From My Mother’s Side

L. Conley Brown*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1976 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
I LIE ON my side with the covers pulled over my head, trying not to breathe. Maybe if I squint my eyes tight enough the clock radio will cease to be. Maybe it won’t nag at my nerves till I swat at it. Maybe this morning his hand won’t nudge me on the rump and he won’t say, Come on, Hon, you’ve got classes. Maybe he will cease to be.

No, I don’t really want that. I want to be able to make him go away, hold him in suspended animation until I want him back again. Not cease, just desist.

Sourly I wonder what kind of disease “classes” is. I should know, I’ve got it. He says so, and he’s always right, goddammit!

I’m sick, I mumble. It is the truth. The pit of my stomach is taking a few jabbing left hooks at my sternum.

You tried that yesterday, he says, not impressed. Maybe if I heave all over, that would impress him. But I am not that kind of sick. That kind of sickness goes away, and the body forgets the chills and the cramping of abdominal muscles and the bitter taste on the tongue. Someday this sickness will go away. It has to. I can’t keep waking up full of pus hate every morning. But I do. Even before my eyes open, the muscles tighten, ready to pounce. There is a fluttering, much like fear, inside me every morning, even before I am awake.

I get up. He looks hopeful. There is silence between us, just the soft rustling of clothes against skin. His eyes flick
over me. He wants to come over and touch me, but I look at him and he knows I would bite his hand if he tried.

This used to be a blessed time. In the mornings, years before, I would wake up just a few minutes before the alarm gently buzzed. It was a time of lazy stretching, for snuggling back into the pillow and trying to recapture the night’s hazy dreams. It was a precious time of laughing to myself over some muffed-up punch line, or sighing just because it felt good and sounded romantic. There never used to be these rubber bands in my arms and legs, never this rock in my gut.

I look out the kitchen window, shoving the curtain aside. It shows its considerable heritage of hanging first in my grandmother’s house and then in my aunt’s house by its off-white background and its once-red-now-pink roses. It is snowing outside. Again. It has been winter forever. Green trees are an incredible memory, an unbelievable promise.

We walk into campus. My feet are numb. The rest of me is seething.

Married Housing is considered part of campus, they told me. That’s why you can’t have a parking sticker to park on campus. That’s why you walk eight blocks and freeze your tinkertoys off. Silly girl. I feel as though I could leave heated footprints in the snow like good King Wenceslaus.

He kisses me goodbye and hurries off, relieved to be rid of me. I am a disappointment to him, an embarrassment. A wife should not resent working to support herself and her husband. Not if she really loves him. Not if she realizes that his curriculum necessitates constant study, whereas hers is all stuff-off stuff like English, psychology, anthropology. Eighteen credits of stuff-off. I have never admitted it out loud, not to him or really to myself, that I’m beginning to hate him for it. It remains buried. Perhaps that is the feeling I get in the mornings—this ugly thing fluttering like a trapped bat. I push the image away. It is hard to look at ugliness in yourself.

Don’t fall asleep, I warn myself as I settle into a chair that seems to get progressively smaller with each class period. You wear contacts; you fall asleep, you wake up
blind. The doctor had told me that the cells of the cornea bind themselves to the contact if blinking does not occur frequently. I have revolting visions of him peeling layers of eyeball off if I should ever forget and fall asleep.

I try to listen, to take notes. I used to be intelligent. Now I'm just tired, I drift.

It was a fall day. Mom said, We're going to clean out the garage, and I said, Why me? Why not make Timmie Joe help? And Mom said, It takes more work to make Timmie Joe work than it does to go ahead and do it yourself, so come on.

The garage was dank and dark and cluttered, a junk catchall. Mom turned on the straggly light. Even though the day was as clean and bright as fish scales, the windows were dust-plastered and no sunlight survived in there.

We worked, and at times like this I felt a closeness to my mother. I asked personal questions; questions a daughter shouldn't ask. A friend, but not a daughter.

I knew my mother had been intelligent as a girl. I had seen her report cards secreted away in a box of yearbooks and class notes and younger smiles. I even suspected that she hid most of what she had left in deference to her role as wife and mother. So I asked her, Are you sorry you got married? knowing all the while that I wasn't asking a fair question. How could she miss what she never had?

Don't be stupid, she said, not even looking up.

You were only nineteen, I said, only a few years older than me. What if I were to get married instead of going on to college?

She turned on me. Then, realizing the trap I'd set, she gritted her teeth. It's your decision, she said. But it was too late.

Sitting here in class, I remember her eyes, brown and mellow. And sometimes when her lips smiled, her eyes just looked. I wonder, how long does it take for that to happen to a person?
It is almost time to leave. I know nothing more about Piaget than when I walked in. I do know that a paper is due next week. It is no consolation.

I force myself to walk fast, but carefully. I do not need to fall. I do not need the giggles and the slow throb of pain inching up my leg. But most of all I do not need the lunch-hour rush that waits for me at work, whether I fall or not.

I must hurry. I cannot. My feet know I must be on time. I resist their pull. I need more hours on my time card; the rent is coming up. I hate every minute I spend at that place. Festering hate, boiling hate, hate.

I stop at the house just long enough to pick up the gaudy orange print apron that is regulation uniform for a taco slinger. I take the daily paper, not because I want to read it, but because it will drive him crazy when he comes home and can’t find it. Tough shitsky, as they say in Russia. I pay for it, I will take it if I please.

When I get into the car, I turn on the radio. Sometimes, like the car, it works.

I drive like a maniac. I like the whine of the car, the cry of its fright as we whirl in and out of traffic, sliding and skidding. I have never hit anything, dammitall! He wants to get snow tires. We have almost two hundred dollars worth of bills due, and he wants snow tires. I push the accelerator down a little more.

I am there. I sit in the car waiting before I go in, letting the cold slither down my back and settle in my feet. My tennis shoes are air conditioned. Next paycheck I will splurge and buy myself another Target Special. I stare at the back of Taco Time. When I first started working here, they told me it was just for lunches and maybe closing once a week. But the hours started to creep into my schedule and the bills started to pile up, so I took the extra time without comment. The short, squat building leers at me. I will have to go in.

Why is the snow around here so dirty? Ashes and grease and mud by the back door. I always go in the back door. I don’t want to see the customers until I absolutely have to.
I go down the steps to the basement without saying anything to anyone in the kitchen. Mac must have bribed the safety inspector to have him pass these stairs, this basement. There are rivulets again today, slowly creeping across the floor. The roof leaks. The roaches love it. As I punch in I think how I never saw a roach before I started working here. Now when I hear their crunch under my shoe, I shrug. I am tempted to put their remains in the deep fat fryer with the Mexi-Fries. Waste not, want not. That way the customers get their meat and potatoes at the same time. The thought makes me smile.

The smile stays as I go upstairs and into the kitchen. It is my television commercial "Hello-can-I-help-you?" smile. It never wavers.

Penny, the assistant manager, is assisting at managing. A few desperate college students are working, wishing they were somewhere else. I look at the schedule hanging on the dingy wall. Only thirty-six hours this week; four lunches, three night closings, and Sunday shift. The heavy smell of grease is in the air. My stomach kicks.

The burritos and empanadas have been fried. Their crispy skins lie baking under the hot lights. Everything is ready. It is almost quarter to twelve, and the herds will be at the trough soon. A pushing, shouting, shoving stampede. They are starting to trickle in now. I wonder if they can see the disgust in my eyes. Do I hide it well? Does my mannikin smile fool them? Look at their bloated faces and drooling mouths. They don’t know.

Is the whole human race like that? I murmur. Joyce, another waitress, overhears. She understands. My eyes are reflected back at me in hers—green, older, but the same.

At least you’re still in school, she says in a low voice. Joyce has a BS in interior design. She’s working in Taco Time. If Mac knew, he’d fire her for being overqualified.

Oh, Christ, I moan. What if I make it through and this is all that waits for me?

Joyce smiles sadly. Things will get better, she says. As soon as Gary finds a teaching job, I can quit.
I smile back in sympathy, but I know the truth. First it’s when Gary gets a job, then it’s when the car is paid off, then it’s when the kid has had his teeth fixed, then it’s when the college fund is started, and then, it’s too late. Then . . .

I see my mother. She used to be intelligent. Now she’s just a mother. A working mother. A factory, assembly-line working mother. Does she remember Browning’s “Caliban Upon Setebo”? Does she even know who Piaget is? She knew once. There are glimmers of it in her eyes still, though she tries to smother it. Would she be better off not knowing, not remembering? Is this what waits like a monster in the darkness, for me?

The corners of my mouth droop slightly. The herds come through the door, trampling each other in their eagerness. I smile and say, can I help you? hoping that each and every one of them will be stricken with arteriosclerosis and an early and painful demise.

Hurry, faster. They are piling up. People are screwing up their orders. Some complete ass hands me a twenty. I haven’t got tens to make change. More orders. Cook, run, ring up, can I help you? Ketchup and hot sauce are on the tables. Special orders. No, I do not sing hold the pickle, hold the lettuce. Yes, everything is fresh here, including the customers.

More orders. The Coke machine is out of carbonation. Someone drops a tray. I swear silently as I take the mop out. The person, an older lady with platforms, smiles contritely and apologizes as she stands in the middle of the mess. I smile weakly at her and say, don’t worry, we’ll replace it, on the house. She scurries back up to the counter, and I almost expect to hear trays full of half-eaten food being thrown on the floor.

More herds come in, tracking through the mess, ignoring my glares. I give up. Penny says, Clean tables while you’re out there, willya? I mumble no, but do it. People stare at me and I stare back. They stop staring. Most people can’t bear to have anyone watch them eat. They chew with their mouths open, cow style. I hope I embarrass them into eating like civilized baboons. They already eat like people.
I finish, and as I get back to the counter Penny tells me, 
Mash the pan of refritos sitting on the back stove. We’re 
running out.

Refritos look like a bad case of diarrhea. They smell 
worse. I have visions of one contact popping out and sinking 
into the muck. I try to mash without looking down. Hot 
beans splatter down my leg. The wooden masher puts 
calluses on my palm. I used to have pretty hands, white and 
unscarred. No calluses, no grease burns, no ammonia 
rashes. I mash with a vengeance.

Put down some burritos. Check the fries. We need 
more lettuce and cheese up front. Aren’t you finished with 
the refritos yet? There is disgust in Penny’s voice. As if 
anyone but me would have done all that without being told 
to do it.

I bite back words and say I’m hurrying. I could tell her 
that she is a moron, that anyone whose idea of a good time 
is getting deathly sick from drinking and playing leapfrog 
from bed to bed is an imbecile; that anyone who doesn’t 
understand catharsis, who has never heard of Descartes, 
who probably has never had a deeper thought than what’s 
on TV tonight has no business ordering me around.

Look at her eyes, the glaze over them as she 
mechanically slaps meat and lettuce on trays. She doesn’t 
even know there are any other worlds. She doesn’t even 
suspect that she’s not the center of the universe. It’s in-
credible. There are actually people like that. I should feel 
sorry for her, but I feel only contempt. And yet, though she 
doesn’t look particularly engrossed, she doesn’t look like 
she has a self-inflicted carcinoma eating away at her, as 
Joyce and I do. And while she will never wrestle with 
angels, she will never feel the searing pits that we create, 
either.

Lettuce! she screams. Bring more lettuce!

I almost break. I almost throw the bean masher at her 
annoyed face.

I bottle it, forcing it down into my stomach, moving 
rapidly so I don’t think. No! Don’t think about it now. Hold 
it till later, ignore it till later, don’t even be until later. Don’t 
think. They don’t pay you nearly enough to think.
I escape to the walk-in cooler. I close the door carefully behind me.

Turning to face the jets of cold air, I lean backwards against the cold metal. My fists ball up, my arms tighten against my body. I give in to the silent screams.

It had been two weeks after Mom and Dad announced they were going to have another baby. Dad had been flushed and proud. Mom had been smiling, but her eyes were blank. I had said, Mom, I’m fifteen and Timmie Joe is twelve. You’ve got to be kidding, and Dad gave me a slap. Mom’s smile slipped a little, but her eyes never changed.

Two weeks after that I came downstairs to the basement where Mom was washing the clothes after work. I felt ashamed. I should have been doing it. She was tired and pregnant and younger than she looked. But I had always avoided going down to the basement. The entire family did.

Even in mid-day it was inky in the hollow of the basement. The sunlight that did manage to claw its way through the narrow, dust-streaked windows never seemed strong enough to battle the lurking shadows, and so slid off in defeat.

The cement floor had rivers and tributaries of cracks that looked as though something large and horrible was trapped underneath and was trying to push its way out.

The old furnace in the middle of the room always had its twisted arms outflung, waiting with diabolical patience for an unsuspecting morsel to wander too close. Its bulk provided a refuge for the slinkiest of black shapes that moved only in corner-of-the-eye glimpses.

The entire room was dank, and it smelled of mold growing and spreading, as yet unseen, but biding its time until the day it would catch me in the basement alone. I vowed it never would, and had avoided the basement with a passion. But knowing that Mom was down there, working again, shepherded me down the stairs.

I found her, back against a wall, her eyes and fists clenched, her mouth open in a bizarre parody of song. There was pain in the lines and tensions of her body. I touched her. Mom?
She jumped, and for one minute her eyes had the blank panic of an animal with its final place of safety uncovered. I never mentioned it, though I caught glimpses of the tightness in her many times after that. I never followed her into the basement again. What really lurked there was something more terrifying than my childish imaginings. That was my first experience with the silent screams.

The cold is making my teeth ache. I close my mouth. I don’t remember when I started this. It only happens once a week or so. At least I’m not trembling anymore. The old tightness is back, and I can handle that.

I grab a pan of lettuce and return, ignoring the angry stares Penny shoots at me. Moron, I sneer inwardly.

I work the rest of the shift in silence. Joyce and I punch out on the time clock, stepping carefully with giraffe legs over the miniature streams on the floor. They remind me of the basement at home. We collapse at the front table with lunch. Biting down on one end of the taco sends brown grease squirting out the other end. Joyce and I look at each other. There is no point in saying anything. It is redundant. Joyce’s face is red, flushed as though she’d been crying, or was about to start.

My father’s face had been flushed as he came in the back door. It was early summer. The kind of day that brought out the Irish in my father. A soft day, he said with a lilt and a smile. He came into the kitchen where I was helping Mom with supper and hugged me, burying my nose in his shirt. He’d been at Taylor’s Tap again. He smelled of whiskey and fried fish.

Mom knew. I saw her body draw into sharp lines and angles. Her lips were thin and white. We haven’t got better things to spend our money on? she said. She pushed past him to the sink and threw in the wooden spoon.

Dad put his arms around her. We can afford it, you old heifer. We’re not poor. He let go, swatted her on the rump, and began searching the refrigerator for a beer.

She threw several pieces of silverware into the sink.
The sound seemed to make her more angry. If we're not poor, then maybe I can quit my job. I'd like to stay home with the baby. After working at Zenith, it'd be a vacation.

Dad's smile left his face. I work hard too, he said, daring her to contradict him.

I wish I had time to go to Taylor's, she said. You come home from work and watch a ball game. I come home from work and go to work here. Her voice was rising and taking on a sharpness I hadn't heard before.

Maybe I should hire you a maid, Dad said sarcastically. Maybe you should quit drinking your stinking whiskey and help me a little, she snapped back.

I left the kitchen and went out the back door. It was open to let the breeze blow through. I could still hear them, but at least I didn't have to see.

I sat on the grass and watched Timmie Joe grudgingly wheel the baby around on the sidewalk. Mom had changed since Eddie was born. There were lines around her eyes that hadn't been there before. Her movements were all jerky, like some unskilled puppeteer was pulling the strings. She was quiet, but I sensed movement inside. It frightened me to look at her and see only the shell.

Then, from inside, Dad's voice yelled, For Christ's sake, Coleen, what are you doing? And there was a hollow crash.

I ran in. My mother was holding a piece of a lamp. The broad glass base of it had shattered and was in pieces on the floor and the end table by the couch. My father was staring at her in disbelief. What are you doing, Coleen? he demanded.

Stupid bastard! she yelled and threw the rest of the lamp at him. She didn't even come close, and it shattered against the far wall. This enraged her even more.

Dad never expected it. She took him by surprise, without defenses. She hit him square in the face, her weight behind her fist. Then she whirled like a cat and stumbled up the stairs, screaming. I'm going crazy! Leave me alone! Even when I'm going crazy nobody listens, nobody knows.

The bedroom door slammed. There was the sound of
things breaking and thudding against the ceiling over my head. Then silence. Dad and I looked at each other. Then he was vaulting the stairs, three at a time, and I was wandering, too dazed to cry, but not stunned enough to sit down. I stumbled through the kitchen. The butcher knife on the table had little flecks of blood on it. Mom must have cut herself. Accidentally. Please, God, accidentally!

If you're going to class, Joyce says, you'd better get your butt in gear.

Right, I mumble, and rush out the back door. Two o'clock is Vicky Lit time with Charlene Rowlie. I'm into Carlyle. That bastard never liked anyone but Carlyle, never said anything good about anyone but himself. I can identify. And for mellow suffering, there is Tennyson and his "Tears." And there is Charlene, a cynical old broad with wit so dry her tongue should blow away. I feel alive in that room. Under her piercing tutelage I can't palm off my stupid "Can-I-help-you?" smile. She knows. She strips me bare. She lets my hate ooze over into my papers as deep barbs of cynicism. I prefer to think of it as truth, but she smiles and understands. She says, I was young and bitter once; there is hope for you. I cling to that sometimes.

I slide into my parking space at Married Housing, another race finished and no casualties. I am frustrated.

He is there in the living room. He is supposed to be in one of his terribly challenging classes. Looking at his face, I can still see why I once loved him, why I might love him still if circumstances were changed. But now all I feel is annoyance and regret.

No. I will not think of those things. It only makes me feel worse to think that I was wrong in the first place. I hate to hear my own voice say I told you so. No, somewhere deep inside there is a kernel. Under the layers of hate and anger and tiredness, there is a nugget of love. There has to be.

He smiles at me guardedly. I'll drive you into campus, he says.

What are you doing home? I feel the tightness stretch.

I'm going to Firestone and get those snow tires, he says grimly. He's in for a fight. He knows it.
We can’t afford them, I tell him. He knows this also. His priorities are different from mine. I believe in paying the rent. He wants those goddam tires.

We can’t afford to be without them! His voice is rising. Mine rises in response. We don’t drive that much. Fifty dollars buys a lot of groceries.

You don’t need to worry about groceries, he says, pointedly looking at my growing hips. He fights dirty.

At least I’m not stupid! Fat, you can get rid of. Stupidity like yours is a permanent handicap! I yell. I am beyond words. I understand “towering rage” now. Something is lifting me up, giving me a strength I never suspected I had. There is fire inside, power, the unbending steel. Little black slivers of pain drive into my head, my eyes, my hands. It only makes me more angry.

He is attacking me! I endure that pit for forty hours a week to put him through school, and the ungrateful bastard is attacking me! What right does he have? What right?

The power, the fire urges me to destroy or be consumed. I am screaming now, but I don’t know what I’m saying. Stupid bastard is what I hear, or maybe it is an echo of another voice, not me at all.

I am in the bedroom, flinging perfume bottles and brushes, mirrors and mascara tubes. I do not pick them up, they jump into my hands. I’m not doing this, someone else is manipulating me.

I want to break, to dig deep and rip. I want to smash his white face.

Then I am face down on the bed, my face on the pillow. Someone is making animal sounds. The pain is whirling black bricks thudding from one side of my head to the other. I close my eyes.

My father came downstairs. He was not a tall man, but he was big—all chest and shoulders and arms. I stood up, wanting to ask, but afraid to ask, so I waited. He put his arms around me, his whole weight on my shoulders, and from this hulk, from this man who had always been the epitome of silent strength, there came the most godawful wretched sounds.
She doesn’t know me, he said. She doesn’t even know who I am . . . Just keeps calling for the baby.

His weight was almost too much for me. I was going to fall backwards or collapse soon. But I couldn’t give in to the weakness and ache crawling up my legs and back. I felt like I’d be kicking the last support out from under him.

He finally shifted his weight and stood up, wiping his eyes. It was almost a child-like gesture. I wanted to cry, but I felt too drained. So I just slumped against the wall and asked, What are we going to do, Dad? And he shook his head like he couldn’t believe any of this. Mom’s voice came crying down the stairs from the bedroom, and he turned without saying anything. I learned then that there is a loneliness in pain, even shared pain.

Mom never remembered the incident. She said later that night as she came downstairs, that someone had broken the lamp. Dad mumbled some excuse and Mom seemed to accept it. Maybe she didn’t remember, maybe her mind rejected it and it became the vague memory of a bad dream. But there is always the chance that she did remember and had chosen to bury it. If she never spoke of it, she knew that we wouldn’t either, and so we could pretend it never happened.

And sometimes I wonder if it ever did.

Things have changed now. He has graduated and is working for a chemical company. I am finishing my last year and will be going on to graduate school in psychology. I no longer have to work.

The tightness has disappeared. My mornings are occasionally grouchy, but there are no more hateful fluttersings. The silent screams have gone. There are times when I think it was all unreal, just a sympathetic dream—my mother and I were always close. I tell myself that I have my own devils, none of which are inherited. I have my own monsters lurking within. I need no one else’s. They are caged deep inside. Sometimes I hear a faint snarl, but I don’t feel their claws.

And yet, I know they are there. And if I should ever forget, I have my mother’s eyes to remind me.