



Maternal Connections

Carolyn Ellis

With one hand, she holds tightly to the support bar along the wall of the bathroom. I take her other hand gently in mine, wash each finger, noting the smoothness of her skin, the beauty of her long, slender fingers. "My fingernails," she says, "they're dirty." Without speaking, I run my index nail, covered with a washcloth, under each of her nails, systematically snapping out the dirt as I go. It's a good sign that she cares. Until now, she hasn't been that concerned even about urinating in bed.

When I push hard on the soap dispenser, small globs of thick, pink, liquid soap, smelling of perfumed bleach, drop onto the translucent washcloth. I load the white cloth with many squirts, hoping to wash away the lingering smell of feces, urine, perspiration, bile bags, plastic tubes, stale hair oils, and hospital odors.

She extends her arm and I slowly wash from wrist to shoulder, observing the intrusion of the spreading black bruises marking needle points. Her washed hand holds onto my wrist for support now as I unclasp her other hand from the railing. I repeat the process on that side.

"I'm going again," she says, sucking in slowly through open lips and closed teeth, eyebrows raised as though she is asking my permission and apologizing at the same time. I'm glad she is sitting on the toilet. It'll be less of a mess than before.

"That's okay," I respond, "maybe this will be the last time. Hopefully the laxative has run its course."

I hold her hand and touch her shoulder gently as she lets it all go. Then, "I'm sorry about last night," she says. "It seemed like it was every hour. You shouldn't have to do that."

"I didn't mind," I say, remembering my reflex gag reaction the first time her bowels exploded in the night. Only my determination that she not know how much the smell—that rotten, chemical odor—bothered

me kept me from adding my regurgitation to the brown liquid I poured into the toilet on her behalf. "I'm glad I was here for you."

"Yeah, the nurses don't come right away," she says. "Even with you here, some ended up on the bed, didn't it?"

"Yes, but now we know better how to do it, get the bedpan under you sooner. It helps when you raise your hips."

"If anybody told me I'd have to be doing this . . ."

". . . you used to do it for me," I interrupt. We laugh like two good friends sharing a memory.

Being careful of the tubes and IVs, I unsnap and remove her soiled gown. She tries to help. I cover the front of her body with a towel, to protect her from cold. "It feels good when you wash my back," she says, and I continue rubbing. When she shivers, I run the washcloth under hot water. I wonder about washing the rest of her body.

Around front, I wash her belly, noting the faded scars of my younger brother's cesarean birth—and shudder at the reminder that he is now dead—and I look closely at the new scars of the gall bladder surgery. Her stomach is puffy, but almost flat now, not rounded as before. The extra skin hangs loosely. Then her legs. Although her skin is dry and flaky, I admire her thin, almost bony, yet still shapely, legs. Our bodies have the same form, I note. Long, slender, and graceful limbs, fatty layers on top of the hips and belly, and a short and thick waist.

I move to her breasts, still large and pendulous. Now they hang to her waist and, as her shoulders curve forward, they rest on her belly, like mine, only lower.

I take one tenderly in my hand, lift it gently from her belly to wash it, noting the rash underneath. "Would you like cream on that?"

"Oh, yes, it's real sore." She holds her breast while I rub in the cream.

Feeling no particular emotion, I observe from a distance. Her body is my body, my body in 36 years. So this is what it will look and be like. I see.

I hand her the soaped washcloth. "Can you wash your butt," I ask, "and between your legs?"

"I think so," she replies, taking the washcloth, holding onto the support bar to balance one side of herself a few inches above the seat. My pubic hair also will be thin and gray, I think, as I notice hers. Then I walk away, to give her the illusion of privacy.

"Are you ready to get back in bed now?" I ask.

"Yes, I'm worn out."

I extend both arms. The bile bag pinned to her gown threatens to become entangled in our embrace. "Put it around my neck," she cleverly suggests. "It'll be my necklace." I smile, appreciating her humor, which bonds us and makes it easier to refer to the bag. But what a breakdown in boundaries—her bile is on the outside of her body for everyone to see, more personally revealing than the butt that sticks out of the back of her gown!!

I hold my arms out straight again. When she grabs on, she and I pull her to a standing position. When she winces in pain, I embrace her around her middle, steadying her for the long journey back to bed, eight feet away. The tubes extending from her chest and abdomen, the bile bag necklace—all are properly positioned. She shuffles her feet in baby steps, all the while holding onto my outstretched arms. She looks into my eyes as I walk backwards, to pick up my cues, when to move forward, when to turn. We are intimately connected. We are totally trusting.

Taking care of her feels natural, as though she is my child. The love and concern flowing between us feels like my mom and I are falling in love. The emotionality continues during the four days and nights I stay with her in the hospital. My life is devoted temporarily to her well-being. She knows it and is grateful. I am grateful for the experience. I do not mind that she is dependent on me. I am engrossed by our feeling, by the seemingly mundane but, for the moment, only questions that matter. Are you dizzy? In pain? Comfortable? Do you want to be pulled up in bed? Can't you eat one more bite? Do you need to pee? Have gas? Want water? Prefer to sleep now? As I help with these events, I do not question their meanings, as I so often do about most things in my life.

While my mom sleeps, I take my daily walk down the hall to peer at the newborn babies. On the other side of the glass partition, there are three—one boy covered in blue and two girls in pink. I wince at the institutional marking of gender roles and then shrug. I strain to read the identification cards, to have a story about each one: birthday, weight, length, parents' names—not much to go on.

A man stares intently at one of the girls. Knowing the answer, I ask anyway, "Are you the father?" He nods yes and beams. "She has jaundice," he says, "a mild case." I feel his bond to her even through the glass

pane. I recognize the connection from the feelings I have for my mother. He leaves and another young man, in his early 20s, arrives. Ignoring the young son pulling on his pants leg for attention, this man stands off to the side, to peer through the glass into an inner room almost out of view. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch and imagine his story. His new baby must be in there, perhaps he is worried about it, like I am worried about my mother. If he could just get a glimpse, or better yet, do something, he would feel better.

I continue watching, fantasizing that one of the babies is mine, and try to generate what the feeling would be. What would it be like to take the baby home? To bond? The dependence? Experiencing unconditional love for my mother makes me, for the moment, crave to feel it toward and from a child as well. Do I just want someone who will wash me when I'm 79? What if something is wrong with the baby? What about my career? Travel plans? Yet how can I omit this meaning-giving experience from my life?

When I return, my mom is having her vitals read by a nurse who "usually works in the nursery," my mom announces. "How old is the oldest mother you have had?" I ask nonchalantly, hoping my question is not too transparent.

"Forty-two," the nurse answers.

I must look disappointed, because she adds quickly, "But I have only worked there for 18 months, I'm sure there have been some older. Yes, I'm sure."

I'd be almost 44 before my first child could be born, I think, turning back to my mother.

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Carolyn Ellis (Professor of Communication and Sociology, University of South Florida) lives in Tampa with her soul mate, Arthur Bochner, and their four dogs, who seduce her into "dog reality" several times each day. She is the author of *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* (Temple) and coeditor of *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Sage). In her work on narrative, subjectivity, and illness, she seeks to write evocative texts that remind readers of the complexity of their social worlds. Writing autoethnographic texts has intensified her life experience; she hopes they also contribute to the lives of readers.