

THROUGH AMAZED EYES

by Leila Allison

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We think 'Through Amazed Eyes' is about as close to a perfectly written story as you're likely to get. The complicated estrangements of the mother/daughter dynamic are explored with the same confidence and compassion as one would expect to find in Alice Munroe. Word by word, their relationship unfolds, escalating with each revelation, and moving with steady ascending grace to a startling conclusion. Perfect storyline. Perfect voice. Perfect characterizations. Perfect prose. You get the picture. We have the honour. Quote: '...she no longer got enough blood to her brain to support a mind. That fate seemed about right because Mom had most definitely been a 'Live Now' sort of person—which is just fine, unless you forget to die when you run out of now.' And: 'She was working chewing gum like a cud, which made me want to relocate her face to the back of her skull.'*

It's three feet farther to hell from New Town Bridge. The city recently installed an eighteen-inch "safety" extension to the pedestrian rail. Since it opened in 1978, at least twenty persons have jumped off the ugly gray span and found death waiting two-hundred feet below in the beckoning Philo Bay Narrows. Northern seas swiftly kill the pain; and when that comforting certainty outweighs the threat of damnation, I don't see another foot and a half up, *and down*, getting in the way.

I'd often pass sarcasms about the safety extension to my mother whenever we drove across the bridge to one of her many doctor appointments. Sometimes I'd wisecrack about the extra yard to hell, other times I'd express admiration for the courageous jumpers. After her second stroke it didn't matter what you said to Mom; she took it all evenly and uncomprehendingly, as though she were an infant or a dog.

Endgame Mom had amazed eyes. You enter life with amazed eyes, live too long and you go out with them as well. After seventy-six drama-packed years Mom had experienced a pair of events like those experienced by Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of World War II. Although she had been spared lasting paralysis by the strokes, something known as "vascular dementia"

prevented Mom from being a person--plainly put, she no longer got enough blood to her brain to support a mind. That fate seemed about right because Mom had most definitely been a "Live Now" sort of person--which is just fine, unless you forget to die when you run out of now.

I never liked Mom much, yet I found myself missing the old witch, all the same. She was already married and just seventeen when I was born, and we bore an astonishing twin-like resemblance in face, form and *difficult* personality. Neither of us cared to be put under the light of understanding; thus Mom and I incessantly and successfully explored each other for the evil in our own hearts. And as it is said to go with sibling twins, we had a private psychic link, of sorts, which sometimes opened and allowed us to snipe at each other in silence. We never discussed the connection for it implied a special closeness that neither of us desired.

I used kid myself and think that our relationship might have been better if my father hadn't died suddenly prior to the start of my memory, and I'll allow that it improved some (at least to the degree that I didn't institutionalize Mom until the very end) when my younger sister passed shortly after Mom's first stroke. But, really, all things considered, I've never believed that we could have had it any other way.

I now know that you should always be as careful of what you think you miss as much as of what you ask for. I've learned this at the cost of my *lack* of faith, for my disbelief in a higher power has suffered a pair strokes of its own and may not survive. Not two weeks before the thing that had become Mom shut its amazed eyes for good, Elsbeth Spahr, *my mother*--the one and only, a local legend who'd once gone unpunished for firing "some guy's" pistol into the back-bar mirror at the White Pig Tavern--which was just one of maybe five-thousand crazy-assed actions on her part--came back online to take a final swing at the world, and me in particular.

All receptionists I endure at medical clinics are females named "Misty." This is the greatest meaningless coincidence in my life, and I'm unable to account for it. Although the receptionists *do* vary in age and size from clinic to clinic, the fact remains that they are all females named Misty. Mature *Mistys* tend to wear slightly out of style business suits and glower plumply at you from a point on the high, while younger members of the tribe sport pastel scrubs and fixate on their split ends when they think nobody's looking. I got a younger Misty the day Mom crawled from her foxhole to toss what was to be her second to last grenade.

"Has Elizabeth fasted?" *The Misty* asked without looking at me after I'd presented Mom's appointment card to her. She was working chewing gum like a cud, which made me want to relocate her face to the back of her skull. Since the law discourages that sort of behavior, I did the next best thing.

"How should I know what Elizabeth's up to?" I said. "Could be waxing her tramp stamp, for all I know. Now if you're asking me 'has Mrs. Elsbeth Spahr fasted?' then the answer is no. It's not that kind of appointment." I paused to check the Misty's eyes. They weren't quite pissed off

enough for my taste--just mildly piqued. I had more pushing to do. "Hope there's nothing *wrong* with what I tell you. Just doing my best to clarify matters."

The Misty--hardly more than a girl, replied with a whisper: "No. Please have a seat until the nurse calls for you." Her childlike eyes were holding back tears of hurt and frustration. I suddenly felt bad about myself as I always do when I push too hard. Only a bully slings "wit" at a person who can only defend herself at the risk losing her job. I have done this sort of thing to people for more than forty years and not once have I ever tried to stop myself from pushing too hard. Unfortunately, I'm better at wounding than healing, but at least I did attempt an apology: "Sorry," I muttered. "Been a day."

Mom and her amazed eyes were right where I'd left them. Unlike sundowners, Mom never wandered unless she needed the restroom, which was unnecessary that day due to the miracle known as the adult diaper. I sat down beside her and tried to spit the bad taste of cowardice out of my head.

"Said some 'wanna take this outside' stuff to the little girl. She had to sit and take it. Poor thing's the sensitive type."

Mom had lost the ability to speak after she had what the doctors' unanimously referred to as the "second event." This made her an excellent sounding board for my observations. I saw that while I'd been gone spreading the love she had grabbed a magazine off the low, faux blonde-wood table. Amazed eyes cannot read, but they are attracted to colors. She was gazing *into* the cover of an old *People* or *Us*--a "Special Edition" dedicated to "Classic TV Memories." The usual suspects were on the cover: Lucy Ricardo, Archie Bunker, Carol Burnett, and so forth. Yet it seemed to me that Mom was fixated on the central image, that of the starship *Enterprise* as it had appeared in the original *Star Trek*.

She turned to face me and my blood immediately turned as cold as the Philo Bay Narrows. Her eyes were no longer amazed, and I saw something *in there* as trapped as a fossilized insect preserved in amber; yet unlike a preserved bug that something was still alive. How I wanted that something to go away. Although it had been made in hell, having Mom linger on as a mindless organism on her way out was something I had gotten used to, and even could be philosophical about. But suddenly being presented with the possibility that she--the *real she*--or at least some portion of, had been existing *alone* in a personal betwixt-between netherworld for almost a year, made me sick inside, and caused a phrase I hadn't spoke since I was a little girl to echo in my head: "*It just hurts something awful.*" Like that. "*It just hurts something awful.*" Like a child.

The greatest arrangement of fatigue I have ever seen in a human face replaced the amazement in Mom's eyes. She held her relentlessly tired gaze on me and began to tap on the picture of the *Enterprise* with her right index finger. She did it over and over and again, and she did it with a purposeful rhythm: *one whole-note tap-rest-two half-note taps*. At first I had assumed that this was just another random oddity concocted by her blood starved brain, and I might have

succeeded in doing so if Mom hadn't *spoke* a memory *into* my head via what proved to be a still lively psychic link.

Ever since I could remember, our link spat out the same stupid pattern. Our eyes would meet, something got "said," and then the race to the Cross. Always two villains and two martyrs in our little melodramas, and never a resolution. It was a predictable process; an idiot's tradition.

But this time, the second to the last time (which had been the first "event" suffered by atheism), a complete story, with a beginning, middle and end, played out. I cannot say *how* Mom had been able to tell it to me, but the why of the thing didn't remain a mystery for long.

The memory of Friday night, 1968. I was ten, which would have made my little sister, Tess, seven. We were in the "old place" in Corson Street, where we lived from '66 to '69 (which was little more than three rooms and a bath on the bottom floor of a hulking, ramshackle turn-of-the-century house that had been divided into "down-and-outer" apartments).

I was sitting on the floor and leaning against the foot of the Murphy bed that Tess and I shared for all three years we had lived there. Tess was lying on the foot of the bed behind me and was making a pest of herself. I was trying to watch our ancient TV, (whose picture often fuzzed and rolled and made a weird humming sound for hours after it had been turned off) but goddam Tess was bent on sticking her big toe in my ear.

"Quit it, Tess, I'm watching."

"Just tryin to see if it fits."

"Do it again and I'll bite it off and flush it down the toilet."

"Flush what down the toilet?" Our twenty-seven-year-old mother asked as she entered the room. She was trying to put a curl in her bangs while at the same time puffing on a Winston. There was always a nebula of blue smoke hanging in every room she spent time in.

"My big toe," Tess said.

"Why? Did you lose one?"

"Sara says she's gonna bite it off."

"Bite off two of hers in return," Mom said as she continued to get ready to "go out," as she did every payday Friday night. "Must I tell you everything?" she added as she returned to the bathroom.

The toe in the ear thing usually stopped when the program resumed after station break. It was Star Trek, the episode in which Spock faced the death penalty for kidnapping his horrifically

crippled former commanding officer and overriding the computer as to send the Enterprise to the forbidden world of Talos IV. A two-parter, which utilized footage from the series' pilot episode--in which Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock had been the only cast hold-over,

Although the message Mom had sent to me lay fifty years in the future, I began to understand its import in both time frames. The girl I was began to experience a heavy sense of deja Vu upon the site of Spock's former C.O., who was confined to a space-age wheelchair and could communicate only "Yes" or "No" through a set of beeping bulbs on the front of his contraption.

1968 Mom re-entered the room and glanced at the program. "What's up with that guy?"

"Pointy ears is going to get hanged," Tess said, all funny-like.

"No, not him--I mean head-on-wheels, what's his story?"

"He got boiled alive for sticking his toe in Captain Kirk's ear," I said, all funny-like.

"Don't get smart, Sara."

I didn't reply. It seemed that Tess always got a pass while I got the shitty end of the stick, no matter what.

"You hear me, right, Sara? Hope there's nothing wrong with what I tell you."

"No, Mom." I said, and I could feel myself holding back all the hurt and the fury which I could do nothing about save for always getting in trouble for fighting on the playground.

Then Mom's body and voice changed. She morphed ahead fifty years. Although we were still in the old place, and I was still a young girl, we were alone because Tess had run out of future forty-eight years later.

"I don't have much left and I can't stay up for long," Mom whispered in a papery voice which barely formed coherent sounds. "But when we go in, it's one for yes, two for no...just like head-on-wheels in the TV show. Nothing wrong with what I tell you, is there, Sara?"

"No, Mom," I said.

"I'm glad," she said with a complicated smile, which conveyed all her smallnesses toward me, but also something else, something contrite, even honestly apologetic. "Cos if you mess this up I won't care how much further it is to hell from anyplace, let alone the goddam bridge you babble about--If you catch my drift."

The link severed the instant a tough-looking nurse called out Mom's name (Mistys usually summon the clinic's resident badass to deal with "pills" such as Yours Truly).

I motioned to Mom to come along with me. "All right," I said, fully understanding the import of her message, "we'll do it your way."

As a Live Now sort of person, Mom never made a will nor did she provide even as much as the vaguest instructions on what to do with her when the bell at last tolled her name (unless you count "leave me in the woods for the wolves to eat" as useful information). Since I was her only living relative, it fell to me to decide what to do with her.

Post stroke Mom was neither alive nor dead; the best she could do was follow when summoned and lift a spoon to her mouth with minimum assistance. Sometimes, especially when dressing, her amazed eyes would *almost* convey intelligence, and she'd slap away the blouse I'd choose for her but allow me to fit her in what seemed to me to be the ugliest blouse possible. On those occasions I figured that somewhere in the burnt out ruins of her mind, a wisp of what had been Mom lingered and did whatever she could to piss me off. But there had hardly been enough of her left behind to make big decisions.

Or so I had thought.

We had come that day for a consultation with a Dr. Zale. Three doctors back, it had been discovered that Mom's kidneys were going the way of her mind. They'd be useless soon, just a couple chunks of spent meat that wanted out after seven-plus decades' of ceaseless work. Zale was a surgeon who was to perform a "fistula" on Mom. She had recessed veins and the procedure, to simplify, would "unzip" her one of her inner arms from pit to elbow as to allow for access for dialysis.

It's a bit late in the day to start lying--lying as in not addressing something that needs it; lying with silence as opposed to words. Nobody wanted Mom dead more than I. This was neither for gain nor revenge; nor did I ever do or seriously consider any sly action that would have hastened her departure ("Why I guess we crossed up her pills. She takes so many"). Simply, plainly, I wanted Mom dead as I would want that for any formerly lively creature who no longer had fun.

Ironically, I suppose, my guilt for my wanting *my own mother to die*, was what kept making me drive her across New Town Bridge to various appointments for procedures that would extend her existence as a zombie. I erred on the side of caution--that's about how I'd sell that lie to myself: "I'll err on the side of caution." Now that all is settled could the truth be even darker? Had I kept her going as a means of humiliating her? Although I cannot believe that of myself, the idea persists.

I immediately began to speak after we took our chairs in Dr. Zale's office. "Mom doesn't want to do this. She doesn't want any of it anymore. She's ready."

Doctor Zale raised an eyebrow to that, as I would have done if I had been in his place. *Then why the hell did you come here?* his arched eyebrow said. A perfectly rational question to which I had no good answer. We could have just walked away, I suppose; people blow off doctors all the time. But we went in anyway because I *needed* independent confirmation in regard to the state of my sanity. I also wanted Mom to place her hand on the plug, so to speak, because that is one hell of a lousy position to be in alone.

“I wanted the procedure for her because she never told anybody what or what not to do,” I said. “You’ve seen her chart, right? Probably says right there in medicalesse that my mother, in her current state, is as capable of making decisions as pineapple would be. I hope there’s nothing wrong with what we tell you, but I have just discovered that Mom here *can* still think and get it across, a little.”

“How so?” Dr. Zale, obviously annoyed with the whole mess, said as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

I faced Mom, “Here’s your big chance to be a royal pain in the ass one last time,” I said. “One for yes, two for no, like head-on-wheels, remember?”

Although Mom’s eyes had once more become heavily amazed, that *It just hurts something awful* light still shone, yet it was flickering, and the pattern would soon go out. She lifted her palsied right hand and shakily struck her left palm with it once.

This got the doctor’s attention. He leaned forward and studied Mom for a moment and then looked at me. I spied thoughtful sorrow in his eyes. *It just hurts something awful* got around that day.

“Do you know what day it is, Mrs. Spahr?”

One.

“Is it Tuesday?”

Two. (It was Wednesday.)

Dr. Zale asked a few other desultory questions before popping off a big one. “Without this procedure you will most likely die within a month,” he said. “Do you understand?”

One.

Dr. Zale had scored some points with me until he got sly and crafty toward the end of the interview. “Has your daughter coached or instructed you in any way?”

Mom didn't reply as she had. Instead, she raised her right hand in a fist and slowly raised her middle finger. Although the gesture was creakily performed, it got across.

"Thank you, Mom," I said, "I appreciate that."

It's still three feet farther to hell from New Town Bridge. I went there yesterday, on foot, for the first time since I was young; back when the rail stood no higher than the average person's mid-drift; back when there were persons in the world who knew secret things about me without having to be told.

Safety extensions no more prevent suicide than the worry-stone I'd always carried in one of my pockets ever eased my troubled mind. Only Mom and Tess knew about my worry-stone without having to be told first. I tossed it off the bridge yesterday because I no longer had anyone to worry about. It was a sentimental, self-pitying little gesture, but it was all I could do.

Mom's shell quit breathing twelve days after her final appointment--three days back. The next morning she refused to get out of bed, and wouldn't take food or water. Although nothing else seemed abnormal about her, I called for an ambulance. The ICU staff finally settled on a "silent heart attack." I guess they had to call it something. But I knew that she had already died after she'd exerted the last of her will in Zale's office. There had been talk about getting Mom strong enough so she could go the die in a hospice. There was a weird and twisted sort of sense to be found in that, but I've since let it go because it is the sort of thing that pisses me off when I look too hard at it.

Besides, *It just hurts something awful.*

After I had cast my worry-stone over the rail extension, a silent proxy of God, I guess, entered my mind. I know. *I know.* But there's no clearer way for me to put it. I have never bought into handmade religion, nor will I ever; but now I suspect that there is *more*, and that a so-called higher power is even more miserable and lonesome as we are. Yet the possibility of its existence can be a comfort to us, although I sincerely doubt that the reverse is true. As long as people walk the earth there can be only sad angels.

The Narrows merges with greater Philo Bay about three hundred yards to the south. The Seattle super-ferry passes the head of the Narrows on its way in and out to the downtown terminal. One was coming in then, and as always, it would soon sound its horn as to herald its arrival. Sometimes the horn would sound just once, other times there'd be two shorter bursts lasting just as long as the single. This choice of one or two soundings varied from captain to captain, and it seemed to me as fifty-fifty as a thing gets.

Upon seeing the incoming boat my mind began to exist only in the moment. There was no then no future, only now. And I felt sorry for the silent and sad angel within; for she was a compassionate presence who wanted to help but didn't know how.

“Tell you what,” I thought *to* the angel, “I’ll help *you* out. I’ll make it easy. Ferry’s coming in: one blast of the horn’s for yes, two means no.” I clutched the rail extension with both hands and laid my right foot on the bottom bar. Even at fifty-nine I knew that I could easily propel myself over the side, if that was to be my destiny.

“I can do this,” I said, joyfully, and anticipating the horn. “I can really do this...”

Just as the horn began to sound my phone rang louder than I had ever heard a cell ring. It was as though ten phones had gone off at once. The noise had successfully drowned out the ferry’s horn. The angel smiled sadly, unfurled her wings and flew away. Time resumed its normal flow and I was left unable to tell if the horn had sounded once or twice. I guess I could have gone over anyway, but the magic of the moment had passed, and doing such would have been as empty a gesture as tossing the worry-stone had been.

I managed to dismiss the call. It was from the mortuary. (For the record: Mom was ready for her burial.)

It then occurred to me to check my settings and I wasn’t surprised to see that my ringer had been turned all the way down as I had gotten into the habit of doing while Mom had been in the ICU. Yet it had gone off loud enough to drown out a super-ferry’s immense foghorn.

I began to laugh. It felt like years since I had last laughed. “You did it!” I yelled, still laughing. “Just had to get the last word in, didn’t you, bitch? I so hope there’s nothing *wrong* with what I tell you...you, you magnificent bitch.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The story was for my late grandmother, who was a prideful, energetic and maddening woman. Sometimes, I hated her. But when her mind died I learned to appreciate the great bitch she had been, and felt a great loss.*

BIO: I am a pen name who lives in the Pacific Northwest. My ‘employer’ is a shy and timid person who hides under the bed with her pets until ‘it all blows over’. Just what that means is anyone’s guess.