Poppies

by Ulrica Hume

I was born upside down, the umbilical cord looped twice around my neck. My mother claimed she was so busy working the swing shift at the hospital that she didn't even know she was pregnant at first. But I found this hard to believe. Of course she knew. My mother has a strong sixth sense and has occasionally predicted natural disasters. The Great Alaskan Earthquake, for example, was preceded by her dream of a bear whose tracks spelled the word *fault* in the snow. And she'd unaccountably been on pins and needles right before a glacier broke apart and tumbled down a mountain, causing an avalanche somewhere, I think in Peru. There was always something going on in the world that snared her psychically. Sometimes she could tell, just by looking at two people, if the love between them would blossom or fade. She simply made a note of what was star-crossed, and slipped it between the pages of a book, or at the bottom of a drawer. Carelessly, it seemed.

Early on, my mother tried to persuade me to become a nurse like her. She sat me down at the kitchen table and showed me her medical textbooks: the amazing blood-red transparencies, all the bones and muscles and internal organs, the glossaries of unimaginable diseases. “Here's thrush, *Candida albicans*,” she said. By her thoughtful expression, you'd think she was looking at a Sears Roebuck catalog.

One Saturday, when I was thirteen and childhood seemed far behind me, I took the local bus downtown for a tour of Mercy Hospital. It was a long ride of sudden stops and starts through a heat-wrinkled valley and a maze of unfamiliar streets. My mother was waiting for me at the information desk. She looked like she always did: snug white uniform (she wore a size 3 then), opaque white stockings, orthopedic shoes, and a badge that read Rae MacDonald, RN.

“This is my girl,” she said to her work-friend Jean, an older woman with flashy red fingernails. “Today I'm going to show her around.”

“Stop by later,” said Jean. She winked, for my benefit. “I think my Buddy's getting serious.”

“Sure, Jean,” my mother laughed. “On our coffee break.” She was steering me by the shoulders, gently guiding me away.

“Three postcards this week,” called Jean, swiveling in her chair. “Says he can't stop thinking of me. Here, doll—you'll need this visitor's pass. Don't want them taking out her appendix.”

Leaving Jean, we passed the gift shop's cheerful display of trusses, saltwater taffy, and begonias. Intensive care was where my mother was working that day. She was a floater, which meant that she showed up wherever she was needed. We walked down a long hall, past a series of occupied beds, and then suddenly entered one room, where an old man lay breath-ing slow and hard. My mother spoke as if he wasn't there.

“Car crash,” she said, glancing at his chart. “Internal injuries, but he'll probably pull through.”

Then the man began turning his head from side to side. He called out for someone named Dixie. I wondered what my mother was going to do. How she was going to stop whatever was happening. Wasn't she going to do *something*?

“Anesthesia,” she said. “Not to worry.” She was smiling now. She seemed so happy in this stuffy hospital room, where a man was obviously dying—happier than she ever was at home.

In the nursery, those babies who were not asleep batted the air with fists the size of rosebuds. “You were like that once,” she said. “Colicky, never stopped crying.” Some were in incubators. Because of germs, we were both wearing masks. My mother didn't tickle or caress or coo, but eyed them indifferently, as though she were a baker and they were loaves of bread.

After a tour of all the other wards, including the emergency room, where there was someone with a broken arm, we ate our lunch of meatballs, mashed potatoes, and 7UP in the basement cafeteria.

I always thought of that day as an initiation, my mother's way of showing me the pain and suffering of her world. And I wondered why she wanted me to be a part of that world, or if it was just her way of warning me of things to come.

We were outside, waiting for the bus to take me home. I was counting all the windows of the sick people's rooms. Then I remembered. I had visited Mercy Hospital once before: the children's burn ward. What a relief that she hadn't taken me there.

“Right on time,” I heard her say, as the bus turned down Lancaster into the parking lot.

When she hugged me, she smelled of Dentyne and rubbing alcohol. I knew that I would never willingly come to the hospital again. I could never be a nurse, like her.

Our house, a modest moss green with sparkling white pebbles in the driveway, was located at the end of a cul-de-sac. I watched the misguided cars from our kitchen window. Turning in circles, wrenching into reverse—I felt sorry for the people inside, because they were lost, while I knew exactly where I was. I was here, drying dishes with my mother.

“Christ, not another poor soul,” she muttered as headlights scanned our lawn, our lives. She planted a row of young pines by the side of road, lowering the root bundles into forlorn holes. For some damn privacy, she said.

Sometimes, on my mother's days off, I helped her with her S&H Green Stamps. The idea was to fill enough books so that they could be redeemed for a toaster, lamp, clock, or some other coveted item. Usually Jean would be there, with her own set of books, talking big about the crystal punch bowl she wanted. Jean never let anyone forget that she was soon to be married. My mother dreaded these conversations.

“Jean,” she'd say, trying to distract her, “have you heard about poor Judy Garland?” Or, “Men on the moon! Now isn't that something?” But Jean always returned to talk of Buddy Fine, an

encyclopedia salesman who regularly sent her postcards from places like Roseville and Herlong.

“Buddy made Top Salesman of the Month,” she bragged, holding in smoke from her Kent cigarette and then letting it gradually exit her nose. “Got himself a bonus of fifteen dollars. ‘Use it as a down payment on the cake,' he says.”

When Jean had gone, my mother sat for a while in the kitchen staring at all the rippled green pages.

“Is Jean in love?” I asked. “Have you ever met this Buddy Fine?”

Before she answered, she asked for some tap water and two aspirin. My mother suffered from migraines, which she said were brought on by a restricted blood flow and from thinking too much about the affairs of other people.

“When you're my age,” she said, “You'll understand about certain men, and all the trouble they're not worth.”

The pines my mother planted grew slowly. Then the county put up a sign, bright yellow and black with the words Dead End. But the cars continued to appear, hovering at the horizon, the people inside still lost and disbelieving.

Soon after my tour of Mercy Hospital my mother received a raise. She would no longer float. Intensive care would be her regular department now. She took a critical look at our lives and decided to redecorate.

“These will stay,” she announced, dusting off her Hummel children. “But the La-Z-Boy will have to go.” She glared at its darkened armrests. We both knew that my errant father, whom she had divorced when I was nine, wasn't coming back.

That weekend we ordered a bedroom set from Grimm's Furniture Store: twin bed, dresser, vanity, and a pink chenille bedspread trimmed with pom-poms. We painted the walls of my room a shade called Bubble Gum. Childhood things were discarded, among them a sisterhood of Barbie dolls. (My mother had always despised Barbie for her enviable figure and smart matching outfits, not to mention

her car, and I suppose this was her way of taking revenge.) Monday the deliverymen arrived while I was at school. She had assembled everything by the time I got home.

I couldn't sleep that first night. The bed was too hard, and I wasn't sure if the walls were the right color—didn't they look just like calamine lotion? More than that, I doubted whether I deserved such indulgences while my mother went without new clothes and special things for herself.

Seated before the vanity's mirror, I examined a beauty disguised. I listened to “Stairway to Heaven” and became increasingly despondent. Nebulous wishes were made—nebulous because I didn't know who I was. The room gathered and then lost so many memories. Exotic wands of incense turned to ash.

The imagination of a latchkey child can be perverse and exaggerated:

Is a man hiding in the closet?

Will my mother know if I eat this handful of raw Jell-O?

Do ghosts make the same sound as Siamese cats?

After school the empty house waited. Doors and windows were checked. The shower curtain was flung open.

Safe.

I spent many solitary afternoons drawing on the rolls of sterilized paper that my mother brought home from the hospital. One of my earliest drawings shows a monster guarding a burning house. Running from him is a stick-figure girl with a red triangle for a dress. Where she is running to is not clear.

It was the first day of summer. Bright orange poppies shook in the wind-ruffled field. The oaks gave off a gray-white heat, fiercely gripping the sky with their skeletal branches.

I had joined David Granger on a secret expedition. He wanted to show me a trick, he said, something new he'd just learned. Already

I'd seen him pull the wings off a bee, and we'd watched polliwogs swimming in a jar. He'd thrust a spear at my heart and laughed, as a devil.

He strode purposefully ahead, already an adult at the age of five. I was a year younger. Daintily I high-stepped the uneven terrain, holding my arms out for balance.

“Wait!” I whined. “Please, wait for me!” I felt the same itchy terror as when I made the swing in my backyard go too high, or when I teeter-tottered with certain untrustworthy children. Yet I followed.

David looked back with an exasperated puff of annoyance.

“Where ya goin'? To a tea party? Here,” he said, gripping my hand and pulling me along.

Now everything seemed different, at his speed, through his sensibilities. We raced on, as though flying, passing through sticky cobwebs.

When I fell, I was so stunned that I forgot how to cry. Tenderly I touched my knees, which were imprinted with twigs. After awhile—it seemed forever—I sat up, dazed as a doll.

But where was he? Gone, I supposed, far up ahead.

“Come quick! Hurry!” he yelled through cupped hands.

From the top of the hill, we glimpsed a miniature town with cars like M&M's dotting its roads.

“That's where my mama works!” I boasted, pointing to Mercy Hospital's white tower.

“So what?”

David didn't have parents. He lived with his aunt. Home was two rented rooms in a leaning cottage near the river dock.

“She can't control him,” the grown-ups said. “Just look at the way they live.”

And it was true: the rooms did smell, there were too many animals (the aunt took in cats), and he had to sleep with her on a tweed sofa bed.

While I stood in the warm sun, singing to myself and fanning away bugs, David gathered handfuls of rocks and steadily hurled them in my direction. One hit me on the leg.

“Ouch!” Maybe he hadn't meant to hurt me, but my reaction pleased him, so he tossed another, this time striking my arm.

I frowned. Was this the price of being in his company? The premeditated ways of adults I understood much better than the spontaneity of other children.

“Lay down,” he said. “Lay down right there.”

“I don't want to; it's too scratchy.”

“DO YOU HEAR ME?” he shouted so loud, all the birds flew away.

I stooped down, cautiously brushing the earth with my hand. “Like this?” I stared at the sky.

“Now close your eyes ...”

My eyelids fluttered, the world inside turning black with bursts of white.

“... and keep them closed. Promise?”

I nodded blindly, waiting for his next command.

“Don't move!”

There was a scrunching sound, then silence.

“You can open now.”

I did. I peeked through my hands. He was intently crouched over something: a pile of oak leaves.

“My aunt's boyfriend showed me how to do this,” he said. “Don't need no matches. Here, hold the magnifying glass, like so.”

“Then what?”

“You gotta be patient.” He gave a wicked, tooth-missing smile.

Soon a black mark appeared on one of the leaves, and a thin spire of smoke came toward our watching faces. I sneezed.

“Oh, shut up,” he said. “You'll ruin it.”

He reached inside his pocket. “Sometimes you need a little of this too, to get it going.” Carefully he opened a small clear bottle. “Stand over there,” he told me.

Flames rose up. They rustled through the weeds, traveling low and fast. I was afraid, enchanted, transfixed. Then David's shirt

caught fire, and he shouted, “Run!” Smoke cascaded, blocking the sun.

I remember telling what had happened (and believing, with every word, that it was my fault), as David was lifted, as a wounded baby bird, and taken in an ambulance to Mercy Hospital.

“Burns are one of the worst types of pain,” I overheard my mother say on the phone that night to Jean. She was sitting at the kitchen table, taking sips of iced tea. “He was lucky this time.”

That fall, David's aunt packed up her family of cats and other belongings, and they all moved away. This happened without us saying goodbye. Children have so little control, their lives follow an invisible course.

But I could still see the charred black field in the distance. This view, as I understood it then, would always be there to punish me.

After David had gone and the two rooms had been rented to someone else, I walked by and looked in the window. The tweed sofa bed was there. But I couldn't help wondering if maybe there never was a little boy, that he was only in my imagination. It was almost better to think of him that way, because then he would always be there, to take long walks with in the field, to show me the dangers and wonders of the world.

As the pine trees grew, I became moody and reclusive. I cherished Joni Mitchell's ballads and the depressing poetry of Sylvia Plath. Perhaps as a way to fill the time between impatience and the arrival of something unknown but longed for, during adolescence I decided that I would become an artist.

My first watercolors had a haunted quality, a bleeding together, whereby common red apples became unidentifiable.

Still, I persisted. I studied the way light changed as it bent along the limbs of the pines and, if you knew where to look, how to see it, sparkled in miniature rainbows at the tips of the pine needles.

Sometimes the shadows were more interesting to me than the subject itself.

I painted everything, even the Monet-like poppies in the resurrected field across from our house.

Wall space was reserved for the one “real” painting we owned. It was a country scene, such as one might find on a calendar or puzzle: a red barn set back on a swampy hill, and a water wheel.

“Well, here it is,” said Jean one evening as she carried a large box into our house. “Don't you gals answer the door anymore? Who'd you think it was, the Jehovah's Witnesses?”

“Be careful of your back, Jean,” said my mother. “Always bend at the knees.”

We joined Jean at the kitchen table, where she untied the string and began tearing at the brown wrapping paper.

“Wait, Jean, I'll get my scissors—”

But Jean had already flung off the shroud of white tissue. She gasped, trembling like a hummingbird. “Oh, it's ... *exquisite*!”

Carefully she raised the punch bowl level with her heart. Balancing it on upturned palms, she turned it slightly so that we could see its many facets. Then she kissed it, not once, but many times.

“What do you think, Rae?”

My mother looked on with her usual droll expression.

“Nice,” she said. “Real pretty. I didn't even know they made lead crystal in pink.”

“Now I can start in on the cups,” said Jean as she lowered the fragile shell of her dreams.

“What about the ladle?” I asked with concern.

“Oh, isn't she smart!” said Jean. “Never misses a trick!”

“That's right,” my mother affirmed. “Both of us are detail-minded. Some see it as a fault—take my ex.”

Jean smiled at me knowingly.

“I bet you'd like to paint it, wouldn't you?” she said with clinging enthusiasm. “I'll pose.” She fluffed her hair.

Soon I was happily dipping my sable paintbrush in and out of a jar of cloudy water.

“Relax, Jean,” said my mother. “It's a punch bowl, for heaven's sake, not a bowling trophy.”

“Jealous?” One of Jean's eyebrows lifted.

My mother sighed. “Of course not.”

I did my best. On the page before me a likeness of Jean gradually appeared: a beaming woman holding a supernatural disk to her bosom. The pink wash was still wet when she offered to buy it.

“I'll give it to Buddy,” she uttered. “Buddy will love it!”

Later our ringing telephone cut through the midnight suburban silence.

“I'll get it!” I said, running barefoot down the dark hall into the kitchen.

The caller sniffled. Clinking followed, the unmistakable sound of ice cubes in a glass.

“Jean's been drinking her Bloody Marys again,” I shouted.

In the next room, my mother cursed the darkness as she searched for her scuff slippers and robe.

“Rae, it's me, Butterfingers …”

I covered the phone. “Mom! She keeps talking.”

“She probably thinks you're me,” said my mother matter-of-factly. She trotted into the living room carrying her cigarettes, a glass of milk, and a handful of Graham Crackers.

“Oh, what will Buddy say? Buddy will never forgive me,” Jean wailed.

“Here I am, Jean. I'm on the other line.” My mother waited with stern patience while Jean blew her nose. “What's up? Don't tell me you dropped the damn thing.”

June of '73, the summer before college, I happened to see David Granger again. I was working at Earring Tree, pretending to

arrange the hoops as I gazed at the escalator's disappearing steps. I had plump cheeks, a crop of pimples across my forehead, and a long veil of blonde hair. A song was playing on the radio: the Moody Blues' “Knights in White Satin.”

“Remember me?” He shifted his weight, stuck his hands in his pockets. “Janet, right?”

At first, I didn't even recognize him. His wavy hair was center-parted and touched his shoulders. He wore a tie-dyed shirt, also a leather headband, which looked handmade. I had never before noticed that his eyes were green.

“Live in the country now,” he stated proudly. “Up north. Got some land and live in a teepee.”

“A teepee?”

“It's like homesteading. I've got animals too.” He looked past the cheap earrings, as though into the sky.

He asked if I was still in school, so I mumbled something about getting a scholarship to San Francisco State, but that I wasn't sure of my major yet.

There was an awkward moment of nothing to say.

“I was always afraid of you,” I blurted out. Already my face was red.

“I liked you,” he said calmly. “Didn't you know that?”

It seemed hard for David to leave Earring Tree. He hung around for a few hours, showing me pictures of his teepee and explaining all about raw goat milk and organic chicken eggs. He was a full-fledged hippie. There weren't many in our town. I worried that my manager, Mr. Gill, would show up, or that someone would call security, but neither of those things happened. David said he wanted to get together again that night. He was leaving the following day—“Got me a well to drill.”—and he didn't know when he'd be returning. I said I got off work at seven, adding that my mother had the late shift at the hospital. He nudged the toe of his Birkenstocks against the display case and said he'd come over any time I wanted.

Dinner was a quick plate of macaroni and cheese. I was watching the Watergate hearings on TV when I heard a truck pull up. Then the sound of someone throwing pebbles at the living room window. It had to be him—anyone else would have used the doorbell. But I wanted to be sure, so I parted the drapes to see who was on the other side.

David Granger stood solemnly in the glow of the streetlight. He wore the same threadbare bell-bottoms, and, thrown over one shoulder, a fringed gray poncho. His legs were as long and thin as saplings.

"*All right!*" he said, bobbing his head. He acted surprised that I was home.

The house took on a strange, vibrant quality. Everything seemed different now that David was here. I made hot chocolate. He sat at the third place, where no one had sat for years. He asked for marshmallows, floating handfuls in his cup until it overflowed. We laughed at that and everything. The television cast wavering blue shadows on the living room walls.

He was scarred from the fire, though the damage was faint. Thankfully it wasn't the first thing one noticed about him, though it was now a part of who he was. His hands and arms (he had rolled up his sleeves) had ropey, zebra stripes, like primitive marks of bravery from some bygone rite. He had the same mischievous look in his eyes, a quality about him that would always stay the same.

I took his hand and led him to my room. Mixed in with all the frilly things, I had two big speakers, and an orange crate full of albums. He seemed impressed.

We sat beside each other on the chenille bedspread. He lit a candle and we stared at its small flame in silence. David picked out a record—*Moon Dance*, by Van Morrison—and walked lankily to the stereo. He turned the volume up loud.

Then he tickled me. We rolled onto the shag carpet, as if down a grassy hill, I shrieked, and the neighbor's dog started barking. By now, I was laughing tears.

Backed against the wall, clutching a pillow, I felt trapped, yet also pleased with myself for having lured him into my pink corner. David's eyes seemed huge this close up, like those of a fish. He looked so dead serious too. Our kiss was sudden and unguarded, like a wave that catches one unaware.

After college, I entered a gray time of no real aims or ambitions. I worked as a cocktail waitress, a file clerk, and a swimming instructor, but never the nurse that Rae had wanted.

While I was in my twenties, floundering, chasing men as though they were soap bubbles and then letting them drift away, Rae was receiving accolades. There were framed certificates and an article all about her in *Phlebotomy* to prove it. In honor of her twenty-fifth anniversary at the hospital, she was given a plaque engraved with her name and the word *Mercy*.

Rae still lives in the same house I grew up in, and that awful painting of a barn still hangs on her living room wall. My old pink room hasn't changed much. And every summer, poppies still appear in the field.

Poppies are wild, perennial, retreating to seed, always returning. They stand as little sentinels, brave and showy. At night they close, purposely wilting to protect the pollen. Their core is tender, forbidden. They have no scent.

I was daydreaming about my power to affect the lives of those people whose surnames begin with the letters A through G, when the phone rang in my file clerk's office.

“Claims,” I confidently answered.

It was my mother, so I shifted down a few gears. I became her daughter again, that helpless creature who cannot feed herself or tie her shoes.

“Where are you?” I asked, hoping *not in the lobby*. I could already see her: Las Vegas in sequins across the back of her jacket, tote bag

crammed full of cigarettes, chewing gum, and romance novels—and those shoes, the same white, scuffed shoes she always wore to work.

“Home,” she said.

At first, her voice on the phone was lighthearted. She said she was seeing someone new. Not more gossip, I thought. I began doodling on the back of the insurance company's annual report: tiny interconnected hearts that formed a grid.

She babbled on for a few more minutes. Then she brought up David Granger, shifting to her professional voice (a deliberately guarded monotone), apparently distancing herself from some painful information she wanted me to know.

“Sounds like bad news,” I said.

“Jean told me. It happened around here ... Pilgrim's River ... found his overturned kayak ... police said it was a freak accident.” She clicked her tongue. Then she started up talking again.

But for an initial jolt, a sudden recoiling, I felt numb. I must have tuned her out. Because her heavy words, that churning fear, only floated around me, not really penetrating. Instead I remembered the hopeful sound of pebbles on the living room window. Marshmallows. *Moon Dance*. His head resting against me, and playing so very gently with his long, wavy hair. Also the way he said goodbye—shy and gruff and teasing—as if he were still, and always would be, a little boy.

The undercurrent of even the most casual goodbye is that it might be the last one.

I am sitting with Rae in the backyard, listening to her tell the story, again, of my birth, how afraid she was of losing me, and how much it hurt. The umbilical cord, looped twice around my neck, was life-giving, yes, but it was also a threat.

Once, according to her, I ate a handful of poison berries and had to have my stomach pumped. Another time, I fell off the swan at the merry-go-round. All of these stories are favorites of hers. It seems that my childhood was full of near misses and dangerous crossroads.

In the time since I left home, Rae has aged slightly. She has a deeper vertical frown, and her dark hair is striped at the temples. She resembles a raccoon: severe, mischievous, unconscionable.

Yet how content she looks with her sack of pine needles. These she gathered herself, from the towering trees before us.

“Life is fantastic!” she says. “I've cut down my hours at the hospital.”

She gives me a tangle of raffia and together we unravel it.

She has enrolled in a course in basketmaking at the community college. So far, she has made a chunky sweetgrass one. The basket that she is working on now is a complicated affair with a swing handle.

“Never been busier,” she says. “So many new things to do and try.” She grabs a bunch of pine needles, and determinedly weaves the raffia around them.

I look around the yard at the fluttering leaves and blossoms. I nudge off my shoes and rub my stockinged feet over the points of green grass. Somehow my life back in San Francisco always has a way of seeming unimportant here.

“That was too bad about your friend,” she says. Just then her owl wind chimes make an eerie, metallic sound. “Oh, that damn thing—” She waves her hand. “Anyway, you know who I mean. Remember, the daredevil, the one with the truck.”

“How could you have known about *that*?” I say, feeling embarrassingly transparent. “He was only here that one time. Besides, he left long before you got home.”

“Some things I know, and then I forget. It wasn't easy raising a girl.”

“Nothing was easy, as I remember it.”

“True.”

She turns the basket in her hands, checking it for mistakes and imperfections. She is not a sentimental woman—witnessing the body pass from life to death can do that to a person—and I know that as she makes the next loop, she is already thinking of other matters.

Maybe she is remembering that hot June afternoon when we sat with Jean at the kitchen table, pasting in our S&H Green Stamps.

“How many more books do you need for another punch bowl?” I had innocently asked Jean. I was about to ask if she had saved any of the broken pieces, when Jean blinked several times and then all at once crumpled down in her chair and began crying black mascara tears: she was distraught over Buddy Fine's prenuptial departure. My mother had probably known all along that this would happen. I could tell by the way she patted Jean on the shoulder. I could hear it in her voice when she said, “You won't forget him, but you know, hon, he was never really yours to have.”