

Chapter 7. My Amazing Mother

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Return to the Sea

Leslie DeLuca Martin

My mother sits by the sea, tracing circles in the sand with a translucent shell as we talk. The autumn morning still holds the warmth of summer; sunlight glints off frothy waves. This is how I love to picture her, happy and serene on the beach of her Atlantic City childhood. We had returned together to the Jersey shore, her final visit, some thirty years ago.

Throughout her youth, when the high tide receded each day, she rode horseback there on the hard-packed sand. She swam out beyond the breakers, her strokes graceful and long. In wintertime, she walked along the deserted shore, tossing driftwood to her Scottish terrier, Thrifty. Those were the glory days of Atlantic City, the resort famed for its oceanfront setting and stately boardwalk. The once elegant beachside house, where my mother grew up in the 1920s, with its awnings and a welcoming front porch, still stands. It has long been vacant though, punished by hurricanes and corrosive salt air.

Marriage in the late 1930s took her to another home by the Atlantic, this one facing Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana, and then to Coconut Grove, Florida, followed by several decades on Long Island's North Shore. A final move to California took my parents inland, south of San Francisco. But my mother dreamed of a house by the sea. She'd name it, she said, Casa Del Mar, a combination of her maiden and married names – DeLuca and Martin.

Memories of her life by the ocean never left her, nor did her yearning to live again by the sea, not even when Alzheimer's disease stifled all else.

Months before her death, with the past her only present, she imagined herself back in the house by the Atlantic. She talked of summer weekends, when relatives wended their way from steamy Philadelphia for refuge by the shore. Copious meals featured mussels my great grandmother plied from the rocks, dandelions gathered in her apron for salad, platters of pungent *formaggi*, and red wine my grandfather crafted in his clandestine cellar workshop. Vivid in my mother's mind were those long-ago nights when three generations of DeLucas and Scaellas congregated

on the front porch, accordion-pleated fans batting back in forth in rhythm to the music of her father's mandolin. She saw once more the striped awnings fluttering in the ocean breeze.

I carried my mother's dream forward for her. After her death, with the money she'd left me, I purchased a house overlooking the Pacific, in the Northern California community of The Sea Ranch. On my first morning there, I walked out to the bluff just beyond my deck. A soft breeze whirred through the tall grasses, but the ocean below was calm. I opened the jar holding my mother's ashes and tossed them toward the sea. Caught in the luminous autumn light, they glittered ever so briefly, then vanished.

Just days after that Sea Ranch morning, I learned the former name of the coastal community: Rancho Del Mar.

Leslie DeLuca Martin, a former travel-and-wine editor with Hearst Magazines, is a lecturer of French at UC Berkeley. She has written extensively of her life in Paris and southwestern France.



Leslie's mother, Teresa DeLuca Martin, (1944)
[Photo by permission]



Leslie DeLuca Martin in (2014)
[Photo credit: Nancy Rubin]

My Mother

Kaye Sykes Williams

The Ridge is a rural community located in Covington County Mississippi. The residents are all African American, and most can trace their lineage back to when the slaves were freed after the Civil War. They tend to carefully follow the pattern of their ancestors as their example of how to live a fulfilling life. Families are unadorned and minimalists; their intention is to live an honest and clean life, working their modest farms.

During the early 1900s there were several families that had the courage to live a life of hope. They envisioned a time and place in America where they could obtain an education, participate in the political process, gain employment on a level where they could support their families, and also have job satisfaction. A common thread among these families was unwavering faith in the Lord that he would see them through their present state and would bless their children. So, with each baby born, parents would privately select the family they hoped their children would marry into when they became of age. This practice perpetuated innocence and folksiness among the residents in the community. Heirs to a few acres of land, this is how life was for my mother's family on The Ridge.

My mother, Laura Dean Lucas Sykes, was born on The Ridge in 1937. She married my father, Q.V. Sykes, when she was just 19 years old. They had three children in the first five years of their marriage and eventually moved to Meridian, MS. Mama's joy was caring for us and supporting my father as he worked as a teacher, coach, and referee.

Once we became school age, my mother acted upon her strong desire to contribute to our often-depleted budget. She had a flair for coordinating colors, fabrics and designs and found pleasure in making clothes for her family. So she took a giant leap and applied for a job in the alterations department at a store downtown. This was the beginning of a thirty-year career in retail.

My father had six months remaining in his second term as Supervisor of Lauderdale County at his death. Married for forty-six years, at sixty-five years old my mother's focus shifted to completing his term. Her goal was to fulfill the remaining promises that he made to the constituents in his district.

During the last twelve years, Mama has consistently supported the young people in her community. She directed youth programs at New Hope Baptist Church, where she has been a member for fifty-two years. She has been involved in fund raising for the high school baseball team, and she has worked tirelessly raising funds for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship Committee. Making sure the baseball team has the equipment necessary to ensure players' safety and presenting scholarships to deserving high school graduates has brought her immeasurable joy.

Mama continues to care deeply for her community. She supports efforts that will bring about peace and understanding. She also campaigns for candidates that she feels will best represent the interest of all people.

While Mama has deviated considerably from her upbringing of bare and unadorned, the thread of loving God, family and community are recognizable in her daily life. She has a passion for

decorating her home and is overjoyed when friends and family are over for celebrations. She spends a few hours each day making necklaces to share with just about everyone she knows. Her personal indulgence is fashion. Mama has a special way of coordinating her accessories, shoes, handbags, and clothes to create a look that is uniquely hers. My mother is radiant, she is sophisticated and she is so elaborate in everything that she does.

My brother, sister, and I treasure the love and support that Mama lavishes upon us. All three of her grandchildren are touched in a special way by her manner of showing them her pride and joy in their lives. Her encouraging words, her lovely smile, and the kindness in her voice continues to chase away any sadness and disappointments that we experience. I attempt to live my life in such a way to have the same impact on my children. I am so inspired when I hear her say, "I am blessed, and The Lord has been faithful."

Kaye Sykes Williams and her husband, Jack, live in the East Bay, near San Francisco, where Kaye is an account manager for a State Farm Agent. They have two college age children.



Kaye and her mother, Laura Dean Lucas Sykes (2014)
[Photo by permission]

Ruth Hunter's Story

Sue Leonard

When I read Marge Lasky's call for submissions of "personal narratives about how older women are doing things that their mothers' generation might never have considered," I realized I had nothing to write on the topic. I may be an "older woman" (seventy-five), but I have done nothing my mother has not already done. Marriage. Child(ren). Divorce. Teaching. Marching for causes. Getting arrested for causes. Travelling for causes (South Africa, Nicaragua, Venezuela). Editing an online magazine. So, I forwarded Marge's email to my mother and suggested she choose one of the many events of her (older) life to write up. Here is Ruth Hunter's story:

"This is a narrative from an older woman (ninety-eight in July). The narrative occurs in Guatemala during its turbulent years [the 1980s] where police controlled the lives of those living in Central America.

College students with leftist leaning ideas mysteriously disappeared. (Snatched from their beds and never seen again.)

Their mothers staged a protest holding a picture of their son or daughter. I joined them, also holding a picture of one of the missing college students.

A chill convulsed me when I looked up into the police guns pointing at the bereaved mothers and, of course, myself. This dramatic event was one in many during my many travels in Central America during my younger [seventies] and more adventurous days.”

My mother was the middle child of five with a father who had fled Russia in 1905 and fiercely supported the Soviet Union. Although a troublemaker as a child, she always sought to please him. I think when the world around her turned radical, especially after she moved to Berkeley, she caught the spirit, his spirit.

For forty-five years, Sue Leonard taught every variety of history except American, mostly at independent high schools for girls — with a brief stint in a poverty program school for pregnant teens in Bedford Stuyvesant. In the mid-nineties she and her late husband John Leonard were co-editors of the Books and Arts section of the Nation magazine. She lives in New York City and is currently the editor of Persimmon Tree, an online magazine of the arts by women over sixty, www.persimmontree.org.

Ruth Hunter retired from teaching social studies to middle-schoolers in northern California to create beautiful objects out of rocks and/ or stained glass. Between and after her rock shows, she pursued social justice through membership in WILPF [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom] and the Raging Grannies. She has marched, sat in (most famously at the WTO[World Trade Organization] protests in Seattle in 1999), travelled to support left-wing governments and written extensively about all her activities. Ruth lives independently in Santa Cruz with her feisty dog, Charlie.



Ruth Hunter (2011)
[Photo by permission]

A Short Story about a Little Vietnamese Lady

Van Pham

Ngan Vu was born in May 1935 in Kien An, an urban area of District Hai Phong, northern Vietnam. She grew up in a very traditional and conservative family with three other siblings and six half-brothers and -sisters. Her loving father had high status in the society. Her mother was a traditional Vietnamese lady who held traditional virtues by dutifully following many Vietnamese traditions, such as chewing betel, dyeing her teeth black, and wearing only traditional outfits. Her father had four wives (polygamy was legal and common in Vietnam during those days). Although Ngan admired many of her Vietnamese customs and traditions, she often wonders how her father was able to manage conflicts among his wives. Most of all, she is thankful that she did not have to be a part of a polygynous union.

Since the French had colonized Vietnam in the mid-1850s, Vietnamese culture was also influenced and westernized by the early twentieth century. It was evident that traditional values were blended with Western trends by this time. Most of the social changes were much criticized. Women who followed the changes were considered to be of easy virtue. Conflicts escalated between the older generation and the younger one, the foreign and the traditional, the urban and the rural. Growing up in such a transitional society, Ngan, like many others of the younger generation, was more open-minded and welcomed some of the social transformations. She preferred wide-legged pants and modern *áo dài* (Vietnamese national tunic dress) over the conventional skirts, traditional outfits (*áo dài* or *áo tứ thân*) her mother always wore. She prefers the fashionable European hair styles (hair perming or letting it down) over the traditional hair style (winding the hair with a cloth string to form a small pony tail arranged on one side of the head).

Ngan does not like betel chewing. This thousand-year-old Vietnamese custom involves folding betel leaves in different ways and wrapping a piece of dry areca nut inside. Betel leaves and areca nuts are symbols of love and marriage in the Vietnamese society. They are two of the most essential items that must be present in every wedding ceremony. Chewing the mixture is also a good remedy against bad breath. However, Ngan could never tolerate the distinct flavor of the mixture. She also finds it unattractive and amusing to have red-stained lips.

Another Vietnamese tradition Ngan did not follow as her mother did was tooth-blackening. While this custom is often misunderstood as the result of betel chewing (which would convey only stains of brownish color), tooth-blackening is instead the result of a ritual, a deliberate lacquering process.

In the 1900s, having lacquered teeth was a sign of beauty and a tooth-decay preventive. There were also strong cultural and religious beliefs that long, white teeth belong to demons and animals. However, the process of blackening teeth is not an easy one and somewhat painful due

to the ingredients used to rinse and sanitize the mouth (lemon juice, fish sauce and saline solution) and to make the dye (potato plant and shellac).

Ngan still remembers watching her older cousins and her oldest sister enduring the pain during the process. It scared her so much that she decided never to dye her teeth black. Fortunately, her family migrated to South Vietnam in 1954 where tooth blackening is much less common. She was able keep her white and beautiful teeth.

In 1954, after the end of the First Indochina War, Ngan's father knew they would not be safe in communist North Vietnam. He decided to migrate with his family to the South through Operation Passage to Freedom. They built new roots in Saigon. Ngan got married on November 22, 1963. She and her husband had five children (two sons and three daughters). After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, life proved to be very difficult. Ngan's husband and their sons joined the two million boat people and fled Vietnam in 1979. After spending a year at a refugee camp in Indonesia, they arrived at the United States. After settling in Southern California and as soon as he could, Ngan's husband registered his wife and daughters, who still were in Saigon, with the ODP (Orderly Departure Program). In May 1986, after seven years of being apart, their family was reunited. Today, Ngan and her husband have ten grandchildren and currently live in Huntington Beach, California. Van Pham is one of their daughters.



Ngan [third from left] and Van, [second from right] (2013)
[Photo by permission]

I Never Did Learn to Speak Afrikaans

Virginia Howard Mullan

After my husband died I felt like a fifth wheel when my friends and their husbands would invite me out or to their home for dinner and cards. I was sixty-one. Everyone's advice at the time was to wait at least a year before doing anything big. So I waited. While I waited, I traveled to New Zealand and rode a chair lift up Coronet Peak. I went heli-hiking in the Canadian Rockies and found wolverine and bear tracks. I rode a camel in Egypt and walked along the Great Wall in China. My kids and I went river rafting in Northern California and took a cruise up the Inland Passage. I enjoyed all the traveling, but was wistful for the small town feel of daily life I had experienced growing up in La Mesa, California during the 1920s and 30s. I was finished waiting.

That is when I decided to move to Homer, Alaska. I had traveled there with my husband a few times and loved the town. I subscribed to the *Homer News* and although no one in Homer knew who I was, I felt as though I knew some of them. So at age sixty-nine I sold my home, told my grown children good-bye and drove up the Alcan Highway.

I am glad I took a chance on Homer. I bought a condo and for the first time in my life I furnished my space without consideration for my mother, my husband, or my children.

I began volunteering at the Pratt Museum and the Homer Public Library. Walking to "work" in the snow during the winter was exhilarating, especially after being raised in La Mesa, which is adjacent to San Diego. La Mesa's range of annual precipitation or temperature is very small, especially compared to Homer! The people of Homer welcomed me, and I got a kick out of the lack of formal attire. I even enjoyed picking up the mail. Everyone was friendly and kind, saying, "Hello."

My family and I have always played cards, so when I heard that there was bridge on Thursdays at the senior center, I gave it a try. It was there, during my seventy-second year, that I met a man from South Africa and fell in love. I learned to "set net" and crab while continuing with my volunteer work. We had a favorite B & B near Anchorage with a hot tub. When I was seventy-three and he was sixty-eight we had a wonderful wedding at the Elks Club surrounded by friends, new and old, and family. Our marriage lasted eighteen years, longer than many people's first. During those eighteen years I traveled for the first time to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, and Rome. Not with an organized company tour, but with my husband, visiting his friends and relatives, staying in their homes and orchards; driving a borrowed car on the left side of the road. It was a decade of firsts: tasting ostrich steak, losing three rand gaming in Jeffrey's Bay, seeing my first wild baboons & elephants, and enjoying Victoria and Augrabies Falls.

The second-to-last time I drove the entire Alcan Highway I was seventy-eight. We were traveling south and I rode in the back of a Nissan pick-up truck all the way to Northern California. The sixty-five-year-old gal who was traveling with my husband and me wasn't in as good health as we were, so she sat up front. It was all right though; I had a couple of good books on the way down, and, I got to ride shot-gun on the way back home.

This story about Virginia's mom, Judy Howard Strydom, is told in the first person to capture a more personal feel. Virginia Howard Mullan loves learning, teaching, and creating. She was a public school teacher for over thirty years. A volleyball coach, and a 4-H project and community leader for many years, she loves being "involved." Virginia's poetry has been published in several journals, she wrote a book about teaching Hyper Text Markup Language (html) to kids, and a children's book entitled, The Mikatoo about appreciating what surrounds us. She is married to a wonderful man named Mike and has two grown children whom she adores.



Judy Howard Strydom (1981)
[Photo by permission]



Virginia Mullan and her mother, Judy, in 2011
[Photos by permission]