!"*

In my mother's room this July  
a single lily plant  
in a small pot as fragile  
as her suddenly ancient body.  
Its pearl-white flower has died  
in here behind our backs.  
But today, we all noticed  
its green leaves are still robust  
and we watered them from the glass  
she drinks out of like a newborn  
draining her mother's teat.

And how much water shall I pour on it, Mum,  
this flowerless lily of the valley? More?

*"More I would say. More,  
to stop it dying."*

"Shall I read to you, Mum?"

*"That might be nice, darling.  
I didn't really mean to carry on  
But I didn't know what else to do.  
I'm sorry to be so useless.  
I hate being this hopeless."*

"Don't forget we love you, Mum."

*"I won't."*

***10 July 2005, after visiting my mother in her Nursing Home room***

## 5. THE LAST THINGS

“How are you, Mum?”

*“More dead than alive.”*

And I thought  
last time was the last time.

“I’ve just been to Framlingham.  
Have you been to Framlingham Castle, Mum?”

*“There are two castles”.*

There is only one  
and within the battlements,  
it was all torn down  
leaving nothing but a poorhouse  
and a smooth green lawn like a golf course.

*“There are two castles-  
one behind the other.  
And I said,  
‘If I’m going to live in the castle  
it has to be the right one.’ ”*

“Have you burnt your tongue?”

*“I don’t know.  
Have I?”*

Drink in the cooling air  
where the wood-pheasants call  
like soft alarms.  
Wait, then drink  
your lukewarm tea through the straw  
like we did at my birthday party  
laid on by your loving hands  
on the hot needles in the pine-woods  
so many years ago.

*“The bottles of drinking water for emergencies at home  
ought to be replaced- in due course.  
Otherwise, there will be an invasion or something.  
And then, there’s nothing.”*

The eyes transfixed.  
Castles, foreign troops.

“What are you thinking, mum?”

*“I try to think about that  
but then I lose the thread.  
So I say to them,  
'It's no good asking me.'”*

The things you say today  
as the silver cord is loosened.

*“I'm probably imagining things, darling.  
I'm glad you told me you were away 12 days  
as I thought it was one.”*

“It must be hard to differentiate the days  
if the same things happen each day.”

*“Yes. I did summon my nice dark doctor  
but it was all too much.  
I had two projects on in France  
and my feet were fine.”*

Long home, golden bowl.

*“Thank you so much for coming, darling.  
I'm very lucky.”*

“So am I, Mum. You always looked after me.”

*“Of course!”*

***7 August 2005 after visiting Mum at Laxfield House.***

## 6. THE QUESTIONS

“How are you, mum?”

*“Hanging on as best I can.  
What’s it like in here?”*

“Fine. Not too warm.”

*“Should I powder my nose  
before everyone comes?”*

“No one else is coming.”

*“The Wednesday People?”*

“It’s Tuesday.”

*“Is that a wasp up in the corner?”*

“No, mum. It’s a shadow.”

*“Will I be taken somewhere else?”*

“No one’s taking you anywhere.”

*“Is everyone out in the garden?”*

“They’re inside now. It’s dusk.”

*“Who’s that out there?”*

“Nurses.”

*“Some of them ask very stupid questions.”*

“Like what, ma?”

*“Like:  
“Do you want to die, Mrs Halliley?”  
So I said:  
“How could you possibly want to do that?””*

Our hearts break like your skin.

*“I do feel I’m slipping all the time. Am I?”*

“I don’t know.”

*"Who's hurting you?"*

*"No one."*

*"What do you think I should do?"*

***21 September 2005 after visiting Mum at the nursing home***



## 7. THE WAY TO GO

*“There’s a nasty man downstairs.  
Whatever business I do,  
he wrecks it.  
Whenever I come near,  
he says “I know you-  
and I don’t like you.”  
So I thought, “I’ll see if he helps  
and stay steer well clear of **him**.”*

“You mustn’t trouble yourself with these worries.”

*“There are nasty men from the north  
at the gate, rowdy and shouting.  
But Christine said,  
“Don’t worry about **them**”  
so I know I’m doing the right thing.”*

Soft as a lover’s touch  
slow like a gentle smile  
and measured white-out  
easy as a warm old memory  
just slipped away  
like some odd dream  
would it be  
could it be  
death and death only?

*“Are there always two lamps?  
I don’t look forward to seeing  
two cupboards all night.”*

“Best close your eyes, ma.”

*“It was one  
but it’s coming apart now.  
Why are there two, darling?”*

“I don’t know, mum.”

*“It’s quite entertaining really.  
I’ll let you know  
if anything exciting happens.”*

**September 26 2005**

## 8. THE DREAMING

In the garden she cannot see  
the leaves turn silently  
as my mother dreams in the warm air.  
Still, so still,  
she goes backwards and forwards  
as her hand quivers in mine  
like a fluttering eyelid.

*"I have to go back to collect something."*

"You don't have to go back anywhere  
to get anything, ma."

*"If my conscience was bad I would."*

"I'd say it was good, your conscience."

*"Hyacinths?"*

Mum you come and go now  
in a twinkling  
anchoring and casting off  
without warning  
and when you drift  
I drift with you.

*"I'm trying to find out what I've got on.  
I think it's something I tried  
to get rid of years ago."*

We're at the bottom of a sea.  
The evergreens wave like anenomes  
in the gentle currents,  
I can see them ma  
out of the window  
or might they be marine willows?

*"If you have time  
you must read the book about  
how they climbed the mountain.  
When they went up  
it was fearfully exciting  
but when they came down,  
it was like falling leaves."*

The clear breeze caresses my face  
while the giant goldfish pass by smiling

and I'm still not cold, not cold.

*"The lamps are an inch apart now."*

"You don't have to talk to me, ma."

*"I'm making sure I'm still alive."*

***October 8 2005 after visiting my mother in her nursing home***

## 9. THE FLYING FOOTSTEPS

*"It's most interesting. I must tell you:  
you heard the flying footsteps-  
a big number of people heard it."*

"Flying footsteps?"

*"Yes. Now let me get it right..."*

The sentence you are in  
began a lifetime ago  
and this morning was another universe.

*"I can hear a wasp."*

"It's a motorbike on the road outside.  
And *that* is a car."

*"I can't hear a thing."*

The leaves on the silver birch  
tremble like golden tinsel  
reflected in still waters.  
The ship of death moves  
a little closer to shore  
and below decks in the dark  
hosts of tired slaves  
rest sweating on their oars.

*"I'm thinking of my mother.  
She's in the room downstairs  
and I'd like to be with her  
but I can't reach her."*

"I don't think she's there."

*"Have they taken off?"*

"I think they've taken off."

*"Have I got a bee in my back?"*

Mum, I feel us all moving  
further out  
from the centre.

*“It’s beautiful, the blue of the sky  
and the blue of the mountains.  
But oh, those hideous bodies  
of the people lying around who’ve been shot!  
It was most remarkable  
how my children knew just what to do  
when we were shot at.  
They just hit the ground like animals.”*

The dying talk in poems and riddles  
the dying are seers and prophetesses  
the dying live in the mists at the heart of the mountains.  
On such soft pillows as these  
in obscure rooms  
the old become young  
and the dying dream dreams  
and have visions without knowing.  
Your eyelids move like the wings of a dove  
as your life searches for the love of itself.  
You spin like a disc  
while the gaps between us stretch  
ever wider.  
The space between the atoms grows  
and the crazy spinning slowly slows.

“Can you still hear the flying footsteps, mum?  
You told me, you heard the flying footsteps.”

*“Did I?”*

**October 10 2005**

## 10. THE END OF THE DAY

*"It's the end of the day.  
and it's been a good day."*

Now the flowerbeds throttled by leaves  
now the sun made low  
now the tufts on the horse's back  
backlit at noon.  
Now leaves blown at the headlights  
like confetti from another world.  
Now the fruit, mists and rain.

*"There's not much of me to see  
with me disappearing behind."*

Now the upper lip stuck up on the gum  
and the voice confined to the back of the throat.  
Now the eyeballs stretched on an unseen rack  
now the veins like thick blue string on skin  
now the shoulders like raw chicken-bones  
and through the face  
the skull's slow re-assertion.

"I must go now.  
Don't forget we love you."

*"I don't.  
It's a great comfort to me."*

Sleep, sleep deep sleep,  
sleep the sleep of the gentle  
whose course is run  
and day is done  
and when you go  
go gently, gently  
as the great slow river  
to the deep deep mother ocean  
somewhere beyond.  
May it be gentle  
may it be kind  
may it be like a lover's sweet sigh  
may it not even be a goodbye  
may it be sweet as you.

"Good bye mum."

*"Thank you for coming all this way."*

“It’s always hard leaving you.”

*“It’s hard to be left.”*

***Late October 2005***

## 11. THE DISAPPEARED

*“Am I on a boat? “*

*“You’re in a room ma.”*

*“I went out to sea last night,  
I know I did.”*

*“How was it? “*

*“Not very different. Quite calm.”*

Sunlight glimmers on the brass fittings  
of the tapered coffin in pale oak  
where your head nestles in the prow,  
gone behind the invisible horizon  
somewhere between you, me and the plastic bouquet .

*“They’re going to put me in a boat soon  
and put me out to sea.”*

Mum ma mother mummy-  
now you’ve gone beyond  
just like you said you would.  
I can’t hear your voice.  
I can’t sense or glimpse you there  
opposite this shiny chair  
and even out of the side of my eye  
I see you in no stranger.

*“You look rather severe today”.*

*“I’m sorry, it’s only that I’m worried about you.”*

In your bed lies the goddess of death  
with the ghost of a leer on her parted lips  
primeval, forbidding and cold,  
the pale old witch and bitch from hell  
charged with mockeries and cruel spells  
the undying harbinger of the great doom  
dressed as you, mummy,  
dressed as you.

*“ I walked into this room  
and there was granpa  
but he wasn’t there.  
He was gone!”*

***Sunday 13 November at the Funeral Directors in Hadleigh***



## 12. THE COMMITTAL

*"I'm leaving in the morning.  
I haven't given them much notice  
but I'm leaving in the morning."*

Now I see you already through a glass  
darkly  
and so soon, so soon  
the jotted words almost freed of you already,  
how they came through  
those freezing lips  
that can't have been yours but were.

*"I can't remember how to cook any more".*

I remember  
but a short time and  
man is like a flower  
cut down, cut down and  
like a flower you were  
then nothing  
but the winter earth  
held for an instant  
in our numbed fingers.

*"I know I came here for something  
but I can't remember what it was."*

Grey and black the earth  
beneath the oak you loved  
-cold though curiously dry to touch  
and scoop from the old wooden tray  
we hand round dumb-struck.

*"If I stay here for long enough  
perhaps it'll come back to me."*

Grey and black  
black and grey the earth  
to scatter down  
below the oak you chose  
in the shrill sun  
this late November afternoon,  
transfiguring the deep red rose  
and scented white lilies  
unfolded fragile and luminous  
as insects' wings  
in the stern absence of angels

and all fiery chariots.

*“Is there anything  
you’d like to know?”*

“How do you mean?”

*“I thought you might like to know  
something that hasn’t yet been revealed.”*

“I can’t think of anything, mum.”

If I stand here long enough  
in this busy city of the dead  
perhaps it’ll come to me  
as your eyes turn to pearls.

*“You must remember,  
if you go into the hall  
and find a glass bowl full of oranges  
DON’T TAKE IT  
or the whole thing comes smashing down  
to the ground.”*

I will come here less often.  
Increasingly,  
you will only be found in your words,  
these pages your quiet container.

*“It’s quite extraordinary.  
But once done,  
never forgotten I suppose.”*

***(After the burial at St Mary’s, Raydon on 18 November 2005)***



To Jackie, who already knew the title.  
I can't tell you, I can't begin to tell you  
But I don't have to, do I?