

## DAVID FLEMING

*The Big Tent*, 2010  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in



## NOVE MEYERS

### Carnival Therapy

The day we kidnapped  
my elderly mother

**F**or some people, dying once just isn't enough. How does one write an obituary for a woman whose life spanned most of the twentieth century, from the demise of the horse and buggy to the exploration of the stars? Her life saw the national angst of the Great Depression and the most horrific conflagration the human race has had the misfortune to visit upon itself. She first opened her eyes the year that women got the vote and last closed them during Obama's presidency. This is not to overlook the fact that she was born in a circus, named after an elephant, and orphaned at sixteen with three younger siblings to raise by herself.

When the phone rang at 2:45 A.M., I knew what I was going to hear. Two days previously, she had suffered another heart attack, and I had informed the surgeon that it was her wish that no extraordinary procedures be taken. It was the last in a chain of events that began when she was hit by a car five years earlier. Until then, she had seemingly defied aging, and most of her children half expected her to outlive us all. We debated as to which grandchild would take care of her after we were all gone. She was a "vegan," which seems to mean, a "vegetarian with an attitude"—eschewing eating anything that "ever had a mother or a face." Aside from the embarrassment it caused us at restaurants, this stood her in good stead, health-wise. But, the auto accident was followed by a heart attack, the loss of her independence, and later on, a broken hip, from which she was unable to recover. I often described my mother to strangers as someone "who began where eccentric leaves off," so it's difficult to know just when the dementia started.

After speaking with the hospital, I tried to go back to bed and let what I needed to do wait until morning; but I couldn't sleep and got back up to the stillness of the night. Hence the obituary. In the quiet and darkness, I opened my computer and watched the obit write itself. The lady at the newspaper told me that it was one of the best she had ever read. I insisted that it include a photo of Maxine being held aloft in the trunk of her namesake elephant.

She had claustrophobia and did not want to be buried. Like my father before her, she wanted her body donated to medical research and had made the arrangements when he'd died some thirty-five years earlier. In the morning,

# *As miles of Interstate 5 receded behind us, Mother's nearly ninety years unfolded before us.*

I made two calls, and it was done. Another dozen or so calls to friends and family, and it was over. No burial, no service, no flowers. Over.

Except for the memories.

I should point out that this wasn't the first time my mother had died. In fairness to her kids, we had tried to give her a proper send-off a year and a half previously.

After she'd broken her hip, we'd gotten her a place in an assisted living residence a couple of miles from where her sister lived—the one she had raised from the time she was a toddler, so she was more daughter than sister. The only way you could tell that they were sisters was when they fought with one another. Sisters can fight like cats and dogs. A furious tangle and then it's over. A few minutes later they are playing well again together, even in their senior years. Mother-and-daughter fights, though, seem to simmer and linger, a protracted battle rather than a frequent skirmish.

She'd been there for about a year when I got the phone call. "This is Three Rivers Hospital. Is this Mr. Meyers?"

"Yes, it is."

"Are you Maxine Meyers's son?"

Again, "Yes."

"Your mother has been here in the hospital for the last week. She has lost her ability to swallow and can no longer eat. Can you come and meet with us?"

My mother was dying because she could no longer eat. Of all the ways I might have imagined this lady meeting her demise, this was not one. Besides being born in the circus and orphaned during the Great Depression, she had also built navy ships as a "Rosie the Riveter" during the Second World War and had raised six, nine, or a dozen children, depending on whom you counted. Two years earlier,

she had been photographed on a cruise ship, climbing the rock wall. When faced with a challenge, she'd always said, "Take a chance; Columbus did."

I called all my siblings, and soon my daughter, Susan, and I began the five-hundred-mile journey south to Grants Pass, Oregon. We took turns driving. And reminiscing. As miles of Interstate 5 receded behind us, Mother's nearly ninety years unfolded before us. The freeway may have been mostly straight, but memory lane was not.

From the time she was four years old, my mother had performed in her parents' circus. Her solo act was the Rolling Globe, standing atop and maneuvering a wooden ball larger than she was up an inclined ramp to the delight of the crowd. But the real scene stealer was mother/daughter act known as the Iron Jaw. Her mother, Dollie May, would hang from a trapeze bar at the top of the tent holding the "jaw," a device made from wood and leather, between her teeth. Her tiny daughter was strapped into the harness part and spun around while her mother held her in clenched teeth. That act was the hit of the circus—until the day she slipped from her mother's grasp high above the sawdust floor.

Her parents both died during the Depression when she was just sixteen. Her older brother got the insurance check. She got her two younger siblings, aged two and four. "What's a girl to do?" She opened a little tavern, a honky-tonk she called it, to support herself and her siblings. She was selling beer to the CCC boys before she herself was legally old enough to drink.

One of Susan's first memories of her grandmother was a weeklong visit when she was six years old: her first solo airplane ride. When we picked her up at the airport on her return, she was carrying a shoebox—but her grandmother had not bought her some new shoes. The box contained a live baby chicken that my mother had helped her smuggle onto the plane. Because it was her seatmate at thirty thousand feet, they'd decided to call it her "high flyin' chicken."

By the time we reached Grants Pass, it was late, so we stayed at a motel for what was left of the night. By mid-morning the next day, we'd joined several of my siblings for breakfast before heading to the hospital. Along the way, I noticed a fairground, populated with all the usual carnival rides and a sign announcing that it was the last day of the Josephine County Fair.

After "visiting" Mother, who by now was in a semicomatose state, drifting in and out of partial consciousness, we met with the medical staff in one of the hospital's waiting rooms. One of the physicians who had been treating mother was joined by two of her nurses and the occupational therapist. "Your mother," they told us, "has lost her ability to swallow and therefore cannot eat and is unable to take in nutrition. We are hydrating her, of course, through an IV. We inserted a feeding tube into her abdomen through her nose. She has pulled it out—twice. She has a DNR [Do Not Resuscitate order] in her file." Then the doctor told us that they saw no point in trying to reinsert the feeding tube a third time. And, at ninety pounds, Mother would not survive long.

For the next half hour, we all asked them questions; the same ones at first. "How can someone lose their ability to swallow? How can a body forget how to eat?" And then later, "What else can be done?"

"We don't know exactly why she can't swallow," explained the occupational therapist who had been working with Mother. The physician suggested that she may have had a stroke or, more likely, a series of small strokes that were undetectable. But really, they had no answer.

To our second question, it was one of the nurses who spoke up. "There are really only two options. We can surgically insert a permanent feeding tube directly into her stomach attached to an external pump that will provide nourishment to her, indefinitely. For the rest of her life, she will be confined to a hospital bed, elevated to a constant thirty-degree angle. Usually what happens is that pneumonia eventually takes the patient. The second alternative," she said, her voice dropping, "is that you can let her go now. Sometimes people last for a couple of weeks, but with your mother's size, she'll probably live a week or less. With morphine, it's relatively painless. There are many worse ways to die."

The room was quiet. No one spoke. Finally, I thanked the medical team for their care and honesty and told them we would have a family discussion and let them know our decision.

My aunt, Mother's daughter/sister, pleaded for us to do everything we could to keep her alive. The four of her six children present felt that the feeding tube option was a slow death sentence that we couldn't condone. I called

my two siblings who were not present. One of them agreed with the rest of his siblings. The other, after hearing what we were considering, screamed into the phone: "Mother killer! You want to kill our mother. You want to starve her to death." This opened a rift that has yet to completely heal, nearly a decade later.

The vote was five to two, and most of the nonvoters, the nieces, nephews, and grandchildren, seemed to concur. We made the decision to transport her to my sister's home and, with the help of hospice and morphine, let her go, surrounded by friends and family. The physicians thought she might have a couple of lucid days to receive visitors before she slipped away. As the administrator of mother's affairs, it was my burden to make the final decision.

After informing the medical staff of our wishes, the family (there were about twenty of us there by this time) asked if we could take her outside on a portable gurney to get some sun.

Of course, that was only our alibi.

We rolled her four blocks through the city streets and across the state highway to the county fair. Even we didn't try to put her, in her semicomatose state, on any of the rides. She perked up enough to ask us if the carnival rides were part of Larry's show, meaning a friend of hers who had owned a carnival. We said it could be but no one mentioned that Larry had died a few years before, making his own decision to preempt the work of cancer. We did get her face painted with a pretty blue butterfly and won her a teddy bear. Then there were the orange sherbet Dippin' Dots, a type of ice cream that comes in BB-size spheres, frozen much colder than regular ice cream. Introduced twenty years ago as the future of ice cream, it has been relegated to the side show of fairs and tourist attractions. I bought a cup and tried to spoon some in her. She perked up a bit and some of us thought we even saw her swallowing. But it simply cooled her tongue. When we returned to the hospital, four hours later, the relieved staff learned what we had done. They officially told us that we had violated hospital policy but then, with a glint in their eyes, said, "We're glad you did."

Traci, my sister, had left for her home in the Sierra Nevada foothills to meet with hospice staff and have a hospital bed delivered to her living room for the last few days of Mother's life. She called what friends Mother had not outlived and invited them to come and say goodbye.

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It was early Monday morning when my daughter, Susan, and I put Mother in the front reclining passenger seat of Susan’s Honda and began the four-hundred-mile journey south to my sister’s home. We’d declined the hospital’s offer of an ambulance trip and the accompanying \$2,500 charge. To their concern about our psychological trauma should she die en route, we pointed out that she would be dying among loved ones.

The hospital had provided a prescription for some medication for Mother’s heart, to be filled at the local pharmacy. When I presented the paper to the pharmacist, he informed me that it was not covered by Mother’s insurance, and the cost for a week’s dosage was \$425. It was then that I noticed that the medication was to be “taken by mouth.” We politely declined filling the prescription and drove off.

The trip was uneventful for the first forty miles, and we safely crossed into California with a living, just barely, grandmother, knowing that if she failed to reach our destination, there would be no question of violating legalities regarding transporting bodies across state lines.

We stopped in Yreka to grab a sandwich at Jared’s diet salvation. I stayed in the car with my mother while Susan got the sandwiches, roast beef for me and a veggie for herself. About two bites in, I heard this disembodied voice from the shotgun seat ask, “What are you eating?”

Startled, Susan answered, “A veg . . . veggie sandwich from Subway.”

“I want some,” croaked the voice.

It was fortunate for my hungry daughter that she had ordered a double-size sub because half a sandwich later, my mother was returning to full form. During the next five hours, we made several other command stops at McDonald’s for fries, an apple pie, and a Coke: items that seemed to have inexplicably moved into the health-food category. Before we got to my sister’s place, Mother’s voice—and now unmistakable dementia—had fully returned as we answered the same question countless times about where we were going and what some unseen creatures (to us) were doing on the car’s windshield. For Susan, in the driver’s seat, it was just too much. Perhaps it was the long drive, or my mother’s disposition after regaining her color, or the realization over a few hundred miles that the grandmother whom she loved was gone, even though she continued to eat and speak. Arriving at my sister’s home, Susan tumbled from the car and fell sobbing into her aunt’s arms, momentarily forgetting that my mother and I were still sitting in her car.

We never did use the morphine, although several of us thought about it—for ourselves. My mother, you see, was not what you would call easy to get along with. She wasn’t in Traci’s house an hour before she was complaining and ordering everyone around.

So, that was one time my mother died before she died. The other way my mother “died” was in her mind. *Tabula rasa*, nature or nurture, a debate perhaps without conclusion. But it’s a happy debate. Regardless of where and how it all comes from, most of us turn out pretty much okay. We learn to walk and talk. The little dictators we start out as usually grow up into at least semirespectable citizens. We are persons. Some of us invent rockets, others create novels, and someone had to be responsible for that damn plastic packaging that you need a power saw to open. We become, and we create, and the world continues to go around.

But sometimes, far too often, it spins backward. We un-become. We begin to forget. We forget. And then we forget that we have forgotten. Whether we are who we are from nature or nurture, it all unravels. Adults become infants and their children become their parents in this great act of un-becoming. It is a terror, whether we be victim or

onlooker. Is this some cosmic joke, a personality with an expiration date?

Religionists assure us that it all sorts itself out in heaven. While not explicated in their scriptures, the presumption seems to be that if paradise presents us with beach-bound bodies, then Einsteinian brains must accompany. But what if not? What if that other scripture is more accurate? “Remember, from dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return.”

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### The Obituary

Maxine “Mac” Richards Meyers

Died peacefully on October 15, 2010.

A member of the “Greatest Generation” that lived through the Great Depression and World War II, Mac’s colorful life spanned most of the twentieth century. She was born in a circus owned by her parents in San Antonio, Texas (I’m a TEXAN), on August 11, 1920. An early family photograph shows her with the elephant Maxine, named after her (or vice versa). Orphaned at sixteen, Mac raised her first family, her three younger siblings, by herself, supporting them by operating a “honky-tonk” selling beer to the CCC crews building Lake Travis in Austin, Texas. Mac was also a war bride. In 1942 she married one of those CCC boys, Nove Meyers, just before he joined the U.S. Army to serve in the Pacific theater. While “Her Love” was overseas, Mac assisted the war effort as a “Rosie the Riveter” building “Liberty Ships” in Richmond, California. While raising a family of six of her own children, Mac worked as a photographer, “shooting” for both the *Fairfield Daily Republic* and the *Vallejo Times-Herald*. Mac was preceded in death by her husband, Nove, her three brothers, and one grandson. She is survived by her sister, Bonnie Elwood; her sons Nove, Von, Martyn, Guy, and Scott and her daughter Traci Meyers; as well as ten grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and many more dear friends and loved ones. Along with her husband, Mac has donated her remains to UC Davis for the benefit of medical research. Mac requested that no funeral services be held for her. She said, “If you want to do something nice for me, do it while I’m alive.” Honoring her wishes, her family managed to have two special outings in the year before she died, a short

cruise with her children and grandchildren and a hospital escape on a gurney to see her last circus. In lieu of flowers or other remembrances, it would please Mac if anyone reading this would find a way to do something nice for someone they cherish. Pass it on.

**Nove Meyers** is recently retired from several careers including being an “almost” priest, an educator, and the owner of several small businesses. His new “career” is reflecting on and writing about numerous “truth is stranger than fiction” experiences in his life; in particular he is working on a memoir about growing up in a circus/carnival family while studying to be a Catholic priest. He is most pleased when his stories are able to reflect a blend of humor and pathos.