
Memoir



The author, at nine months, with her parents on a U.S. Army ship headed for her father's post in France, 1957.



I am nestled in my parents' home. Though I am well into my fifties, a mother, university professor and writer, a woman who's gone through divorce, the tenure process and her first colonoscopy, whenever I come to this sprawling Florida apartment, I become completely and utterly *daughter*. I've flown here again from my Midwest home to clear out one more layer from my parents' overstuffed cabinets and closets so that my brother and I can either rent this place or sell it. Today I'm tackling my mother's vanity table. With unfettered access to her diaries, I feel a frisson of anticipation and dread of what I'll find written. My mother died two years ago, and my father's been gone since 1994, yet I feel as surreptitious as when I was a little girl nosing around in places where I knew I didn't belong.

In the vanity-table mirror, I look like I'm playing dress-up. Earlier, as I cleaned out my mother's jewelry box, a pair of dangling clip-on earrings caught my fancy, and so as not to lose them in the jumble, I am now wearing them—along with a sweaty tank top and dirty cutoffs. My work here is part janitorial, part archival. I've fetched my reading glasses, but the scrawl in my mother's diaries is still difficult to decipher, thanks to the nuns who ruler-rapped her out of being the left-handed person she was meant to be. Her daily entries record what time she woke and what

Unpacking my parents' dreams

Her mother's diaries. Her immigrant father's fourth-grade report card. Clues to a past that their daughter is only now beginning to understand

BY ANNA MONARDO

she cooked for dinner, and they summon up the tedium I felt during our frequent check-in phone calls in her later years. But then I read entries in which she recorded the news of her heart: "I feel sad and lonely," she wrote. I'd always suspected this, but I'm spooked to see it in writing. "He says stay together for the kids. What a joke." Shocked, I check the date—just a few years before my dad's death, so "the kids" means the grandchildren, whom they adored. Is it possible that even after almost 50 years, they weren't spared the hard questions? I'm devouring this news when, out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the figure of a boy hovering in the doorway, and I'm just about to turn and say to my kid brother, "Wait till you see what I found," when the boy at the threshold says, "Mom, you promised we'd go down to the pool, and it's already been a really long time."

Mom? Me? I'm so immersed that when my son comes closer, he seems

Daughter as in *Am I doing a good enough job?* Daughter as in *Don't leave me.* Daughter as in *When will I finally get out of here?*

» **There is an** aura around the possessions a person leaves when she dies, and it's my mother's anxiety and insecurity, her brushes with happiness and her disappointments that I come face-to-face with as I weed through the material excess in her home.

The general living space, though decorated in the taste of an earlier time, is uncluttered. This was a well-loved home, and my brother and I have hired a caretaker who keeps the place repaired and clean, ready for the market—once we manage to clear out these rooms. The mahogany of the formal dining room table shines, as does the crystal chandelier. The master bedroom suite is ornate and reminiscent of Versailles, but it's so well preserved that for a collector of kitsch, this furniture will be a prize. It's only as you

like all this stuff that tumbles down when I reach up to the shelves in the walk-in closet.

Who helped her store so high up these heavy plastic bins filled with rolls and rolls of paper towels and dozens of boxes of aluminum foil? In Christmas bins, I find hundreds of paper plates and enough holiday-green plastic wrap to send dozens of guests away with packages of cookies. If there were five or six of us at Christmas dinner, that was a lot. We'd stopped baking decades ago. But here is the mile-long tablecloth with its umpteen wreath-decorated napkins—enough for Santa's elves and all the members of the condominium board.

» **I used to** tease my mother about her Cuban-missile-crisis mentality, and these loaded-up bins would be funny if the accumulation stopped there. But it doesn't. At what point after my father's death did my mother take over his drawers and fill them with nothing but hats—sun hats, rain bonnets, tams, fedoras? If she were still alive, we'd be arguing by now. *Mom, what were you thinking?* But I know exactly what she was thinking.

Having never learned to drive, my mother always worried about being caught short. In practical terms as well as existentially, she never stopped asking, *What if? What if?* Maybe her anxiety

began at age six, crossing the ocean from Italy with her mother. Or maybe as she grew up in the apartment above her father's tavern where fights broke out so often, shouts and shattering glass were a frequent backdrop to her home life. Or maybe it was the childhood fever that left her with a permanently damaged heart. A woman who withstood three open-heart surgeries, my mother had a strong will but weak defenses against her many fears. As her young daughter who adored her and, later, as her adult daughter frustrated by her, I tried to support, protect and distract my mother, but I always ended up feeling that what I offered wasn't enough. »

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more my sibling or playmate than my child. We're all children in this place, aren't we?

"OK, honey. We are going swimming. In just one minute."

Exasperated, he sighs and goes back to the TV. He knows that one minute will turn into one hour, and again I will be lost, like a greedy reader who refuses to put down a fat novel. In the arc of my parents' story, this cleanup should be nothing more than an epilogue, but in these overfilled rooms, I keep stumbling onto a saga, an epic narrative I'm unable to tear myself away from and in which I always play the same role: *daughter*.

move in closer that you notice one of the nightstands cluttered with sticky notes on which my mother listed—and underlined—a slew of emergency phone numbers. There's some push button medical-alert device and statues of numerous saints. In the more intimate areas—around the bed, in the dressing room—a mild hysteria rises up and taints the sheen of these well-appointed rooms.

In the same way, my mother's truest self wasn't apparent until you knew her for a while. Attractive, well dressed and friendly, she came off at first as an easy-going person, and often she was. The anxious woman stayed tucked away,



Monardo's parents (far left) reprising their vows in the U.S. in 1950, a year after their civil ceremony in Italy. Left: The family in Paris, 1957.

Clearly, too much wasn't enough, either. By the time I discover a shopping bag stuffed with nothing but empty shopping bags, I'm muttering, "This is a safety hazard."

And I hear her telling me, "This is my house. In your house, you can do what you like."

The fact is that in my mother's house, I recognize too much of myself. Among her stockpiles, I stumble upon the detritus of more hobbies than I ever knew she had attempted—needlepoint, ceramics and something that required a glue gun—all of it abandoned, in the same way that I've abandoned stories, class plans, relationships that defeated me. Did she feel, as I often do, that she didn't have what it takes? Or perhaps these hobbies failed to fill the loneliness she mentioned in her journals. Weeding through skeins of yarn, I am engulfed in a feeling of suffocation and encumbrance that, sadly, matches how I often felt when in my mother's presence.

Which is why, when I see on my father's shelves the neat assemblage of labeled containers—LIGHTBULBS and FOREIGN STAMPS and TOOLS—I linger, savoring the comfort of his company. Any scrap of paper on which I find my father's loopy European script I slip into

my pocket for safekeeping. Then I try not to feel bad about how quickly I crumple my mother's bossy sticky notes—*You are NOT to throw this out!!!!*—and stuff them into the jumbo plastic bags my son and I haul out to the garbage chute.

The bags are heavy, and so is the guilt each time I enact a betrayal by favoring his stuff over hers. I'm grateful when some knickknack is ugly or useless enough to be easily tossed. "Pitch it!" I whisper, just as my mother used to. Pitch it, she'd say when a meal hadn't come out the way she'd hoped. Pitch it, when a pair of slacks no longer fit. One afternoon when I was little, I watched her store winter coats in the cedar closet and noticed her wedding dress in a blue plastic bag. "Mom, can I try it on? Please?"

"If I pull that thing out," she snapped, "I'm going to pitch it."

» Like so many women of her generation, my mother defined her adult life almost exclusively in terms of her marriage, but unlike most girls who came of age during World War II in her Pittsburgh-area steel town, my mother had a marriage arranged by her parents.

When she was 18, they took her back to their southern Italian village to meet her intended, a young doctor. During

med school, he'd been drafted into the Italian army in bombed-out Naples; she was one semester shy of her high school graduation. When my parents met, on Christmas Eve, he was 28 and the oldest of seven children who had recently lost their father. In April, after four months of formal courtship, my parents married. Just a few hours ago, I unearthed the gold-trimmed porcelain demitasse set my father's mother gave them as a wedding gift. Another relative gave tiny now-tarnished silver spoons. *Do I keep or give away or sell?*

In my mother's nightstand I found the box from a Naples jewelry store where my father had bought the first gift he gave her, a bracelet; and I found the receipt for that bracelet among my father's papers. The bracelet is lost to time, but I'm touched that both my parents held on to evidence of that early exchange. For a bride and groom who knew each other so little, it was the offering, and accepting, of significant gifts that signaled their serious intent. Later, in my parents' lifelong and strained marriage, how often did these objects function as a kind of glue, reminding them of family promises and the primitive dream that two strangers with good intentions could join forces and do for themselves and their loved ones what needed to be done. In my parents' case, this meant that the groom, now wed to a U.S. citizen, could immigrate easily, establish himself professionally and in time move his mother and siblings from war-battered Calabria.

Meanwhile, the bride's parents had done the best they could to ensure her smooth passage through life. For a girl with a chronic disease and no brothers or sisters, what could be better than a doctor husband? CONTINUED ON PAGE 66

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» **I don't think** my mother—naive American bride—ever recovered from the shock of figuring out that her groom, though clearly attracted to her, was positioning for his family when he agreed to the arranged marriage, and who can blame her? But how can you blame him, a young guy who needed to fulfill his responsibility as oldest son?

If she had gone through the papers I found in his cabinet yesterday, would she have been able to forgive him?

made his double decision—to marry her and to immigrate—would it have mitigated her hurt?

» **His papers,** her excess. Surrounded by these totems that tell my parents' story, I'm humbled by what I've learned. They erred and argued, took care of each other and hurt each other, too; but they were allied in their commitment to do what they saw as the one right thing—create a family and keep it together.

» **Tomorrow** a thrift shop team will arrive with a pickup truck, and I suspect they'll make a good dent in our inventory. A part of me wishes I could keep this apartment in the margins of my life forever, as a repository, but my era as *daughter* is clearly drawing toward its end.

Sometimes I take a break, sit in my father's reading chair and stare out at the sea. The view summons up the Italian vistas he loved. Much that was meant to happen in this apartment almost happened, but not quite. My parents really thought that, together with our growing families, my brother and I would fill up their rooms deep into the future. But too many visits were about one illness or another, and my father died within four years of moving down here. Our family's Florida was always an "al-

most place," as my parents' marriage was always *almost* happy, my mother *almost* healthy, all of us *almost* together. But what family—anywhere, ever—gets all the time it wishes for or needs?

» **It's evening** when my son and I finally make our way down the palm-tree path to the pool. In summer, there are so few people around that it's all ours. The sun is lowering, and the surface of the water is covered with the soft reflection of fronds, feather-like, something you could use to tickle a child. We dive in; then my son and I stand in the shallow end and toss a ball back and forth, back and forth to each other. I revel in this game because it allows me to keep my gaze on his face. When he misses, he dives into the intricately patterned water and comes up smiling. Turquoise pool, amber light swaddling my son, our evening another episode in the golden mystery of family life. I lower my face into the privacy of the water and thank my parents for this inheritance. *

ANNA MONARDO's most recent novel is *Falling in Love with Natassia*. She is currently working on a memoir.

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Thanks to the bureaucratic hoops he had to leap through when he came to the U.S., I have documentation of his entire academic career—the Italian originals and the notarized English translations, all of it meticulously preserved in case he ever again had to show proof of where he'd come from. This is the minutia of an immigrant's quiet heroism.

» **My father's** first-grade report card was stamped with the emblem of the Kingdom of Italy. In autumn 1926, his conduct was good, and in spring 1927, it was excellent. And though his grades stayed high, on his fourth-grade report card, the words *Regno d'Italia*, Kingdom of Italy, were replaced by the words *Opera Nazionale Balilla*—the Fascist youth organization. Holding that brittle document, I understood how insidiously dictatorship grabs hold of a person's life. In childhood, my mother had had right-handedness forced on her, and my father was also young when the mandate of duty was imposed on him. Did he ever share these old papers with her? If she had been able to absorb the context in which my father

Pitch or give away or keep?

When I look at my parents' plentitude, I realize how unlikely it was. Both were born peasant poor in the same landlocked village in a destitute part of the world; yet within one generation, they crossed an ocean and numerous social strata. After decades of hand-to-mouth and scrupulous saving, they eventually lived well. Bypassing junctures when they almost parted, they traveled together over much of Europe, Hawaii and Australia—and my mother had the saltshakers to prove it.

I've spread her collection out on the dining table, along with the Hummel figurines, a flotilla of Lenox swans and the accoutrements of my parents' entertaining. Does any other household have so many coasters, highball glasses and chafing dishes? They loved their friends, and our family was never more united than when we were preparing for a party. Afterward the good feeling lingered for days, like my mother's delicious leftovers. But sometimes just the four of us shared a spontaneous joy as giddy as any of their well-orchestrated parties. I choose to believe that those times were the truest heart of our family.