

Susan Koppelman

A Meditation on Mothers and Sons by Nathan's Mother

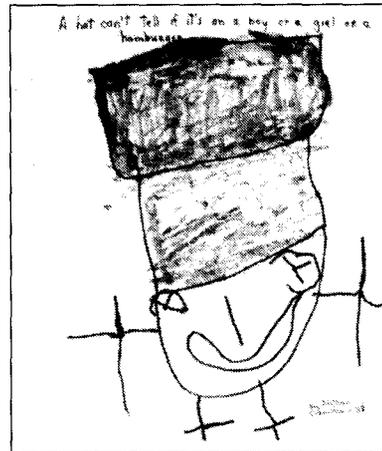
The dedication to my first book, the 1972 *Images of Women: Feminist Perspectives*, honors my three and a half year old son.

"To Edward Nathan Koppelman Cornillon who likes his dolly house as much as he likes his trucks, and for whom I wish, and am working to build, a better world." The book also includes my son's first publication, a drawing he made in response to my request for a picture for Mommy's book. I was as impressed by his creation as I was by anything else in that book.

I am still impressed by it, by its wisdom, its humour, and its absurdity, and by the fact that my little boy, Nathan, did it.

Nathan has impressed me since a few hours after his birth when he lifted his head and looked directly into my eyes. His expression that day is as clear in my mind's eye now as it was five minutes after I first saw it. I recognized that my experience was not mine alone when I read Elizabeth Enright's short story "The First Face" and came across this description of a new mother's first sight of her sleeping son:

... the expression of his ... face ... was—"majestic" ... For this was a face of total calm, a face where doubt had never yet been seen. One might have called it stern, but stern-



Nathan's drawing at three-and-a-half years old. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

ness presupposes an attitude toward acts or beings, whereas he had just accomplished the first and most important act of his life, willy-nilly, and as for beings, he was not so much ignorant as innocent of their existence ... this must have been the look he had worn, lying in the oceanic fastness of the womb, sustained beyond doubt or question, assured as no caress or mortal word could ever reassure him. In his lifetime, he would hear and say the hackneyed word "security" a hundred thousand times, perhaps, never quite forgetting that once it was no word but his own kingdom. (1955: 252)

I felt a sacred responsibility for that tiny person and promised him that I would keep him safe, let him come to life on his own terms, in response to his own sense of wonder and curiosity instead of allowing life to impose on him. I promised him safety and justice and beauty; I promised him adventure and tenderness and a chance to become his best self. I promised him my patience and attention and respect. I believed that there were no significant differences in potential between males and females and that I could protect this small person from gender imprisonment. I failed, I was unable, to keep most of those promises. Our lives were harder than I could have imagined. Both acute and chronic illness moved in our family before he was one year old and whatever plans we had for a stable and productive life were thwarted. Together we experienced poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, endless health crises, promises broken, hope encumbered, and uncompensated deprivations. But still, my son has come to adulthood successfully, with authentic knowledge of himself, with a capacity for love that makes him a good husband and father, with a sophisticated sense of justice, and with the ability to feel joy in his work. I am impressed. I am also deeply sorrowful about all that we missed during his growing up years, all that will never be recovered, all the memories we never made, and all the distance that separates us.

What was most remarkable to me about my son in his childhood was not his beauty, which I took for granted, not his intelligence, which I was anticipated, not his obsessive involvement with the things that impassioned him, which I shared, but the strength of his will and the implacability of his logic. I think I have never won an argument with him, never persuaded him of anything, never changed his mind about anything, and never succeeded in leading him to water, let alone getting him to drink.

Commitment to the struggle for social justice had been a part of my life since 1955, when I was 15 and carried my first picket sign in a circle of marchers protesting the Woolworth policy of not serving "Negroes" at their lunch counter. It seemed as natural to me to include Nathan in my activities (when I knew they were safe) as it was to feed him when he was hungry and change his diapers when they were wet. So, at the age of 20 months, he cheerfully rode on my shoulders as I marched to the draft board headquarters in Haverhill, Massachusetts, to insist on my right to register for the draft. I wanted to

simultaneously protest the gender inequity of endangering only male citizens and to make my protest of the draft more than symbolic. When I asked for the papers to register, he said, "Me, too."

When at the age of three, he came to a party with my feminist allies in Bowling Green, Ohio to make picket signs to carry at the Miss Ohio Beauty Pageant protest scheduled for the next day, Nathan cheerfully decided to make his own sign: "GIVE CHILDREN RIGHTS!"

"Well," I thought, laughing to myself as I enjoyed the cheers the other protesters greeted his effort with, "he's got it!"

Nancy Hale's words at the beginning of her story "On the Beach" resonated in my heart, reminding me of what I felt for and with my young son:

She was sure Mac, her seven-year-old boy, felt just the same way, that the blue, crystal perfection of the morning was their private production, because they always felt the same way about everything ... Ever since he was a tiny baby, their instant sympathy had been astounding. He had used to look up even from his playpen, the light in his face reflecting her exact mood. It was wonderful to have one person in the world who felt along with you, without words, as though by an electric communication. (94)

When Nathan was seven or eight and we were living in St. Louis, he began arguing for his right to have a toy gun like the other kids had. I insisted that our home would be without guns, that as long as he was living in our home, he wouldn't be allowed to bring guns into the house. He looked at me with the look of impatient patience I came to know all too well and said, "Mom, I don't need you to buy me a gun. I don't need a gun made out of plastic to have a gun. If I want a gun, I can take a stick and pretend it's a gun and point it at the other kids and say 'Bang bang' and it will work just as well as a plastic gun. You can't keep me from having a thing like a gun, so why don't you just let me have a *real* toy gun?" He was, of course, right. As he demonstrated, even a pointed finger accompanied by the appropriate bang bang sound was a sufficient gun. But I never did solve the mystery of why he wanted a gun in the first place. Why any of his little boy friends wanted to play gun games. His closest friend, Patrick, the little boy from across the street who has become our play-son, our unofficial foster son, after years of playing paint-ball, has grown up to be a Marine.

I wondered if all little boys invented guns. I wondered if little boys were really different from little girls. I wondered if all those qualities that I thought of as Nathan qualities were really boy qualities. I questioned the feminist theory about socially determined gender roles that I embraced with so much hope for a just and humane future human society. Was the theory really just about hope and not about truth. I wondered if other people's little boys invented guns. I wondered if little girls invented guns.

I don't remember if I acquiesced to Nathan's wish for a gun at that time or

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not, but I do remember my despair. He was right: he could make a pretend gun and all his friends would honor its “gun-ness.” And I remembered how that story by Nancy Hale ended, how that perfect day on the beach was shattered when, as her little boy lay down for his nap, “There was a tearing, ripping sound in the heavens, a kind of whizzing like a length of silk being split. Mary sat up sharply.

Mac got up, too; he jumped t his feet with his head thrown back, peering up into the unbroken blue whence the piercing sound had come.

“Jets!” he cried joyfully. “Pr-r-r-r-r-r...” and he began to imitate the sound of a machine gun, doubling himself over and holding an invisible gun to his hip.

The jerk came them, in her innermost, uncontrollable foundations. Sick, draining, both startling her out of the dream of the day and blacking consciousness, the jerk came and went. She sat quite still, letting the sensation pass.

“Weren’t they lovely jets?” the child said happily, lying down and lifting his face for his kiss.

But she felt no impulse to give it to him. He seemed too far to reach.

When she bent over anyway to kiss the round cheek, nothing went out to her child. All her life and her love seemed to shrink behind her eyes and mouth, gathering themselves around some other focus, as blood and fluids rush to a wound.

But the child was satisfied, and rolled over on his side, heaving a great sigh. (Hale 100-101)

Years later, when I read Pamela Sargent’s (1987) post-nuclear apocalypse short story “Heavenly Flowers” my blood chilled with a sense of *déjà vu*. Sargent’s story tells of the thirtieth anniversary of the launching of the missiles that had ended civilization. She describes the worldwide ritual ceremony of rejection of all forms of violence in human society. The mass destruction and its sequalae are recounted

Within an hour a billion had died; within a month, another billion; within a year, most of the world.” A poisoned earth and a genetically compromised small survivor population were all that remained. The lives of the survivors were limited in every way possible by the consequences of the self-destruction of the species. The loathing of all forms of violence and destructive machinery was believed by those who remembered what life had been like before the missiles flew to have been hardwired into the survivors and their pathetically deformed and deprived offspring. And yet, and yet—once the ceremonies were complete and the gathered crowd prepared for departure

from the gathering places, Junior wandered over to them, clutching a toy made of wood. One end of the toy came to a point; two wings had been carved on its sides. The boy lifted it, swooped toward Maisie, then stabbed the toy into the ground at her feet.

"Boom," Junior shouted as he strewed dirt around with his hands. "Kaboom. Boom. Bang." (304-305)

II

In 1984, I mailed the completed manuscript for my third book, *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories Across a Generation* to Florence Howe at the Feminist Press several months earlier than either she, my publisher, or I expected. My 15-year-old son had finally broken through my three years of phobic resistance to "those things" and taught me to use the Commodore 64 his grandmother had bought him at his request for his 12th birthday when his mother said, "No way." He taught me to use his computer as a word processor. My son. My 15-year-old son. My beloved Nathan who has said to me that he figured I was glad to have had a son instead of a daughter so I could pioneer raising a feminist son.

Nathan read all the stories I considered for *Between Mothers and Daughters*, not just the ones I eventually included in the book. His emotionally detached, insightful, and witty comments about the stories enriched my own readings. My acknowledgments for that book conclude: "It is often said that family members can't teach each other things; disproving that is the most fun part of our family life. Nathan helped me conquer my technology anxiety and taught me to use his word processor. It has transformed my work life, and I am forever grateful. Now that I've made a book for Grandma, I agree with him that it's time he and I made a book for each other about mothers and sons" (1983: xiv).

Well, it's 16 years later; my son is a 31-year-old married man, the father of a daughter, and a Program Manager at Microsoft; I've published five more books, many articles, many reviews, and some short stories. But I still have not completed the book I promised my son in 1984. One more promise I haven't kept yet. This article is many things. It is an apology to Nathan because his book hasn't yet been completed. And an apology. It is a celebration of my son and my love for him. It is a chance to tell some of my favorite stories about him.¹ And it is a preliminary version of the introduction to the book of stories by women about mothers and sons.

III

One reason I haven't yet completed Nathan's book is that the mother/son stories I have discovered so far raise so many painful questions about mother/son relationships, offer so little hope, and, together, don't seem at all like a gift to offer my son. They reflect what we have learned from cultural anthropologists and other social scientists about the relative helplessness of mothers in exercising significant control over the circumstances of their sons' growing up,

their helplessness in providing safe lives for their sons, and their rapid disappearance from their adult sons' lives.

In some cultures, sons are taken literally and physically from their mothers when they reach a certain age and stage of development. They go to live with the adult men once they can be useful and don't require a whole lot of physical care. In our culture the boys are usually left in their mother's physical care until they are 18 (at least); the patriarchy just takes their minds and hearts, shapes their priorities and dictates their values. And their lives, too, when they are ready to be used to fight wars.

The patriarchy has managed to trick women into doing more and more of the work of son-raising in return for less and less respect and reward, and under increasingly powerless conditions. The patriarchy has persuaded mothers to accept as part of their jobs teaching their sons to be loyal to the patriarchy. Mothers of sons are conditioned to push their sons toward emotional "independence" from their mothers and to worry that they have failed at their jobs of rearing healthy men if their sons seem to love their mothers "too much."²

Why would a woman want to mother a son? How dare a mother love her son?

She knows that he is destined to grow up to inherit a greater privilege than is available to her daughters, or to herself. He may not consciously become, but he cannot entirely avoid becoming, her oppressor. These little boys we bear from our bodies are no more "ours" than the silver polished by a maid is hers.

I know—I know, we do not "own" our children. Of course I agree that they are free and unique souls, belonging only to themselves. I know well the words of Kalil Gibran about loving and letting go, about bows and arrows. Of course we don't and aren't supposed to own our children, but neither should their fathers or the FatherSystem own them. And certainly the FatherSystem does own our sons. Our sons can be snatched from us without either our or their consent, and taught to aim a gun at other mothers' sons and to pull those triggers and kill or be killed by other mothers' sons as soon as they are big and strong enough to hold those guns. Sometimes sooner. Certainly it doesn't happen to all of our sons and it doesn't happen to the sons of every generation—but there is nothing in a son's basic character that helps a mother know which ones will be left intact and which ones won't escape absorption into the heteropatriarchy.

The stealing of our sons, the impressing of them into the service of the heteropatriarchy is as random, as rampant, as heartbreaking, and as inevitable as domestic violence and rape, which is just an additional dimension of the warfare they are conditioned to engage in. Only this guerrilla warfare—domestic violence and rape—is waged against women, their mothers, their sisters, their daughters, and their granddaughters and the mothers, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters of the mothers' sons they are taught to murder.

But how can we not love our sons? How can we not love those tiny-fingered bright-eyed good-smelling little bundles of glorious babyhood when they are

little? If we keep our babies, rear them, live with them every day, from infancy to manhood is a matter of such incremental changes, we barely notice when they segue from little people who need help with their buttons to people who shave their faces daily.

How do we keep the mothers' sons who have already grown up to become killers and rapists from stealing our sons and teaching them to become killers and rapists in their turn? And at the same time, how do we protect ourselves from those we have already lost to the killers and the rapists?

What do we do about our ambivalence when they are born and we learn that "It's a boy?" How do we handle the congratulations heaped on us for having produced a boy? How do we handle the personal, private disappointment we often experience that the baby is not a girl? What do we do about the barbarity of circumcision? What do we do about indoctrinating them into faith traditions that teach them they are better than we are because they have that leaky tiny flower bud between their tiny legs?

IV

Long before I became an historian of U.S. women's short stories, I was introduced to stories about mothers and sons in another context. Women did not write the earliest mother/son stories I read as an elementary school aged girl in Sunday school at Park Synagogue, a large conservative Jewish synagogue and religious school in Cleveland, Ohio. Four stories triggered powerful and lasting emotional responses as well as outraged questions and protests from me. The first two are from Genesis: the story of the sacrifice of Isaac and the story of Rebekah providing her younger and favorite son, Jacob, with the tools for tricking his father Isaac into giving Jacob the patrimonial "blessing" intended for the older twin, Esau. The third is from Exodus and involves the killing of many sons. The killing of the Jewish boy babies is mandated by the Egyptian Pharaoh to protect him from a prophecy. And later when he will not comply with Moses' demand that he let the Hebrew people depart from their slavery despite the visiting of a series of plagues on Egypt, the final plague is wrought on the Egyptians and their Pharaoh: the killing of the first-born sons of the Egyptians. A fourth story was Apocryphal, read as part of the Chanukah ritual. It was the story of Hannah and the sacrificing of her sons.³ Each son was given the choice between great material rewards if he agreed to worship the deity of the conquerors or death if he refused to betray the Hebrew God. Each son looked to his mother for a sign, each son chose death, each son was killed in front of his mother and brothers. When finally only the youngest, smallest little boy remained alive, the torturers, horrified by what they had done, what the mother was suffering, and what remained for them to do if the little boy refused to bow down, pleaded with Hannah to tell her little boy to chose life. She did not. The child was killed.

That God is reported to have ordered Abraham to kill his and Sarah's son and Abraham was willing to obey horrified me—and frightened me! What if

my father started hearing voices that told him to kill me? I trusted my father, believed with all my heart that if he began to hear voices telling him to kill me, that he would tell the voices to shut up. Why hadn't Isaac done that?

Then I began to wonder what would happen if I grew up and got married and had a son and his father heard voices telling him to kill our son. What if he tried to kill *my* son? Was I supposed to just let it happen? What kind of father was Abraham that he would let some voice in his head tell him to kill his son? Whose voice, inside or outside of his head, could be important enough for him to do what it told him to do when it told him to do something so horrible as to kill his child? That story sickened and scared me. No God I would believe in and honor would issue that order or would want to be represented to the world by someone who would be honor such an order and be willing to kill his own child.

And what about Sarah? She was his mother! Whatever she might have wanted or thought or felt or deserved just didn't count. Why didn't God talk to her? Probably because she wouldn't have paid attention! What mother would? But why would any father pay attention to such a horrible request?

And why didn't Isaac and Rebekah let their sons share the inheritance? Why set them up as competitors? And why, if Isaac was dying, was the inheritance going to either son instead of to Rebekah?

These stories⁴ set me in a state of permanent contention with my heritage. They also triggered questions that prepared me for all the revolutionary movements I have spent my life supporting: civil rights, feminism, lesbian, gay, and bi/transgendered rights, and disability rights.

V

In addition to the various faith traditions that teach us that sons are more important than daughters and that mothers are excluded from “the loop” of decision makers about their sons' futures, we learn about mother/son relationship from popular culture.

In spite of our most loving, intelligent, dedicated, pure, and impassioned efforts, they will most likely be lost to us. They will grow up to be our enemies and our oppressors, learning that to love us is to be weak, and that evidence of having loved us is a matter for shame.⁵ They will grow up to condescend to us, to be fond but patronizing, to be generous with everything but their time because we bore them, we aren't important, our ideas and opinions are, literally, worth nothing. We will be, at best, loved like shameful backstreet women, because no man worth his salt, except for a very few, dare to be a public Mama's Boy. The few? Lee Liberace, Elvis Presley, and Bill Clinton in the latter part of the twentieth century. And these public-figure sons who love their mothers are—sexual outlaws in one way or another, for one reason or another.

Perhaps the most famous Mama's Boy on film is James Cagney in “White Heat.” Writing about this 1949 film, Pauline Kael comments that:

This Freudian gangster picture, directed by Raoul Walsh, is very obvious, and it's so primitive and outrageous in its flamboyance that it seems to have been made much earlier than it was. But this flamboyance is also what makes some of its scenes stay with you. James Cagney plays the tough guy who sits on the lap of his mother (Margaret Wycherly), and goes berserk in the prison mess hall when he learns of her death—a horrible sobbing whine comes out of him, and it just keeps coming, as he punches out anyone who gets near him. (Kael 1982: 650)

Leonard Maltin labels Cagney's character a "psychopathic hood with mother obsession" and comments that the "Top of the World" finale has become a "movie legend" (Maltin 1990: 1250-51). In the grand finale of "White Heat" the Cagney character proclaims to his now dead mother, as he himself is dying in a fire atop a burning oil derrick, "Look at me, Ma. I'm on top of the world." This dying declaration of a Mama's Boy makes mother love in an adult male appear to be a hopeless sickness that can only pervert the son who experiences it. Are we to think that mother love in a man inevitably leads to criminal behavior, sociopathy, death? Does it mean (of course it does!) that if we do not "cure" our sons of loving us we are responsible for damaging them? If we are to "cure" our sons of loving us for the sake of their mental health, what about our mental health? Are we supposed to stop loving them? When? At what age?

VI

I have remained faithful to the reading schedule I established for myself in November 1972. I read three new (to me) stories by women each day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Or at least that's how my reading averages. And, just as I keep track of all the stories thematically (among many other ways) I've kept track of and collected mother/son stories all these years. I never start to winnow stories into a thematic collection until I have accumulated at least one hundred stories that explore the theme. I've never done a mother/son collection because I have yet to encounter the crucial one hundred stories. During the years of reading and studying short stories by U.S. women writers and of trying to construct a history of U.S. women's participation in the development of the genre, I have observed that the mother/son relationship is one of the less scrutinized family relationships in women's writing.

There are 58 stories in my inventory of mother/son stories. These are enough, by my standards, to begin speculating about the thematic sub-genres, although not enough to begin the culling for a book. I have stories written from 1878 until 1998—120 years. There are multiple mother/son stories by some individual authors, including Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, Fannie Hurst, Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Nancy Hale, Gloria Naylor, Pamela Sargent, Lynda Shor, and Sally Bingham. Multiple explorations of

important themes by a single author are not unusual and these multiple treatments follow the general pattern of multiple treatments of other relationships, such as the mother/daughter relationships and women's friendships. In addition to these ten writers, thirty-one others are represented with a single story each. These writers include Constance Fenimore Woolson, Beth Brant, Anna Lee Walters, Joyce Carol Oates, Marita Bonner, Alice Brown, Alice Elliot Dark, Alice Walker, Hortense Calisher, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Nella Larson, Janet Burroway, Janet Lewis, Maxine Kumin, Kay Boyle, Ruthann Robson, and Lorrie Moore. There doesn't seem to be any correlation between whether or not the woman writer was or is the mother of a son or sons and whether or if she wrote mother/son stories.

Many more stories written by women are about mothers and daughters than mothers and sons. It makes perfect sense that this is so. Both mothers and daughters are women and both mothers and daughters, when they write, are likely to write mother/daughter stories. The mother/daughter theme is the single most frequently revisited theme in all of women's short stories. In the mother/son relationship, however, only the mothers are women, so only their stories can be considered among those I study—stories by women written in the United States or territories that later became states. Adding to the reasons for smaller numbers of mother/son stories than mother/daughter stories is the fact that more daughters write mother/daughter stories than do mothers. Mothers of both sons and daughters have often been unable to find the time, the room of one's own, to write their stories. The percent of mother/daughter stories written by mothers, or from the perspective of a mother, is far smaller than that of those written by or from the perspective of a daughter.⁶

All of the mother/son stories by women that I have found over the years of reading and looking and thinking and rereading have to do with the questions I have asked myself ever since the afternoon of November 1, 1968, when the doctor said, "It's a boy." The stories explore the dynamics of the power of the sexist, homophobic, classist, ableist, racist heteropatriarchy and how those dynamics intervene in, pollute, and appropriate for its own purposes the relationships between mothers and sons. Love and pain are the dominant emotions in the stories. The mood that prevails is sadness, sometimes accompanied by bewilderment or anger or submission to the loss of her young, beautiful, basically gender-neutral child as he transforms into an Other or is lost to her by illness or death.

Some of the mother/son stories I have read over the years have had a profound impact on me emotionally. When I do complete the collection, it will certainly include those stories.⁷ I have already referenced some of those stories above and, in my remaining space, will talk about a few more of them.

VII

Fannie Hurst has written a number of stories⁸ in which the mother/son relationship is the central relationship being explored. Each of these stories is

a somewhat different take on the same tangled dynamic. The dynamic is this: the widowed Jewish immigrant mother has expectations of her adult son that reflect the values of the shtetl culture of Eastern Europe. The son, whether American born or brought to this country as an infant, has grown up in households and, often, communities in which the shtetl values define the appropriate relationship between and obligations governing an adult son and his mother. The pull of assimilation and the different values of the dominant American culture, is personified by a young American (-Jewish) woman who is the love interest, potential marriage partner, or wife of the adult son. Her expectations of marriage center on the creation of an independent two-generation nuclear family. His mother's expectations are that her son will bring his bride home to a three-generation extended family living under one roof. The son loves his mother, has enjoyed both her company and her ministrations all his life, and, as an adult, enjoys being head of his mother's household. He has no desire to abandon her. He understands that if he honors his obligations to his mother, he will lose the woman he loves. He is forced to choose.

These stories have parallels in father/daughter stories by Jewish-American women writers. Wilma Shore Solomon's "The Great Tradition" is one of the most interesting of these parallel stories. In this story, a young woman is courted by two men. One of the men represents the traditional culture of her parents' world; the other promises the best of the New World. She must choose: does she embrace her paternal world or abandon it.

In both sets of stories, the parent/child relationships serve as opportunities to explore the clash of cultures faced by assimilating generations of immigrants. The son must choose between his mother's world and the world of his sweetheart. The daughter must choose between two suitors, one who represents the culture of her father, the other who represents the culture of the New World.

The culture of the parent embodies multigenerational family residency and intimacy, ritual religious activities, and a slow pace of life. The culture of the assimilated mate/lover was fast paced, filled with indulgences in contemporary popular culture, and acquisition. In the father/daughter stories, the daughter usually chooses the suitor who promises to honor by living the tradition of her father. In the mother/son stories, the son agonizes about the choice between his sexual attraction to a woman of his own generation and his love for his mother and what she represents until one or the other of the women makes a choice for him. When the object of his lust insists that if he doesn't choose her *now*, she will abandon him, the mother dies to make way for her son's freedom and happiness.

Fannie Hurst's (1918) story "A Boob Spelled Backward," is one of the great stories of a man being torn between his mother and the other woman he loves, a woman he wants for a wife. It is the story of an early middle-aged man in business who has always lived with his widowed mother. He has always loved her, loved her caring for him, loved bringing her gifts that delighted her, loved sharing peace and quiet with her, loved to provide her with comfort and

security, loved her pride and satisfaction and approval—for and about him.

He loves a career woman. He wants them to marry, live with his mother, assuming that they would live in a way that would not interfere with Mama's ways, their ways. The career woman is equally in love with him, but she wants to live her own way in her home. She wants her husband and herself to create their own way of life. She wants him to leave his mother and be alone with her.

She delivers an ultimatum: give me what I want or give me up; there is another man who has offered me the life I want. I'm not getting any younger and earning a living isn't getting any easier. I want security while I can still get it. I want the promise of a way of life that will make me happy. I would prefer to have those things with you, but if you won't leave your mother and give me my own home, I will marry this other man.

She presents him with a plan—to enlist in the army. They could marry and she would follow him to wherever he is assigned and they could live together. His mother would stay home. By the time the war is over, she will be used to living alone. He must choose. He is faced with an agonizing choice. He is utterly sensible to the pain he would cause his mother if he left her and also utterly sensible to her desire for him to be happy, her desire to not stand in his way. She hasn't, in fact, imagined any way in which she could stand in the way of his happiness. After all, doesn't she want for him what he wants for himself?

And he is utterly sensitive to the grief he will feel if, when, this woman he loves marries another man and is lost to him forever.

The potency of his sexual desire for his fiancée makes it clear that we are not dealing with, what in U.S. culture is so often dismissed contemptuously, a "mama's boy." And for him, these feelings are the feelings of love; he is not a lewd man; he does not objectify women. His mother is a woman and he loves his mother. He cannot "love" in the fragmented way of men who are alienated from their mothers, who consider mother-love to be a sign of mental illness or characterological flaw.

Why must a man turn away from his mother to be completely adult? And what service is performed in our society by the alienation of a man from his mother? It makes him a more willing warrior, more vulnerable to the seductions of being both a purveyor and a pawn of the patriarchy. It is asserted that for a man (sic) to become whole (sic) he has to amputate his love for his mother. What kind of wholeness is achieved by amputation?

One of the reasons that Fannie Hurst has lost her popularity is that stories like these have lost their audience. We no longer have an audience ideologically predisposed to accept her premises. Once upon a time her stories were read by audiences who knew what the stories were about and were not embarrassed or disgusted by men who loved their mothers; they did not see that deep and joyful connection as perverted or demeaning or unhealthy. But it has become taboo for a man to love his mother or for the mother of a son to want her son to love her and remain close to her. The taboo has been enforced under the guise of mental health.

"A Boob Spelled Backward" was written during that period when all the immigrants were mad for assimilation. Many, perhaps most, didn't differentiate between "Americanism" and "Protestant Imperialist Capitalism." The white male apparently heterosexual apparently Christian patriarchy has long wanted to define Americanism they way and, for the most part, desperate and desperately hopeful immigrants have fallen for their definition. After all, how can a stranger in a strange land know the difference? So the children of immigrants have grown up as true to the Ideal of the Patriarchy as they could make themselves.

In this story the career woman-fiancee represents the assimilationist argument/point of view/values and priorities. And in that culture, people aren't tribal, as are the people from the cultures who are the subjects of Fannie Hurst's stories. So part of what is going on in this story is the struggle between Old World tribal culture and New World patriarchal wasp culture. If you belong to the tribal culture, the story reads like a real tragedy and all the pain is believable, palpable. The story makes you cry. But if you belong to the culture that has become dominant, the culture that has generations of history of sending their sons off to war without a whole lot of fuss, then the story seems sentimental, all emotional purple prose, some sort of vulgar emotional burlesque that is embarrassing because it seems to be ignorant of the sexual deviancy its expression makes public.

Fannie Hurst has another powerful mother/son story, "Seven Candles," published first as a short story in 1923 but later incorporated into her novel *Lummo* (1923). In this story, the son is torn between his Orthodox Jewish mother, old Mrs. Palestine, for whom he feels deep love, profound attachment, and deep filial obligation, and young Mrs. Palestine, his Episcopalian wife, a woman with deep contempt for his mother and all that she represents. "Poor Palestine. It was as if a wire cage had curved itself somehow about him, with the egress woven cunningly into the mesh. He was in and the two women with him, making a prison of what, with either of them alone, might have been a nest."

In both of these stories, there is no peace for the son until the mother dies, which she does sooner than her age or health would suggest, knowing full well that her death will bring her son grief immediately, followed by relief and peace.

VIII

There isn't room here to write more than briefly about other mother/son stories I have collected, but besides the already mentioned mother/son stories representing the conflict between tradition and modernity, I will briefly mention some stories that represent other kinds of conflicts.

Stories by women about domestic violence, whether emotional, physical, or intellectual, sometimes focus on the mother/son relationship rather than on the abuser/victim-survivor relationship. Right now (March, 2000) an anti-domestic violence public service announcement is running nightly on Tucson

(where I now live) television. A voice-over tells the story of a woman whose husband began beating her during her first pregnancy who was finally able to negotiate a safe escape from him, saving herself and her two children from her husband's further brutalities. The psa is moving—until she gets to the line that indicates that the most important catalyst in her leaving was learning that little boys who grow up in households where their fathers abuse their mothers are likely to grow up to be abusers themselves.

I wrote in March of 1984 (Koppelman) "I am the mother of a 15-year-old male child. He is not a rapist. He does not molest little girls. He is not a physically abusive person. He avoids fights and over the years he has developed an astonishingly clever routine, or set of routines for "turning aside the harsh word," for defusing emotionally charged situations threatening to escalate to physical violence. It is too soon to know if he will abuse his wife and children. It is too soon to know if he will have a wife and children, or have even a single child, as his mother and his mother's mother did. But he lived with wife and child abuse in his early years and statistics suggest that his chances of becoming a wife and/or child abuser are greater than they would have been otherwise ... I have often asked myself how it felt to the women whose sons were wife and child abusers or rapists. I should think she would be torn between an inability to believe that her son could have done these things, committed these unspeakable acts of violence and violation against a woman who is a woman like herself and the most impotent grief a parent is capable of feeling. I think it must be as profound a loss of the child you loved and nurtured with hope and tenderness as death might be"

I included the 1907 *Atlantic Monthly* story "The Quiet Woman" by Mary Heaton Vorse in *Women in the Trees: U. S. Women's Short Stories About Battering and Resistance, 1839-1994*. Mrs. Wetherill is so distressed by her son's behavior, his way of being-in-the-world which is so like her husband's, that she discourages her dear young friend, the only woman Henry has ever loved, from marrying him when Katherine asks her advice.

Men like Henry don't know how they hurt women like us ... Henry's like his father ... All the Wetherill men are alike. They crush the weaker people around them out of existence; they don't mean to,—they don't even know they do it." While she told what her son was, she had to cry out in the same breath, "It's not his fault."

Mrs. Wetherill tells Katherine that if she were to have married Henry,

"I should have lived over through you all that has been hard in my life. It would have been like having my own at war with my own. I should have had to know that no day of yours went by without its humiliation, without its bruise. I should have known that it was my son's fault. He couldn't help doing it,—and you couldn't help him. You would try and

try and then you would see that neither patience nor submission nor love could change him.”

“They are the men with no woman in them. They are the ones who first created our meanness and weaknesses and then laughed and scolded and sneered at us for being as they make us.” Her voice softened. “They can’t help themselves for their unconscious abuse of power,” she said. (Vorse 1996: 63-64)

Because she loves Katherine, the young woman she has befriended, too much to collaborate in dooming her to her own silenced fate, she collaborates in breaking her son’s heart. She has never before denied him anything.

In the acknowledgments to *Women in the Trees: U. S. Women's Short Stories About Battering and Resistance, 1839-1994*, which I think of as Nathan and my book, I wrote: “I am grateful to my son, Edward Nathan Koppelman Cornillon, who suggested that I make this book instead of just talking about the stories and who shared with me the important personal issues we had to wrestle with then and now.”

When my son asked me to do a book on domestic violence, he reminded me, as he has since he was 15 and I began to worry about those predictive statistics, that violence is always a choice. And that it is not a choice he will make.

I hope Nathan recognizes that book about domestic violence as “our” book and I renew my promise to create “his” book, a collection of stories about mothers and sons. The stories I have discovered in these years of research have been filled with provocative wisdom, distinguished writing, memorable characters, and emotionally eloquence. But they have almost all made me sad. The mother/sons stories have made me sadder than the stories about domestic violence because they have offered even less hope for reconciliation and social transformation. Nevertheless, they have filled my personal journals with bits and pieces of the most exquisite of all jewels—wisdom grounded in love. I want to close by quoting one of these gems from Alice Elliott Dark’s (1993) story “In the Gloaming”:

... she and Laird began to speak. The air around them seemed to crackle with the energy they were creating in their effort to know and be known. Were other people so close, she wondered. She never had been, not to anybody. Certainly she and Martin had never really connected, not soul to soul, and with her friends, no matter how loyal and reliable, she always had a sense of what she could do that would alienate them. Of course, her friends had the option of cutting her off, and Martin could always ask for a divorce, whereas Laird was a captive audience. Parents and children were all captive audiences to each other; in view of this, it was amazing how little comprehension there was of one another’s stories. Everyone stopped paying attention so

early on, thinking they had it all figured out. She recognized that she was as guilty of this as anyone ... Now she had a chance to let go of ... old notions. (272)

- ¹What I'd most like to do is tell Nathan stories. I'd like to write a whole book of Nathan stories. Judith Arcana's (1983) wonderful book *Every Mother's Son* is, essentially, a book of Daniel stories. Judith tells me that her son is okay with it; I wonder if Nathan will be?
- ²A joke making the rounds on the Internet: "There comes a time in every man's life when he must stand up and tell his mother that he is an Adult. This usually happens at around age 45."
- ³I haven't revisited that story in many years. Perhaps I should have looked it up, made certain that I was retelling it correctly before I wrote about it. But instead I told it the way I remember it, because how I remember it is how I have been influenced by it, how I have always thought about it, been frightened and anger and outraged by it.
- ⁴The story of Job was equally appalling and outrageous to me, but, not being a mother/son story, I won't discuss it here.
- ⁵Norman Mailer, commenting on his perception of his portrayal in a documentary about himself, wrote: "For a warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity, husband of battling sweet wives, amiable bar drinker, and much exaggerated street fighter, party giver, hostess insulter—he had on screen in this first documentary a fatal taint, a last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely insupportable—the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. Something in his adenoids gave it away—he had the softness of a man early accustomed to mother-love" (qtd. in Wolfe, 1973: 192).
- ⁶This appears to be changing somewhat, as evidenced by the wonderful collection *Mothers: Twenty Stories of Contemporary Motherhood* edited by Katrina Kenison and Kathleen Hirsch. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).
- ⁷Assuming, of course, that I can discover who owns the copyright, track down the owners, and successfully negotiate for the rights to reprint the story—always a precarious, time-consuming, and not always successful process.
- ⁸Two of Hurst's mother/son stories are "A Boob Spelled Backward" (1918) and "Seven Candles" (1923). The latter was included in the anthology *The Best Short Stories of 1923*. (O'Brien, 1923) and reprinted *Famous Story Magazine*, October 1926.

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