

Paul Simon Money

TERESE MARIE MAILHOT

The fall of Man is my mother's story. I am the child of a woman laid low on this earth. Not that I was born to a green world and trespassed with her, but born into the blood. Maybe her generation was Adam and Eve: radical spiritualism and awakening. Maybe the sixties was of the body and pure. The Indians were corporeal manifestations of the spirit world, and their leather jackets and brown bodies and fists, majestic and holy and connected. It's all bullshit, but maybe. Mom transgressed. She only needed to do it the once, but she did it twice for posterity.

God foreordained Eve's transgression. He is all knowing. He knew Eve was hungry, and he knew the serpent was around, and he knew that Man would shine brighter in heaven after the fall. He knew he'd give up his only son to show mercy. Had Eve stayed in her confines, there wouldn't be an incarnation of Christ. To ascend there must be a dark, a dissention. Christianity's first female martyr was a bad mom. Perpetua tore her child from her breast so she could have her own intestines pulled out by a lion. Who does that?

Salvador was serving time for murder when he wrote an article for a radical Indian newspaper. He talked about the binding vices of colonialism and imperialism, and Puerto Rico. He signed off, "¡Que viva Wounded Knee!" They corresponded: my mother from her island, which was bordered by two channels of the Fraser River; Salvador from a box in Attica. She left Seabird Island, her children, and her mother Little Bird for New York. Paul Simon would tell it slant in the white ways of provocation and sentimentality.

Mom worked for Xyolhmeylh Child & Family Services, a group home for Native teens. They take kids being neglected and abused, and try to place them with Native homes. She worked three-day-long shifts keeping teenagers off the streets. I went to work with her sometimes and watched how she connected with the girls. Their eyes would dart and Mom would get out a board game and tell them they could have a soda. "Stay," she said. They did every time, even when their jackets were on and they wanted to see the other side of the door.

Sometimes Mom came home with lice. Sometimes she worked overtime and left us alone for days. Before she went, she bought groceries for the week. We feasted on Hot Pockets and

frozen pizzas and juice boxes and No Name chips that first day and then starved the rest. Mom came home to a house covered in wrappers and dirty cups, and two hungry kids. We never went to school, so our lives were spent waiting. Mom drove us into town, parked at the Chevron, and gave us five dollars. A bruised banana and peanut butter crackers were transubstantiated into the body. I’ve always had the human condition of hunger, always hungry. I used to babysit for chips and Snickers. My oldest sister took advantage of that in her twenties. She was a young mother who needed a beer, a man—to leave. Her eyes were like Eve’s at the gates of the garden. She was clothed and ashamed.

We were teenagers, my brother and I, already acclimated to my mother’s way: do good for others first. We didn’t celebrate Christmas when she worked at a homeless shelter in Vancouver. I asked her to help make cranes for a Veteran’s Day project in grade three and she told me symbolic gestures weren’t necessary. We couldn’t object to her, not in her exhaustion to be just. My oldest brother and older sister moved out when they were young.

When Paul Simon called I was watching TV on the couch. Our landline was screwed into the old seventies wood panel of our kitchen wall. I was ashamed of the house. The room was barren. There was an orange, thrift shop dinette set, and a shrine on our counter for Stevie Ray Vaughan. It was a picture of him surrounded by barks and sage my mother picked, with red ties, and turquoise jewelry. The bracelets and rings were gifts from my uncle Lyle, a jeweler who idolized Elvis and wore a bouffant, until old age turned it into a less voluminous side part.

My mother was in the bath. Paul Simon’s voice was timid. He asked for Mom. I yelled to her that Paul was on the line. Mom told me to keep him on the phone while I heard her body emerge from the wet.

“How old are you?” Simon asked.

“I’m ten. What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m an artist,” he said.

I told him that was nice and asked him what kind of art. He laughed.

My mother, wrapped in a towel, ripped the phone from my hand. She carried on several conversations like this. I began to suspect they were flirting when I went with Mom to the library to look up if Simon had a wife. I didn’t want Paul Simon to be my new father. I saw an album cover with him on it and grimaced. He wore turtlenecks. He was pasty. He had beady eyes.

“He’s married to some red-head, I think. White woman,” Mom said. We had seen some news clippings and rented a biography. He was a god, and not the personalized one of benevolence, but the type who could take things away.

She sent him every letter between herself and Salvador Argon. I had read the letters in our basement. There were images of horses and dirt and bodies, and nothing of love until it became all about love. Simon was inspired by Salvador’s plight. While Mother wanted to share their turmoil, and all the penned letters that showed intellectuality, Paul was turning the work into a Broadway play. Mother’s narrative was drowned in Simon’s version of it all, and nowhere was Sal’s story. He was dead.

We became self-important Indians with every call. Mom floated around the house after three-day shifts and became happy. After years of writing maniacally in her room, someone was finally using her words. A camera crew came to interview Mom. When the film came out, a narrator with a rich English accent said, “Paul Simon and his team researched every detail of the story. They even located Wahzinak. She offered Paul Simon her intimate memories of Sal’s character.”

“He was much more beautiful in real life,” my mother said. “He just illuminated. His prose was phenomenal. He could talk about the prison life. He could talk about his poverty. People come along and they grace your life, and they make it extraordinary.”

After the interview my mother cried into the phone and she didn’t speak to us. She didn’t sit at the table; she sat on the floor. I watched her body shake. Maybe it was having cameras in our rotting home. It was infested with mold and ladybugs and old furniture we didn’t wear down ourselves. Maybe that’s my shame talking. Maybe it was that Indians are at a ripe age when they’re fifty, and Mother was there. Maybe it was that Salvador was kind.

She met a serpent in prison who was my father. The same provocation and sentimentality drew her in, and he wasn’t kind. The legend is that he was banished from the house after many transgressions, and that we all waited by the door with weapons in case he came back, even me, a baby then, holding a hammer or a bat or a broom or a doll. The story has shifted because it’s not funny anymore.

Simon gave us a choice: American dollars or a family trip to New York. Julia Roberts attended the opening. A woman from *Grey’s Anatomy* played my mom. We missed the opportunity to see them to buy school clothes. Mom spent the rest on bills, food, and things.

The play reduced Mom down to an “Indian hippie chick,” as *Variety*’s Greg Evans called her. A “prison groupie,” and I had only known her as an outreach worker. Prison was part of that, getting them to write or draw, to find sanity in isolation. I’m trying not to make excuses, because she did fall. It’s in the text and on my mind every day how she fell. It could be like Eve. The old texts say we get menses for the fall, feel pain for the fall. God couldn’t watch it; he sent us his boy, but I doubt he watched his son die. I think he just waited for him on the other side.

One of my mother’s old friends, Richard, wrote about her breasts and Salvador’s womanizing for his non-fiction book. He wrote with provocation and sentimentality while the iron was hot. Dick flew from California to Seabird to show Mom the book. He told me about his Jeep and that he would take me to the city someday, and Mom grew suspicious. He handed her the book after tea. She went to her room, came out, and told him to leave. Mother cried. I found the book underneath her bed and understood the contents like Hildegard, a prophet without an education. Her heart was inflamed and she knew the scriptures and the gospel. She didn’t understand the tenses or the division of syllables, but she could read the pain.

The pain was a process to understanding. Men were born to hurt my mother in the flesh and the text, and she was my savior. The language was always wrong. Even in this account, I can’t convey the pulse of her. In her sleep I couldn’t turn away, in love with her heavy breathing. She rarely slept, but, when she did, it was a hibernation. Her small palms were red with heat. She always fell asleep with a book on her chest. It was the illumination of living light. I can feel her, formless to me now, and more god than our deity X:als or Creator.

Mom took us to the Abbotsford Mall and handed us each five hundred dollars. She got “Stevie Ray Vaughan” embroidered on the back of a raincoat at a sports store. Her old jacket had ‘Tupac’ on the back, and had been worn down by protests and hikes through the valley to pick Devil’s Club shoots. I walked to the corridor in the mall to the bathroom and stayed by the drinking fountain, knowing something was wrong. When it was time to convene I bought a purple Adidas tracksuit and runners for school.

On the drive home I asked her if she wanted to be in New York. She told me she thought about leaving every day, but life wasn’t like that. I remembered the car smelling like McDonald’s French fries, and Vaughan’s cover of *Little Wing* played. I wanted to confront Paul

myself, to bruise his art with the idea that a white man can never know us. But how can I condemn what he wrote, when she smiled for months one year?

In the root of my mind, which is contained like my old house and formed just so, I see her laying down against the concrete with my father standing above her. I walk backwards up the steps, knowing my feet like I never did. When I was six I watched a lot. Do I forgive my mother for him? We're all more human for the fall, and resentful when we're at our worst. There's a meaning beneath it all that knows everything before it happens and still will let it be. We shine brighter in heaven. She is formless to me now beneath the currents of daily operations.

I can pull you up, Mom. Between you and I, being lukewarm about you is the only sin I forbid. My words lay still like shadows on the page, but they are better than nothing. Better than your formless looming, and the guilt I carry, and the dead men who left you. I often feel ripped from your chest; only *I'm* on my way to the lions. On earth you can be the shadow these words cast. Is this conjuring and am I forgiven? I lament and lament the beginning until the end, where your red hands are waiting.