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Thin Blood

Barbara Ridley

A woman in my writing group said: “Blood is always thicker than water.”

She objected to my World War II protagonist appearing more concerned about the fate of her close friends than her brother. That just wasn’t plausible, she said.

There were other suggestions from the group, of course. I made revisions. Many revisions. And I placed more emphasis on my character’s relationship with her brother. If one reader found it troubling, probably others would too.

But her comment niggled at me like a loose tooth. That was three years ago. I never forgot it. Blood thicker than water? Not always.

At age 18, I couldn’t wait to get away from my own family of origin. I was off to college and *out of there*. I never returned for more than brief visits, two or three days at most. It wasn’t that my parents were mean or cruel or abusive. On the contrary, they were liberal and progressive and tolerant of almost everything I did. But I was fiercely independent from an early age, and I never felt close to my parents or brothers. In my family, emotion was frowned upon. Stiff upper lip and all that.

After university, I lived for ten years in London, barely forty miles from where I grew up. Yet I rarely went home. Most of that time, I lived in a commune: seven adults and three kids. We had a ‘kitty’ for all household expenses – *from each according to his/her ability to pay*. We shared childcare, cooking, and the secrets of our souls, delving into our feelings in

consciousness-raising groups and railing against all social injustice. I never went home for holidays and neither did anyone else. We were building our own community as family.

As I grew older, I came to like and respect my parents more, becoming closer to them even though – or perhaps because – I settled 6,000 miles away in California. I was no longer embarrassed by my father's eccentricities, I took delight in them. When his research took him to Mexico, I accompanied him, driving three thousand miles in three weeks in a beat-up VW beetle. I became increasingly interested in my mother's story as a Holocaust survivor. As a child, I always knew she had escaped Czechoslovakia but lost her own mother and young sister in a concentration camp – although she never spoke of these events in any detail. She certainly never dwelt on what they had meant for her. In my thirties, I convinced her to record an oral history and probed as much as I dared.

My mother came to visit me after I'd been living in California for two years. By then, I was creating a new kind of family in the San Francisco lesbian community. I came out to my mother during that visit. She wasn't thrilled, and said something about being disappointed if I didn't have children, but she moved on and accepted the news in her quiet, unassuming manner.

I didn't know it yet, but my life was unexpectedly developing a trajectory similar to hers. Like her, I was destined to spend most of my adult life away from the country of my birth. I was fleeing not Hitler obviously, but – what exactly? Thatcher's England, with its rigid class distinctions, its sense of gloom, the grey skies, and landscapes far tamer than those I'd come to love in California.

When my mother met my lesbian friends on that first trip, she commented that it reminded her of the community she'd been a part of when she was young, first in the Socialist Youth movement in Prague in the late 1930's, and then as a refugee in wartime England. Her

father and brother also escaped Czechoslovakia and survived the war, but she had never been close to them. Her father was ultra-conservative, and had literally beaten her for becoming involved in left-wing politics. Her brother had stood by and watched. She told me once that if it hadn't been for Hitler, she would have never spoken to them again.

That World War II novel of mine is based on my mother's story. It's true that she was much closer to her friends than to her brother. And by the end of the war, she and her friends had lost most of their families in the Holocaust. They vowed to act as aunts and uncles to each other's children. Growing up, we received holiday gifts from them each year. Some settled in Australia or New Zealand. Decades later, when I traveled to the other side of the world and visited their children – my generation – I was welcomed with unbridled hospitality, even though we had never met in person before.

Now I have created a family of my own in California, with my partner and our daughter Abby. Judy has biological family on the East Coast but none here; my family is all in England. So we made our 'village' with neighbors, friends, other lesbian couples. Our friends Nancy and Lynn have two sons; they have served as our emergency contacts on every form since Kindergarten days.

Abby did not come from my womb, but my love for her is deep and fierce. Once, when she was three years old, we were traveling along a narrow winding road through the mountains of Mendocino. A car came careening around the bend and crashed into us, ruining our truck and our camping weekend. We were shaken but unhurt. The other driver, instead of impressing his two female passengers with his speed, sheepishly had to confess that he "couldn't make the turn". As I pulled Abby from the wreckage and held her in my arms, she screamed in fright. I bared my teeth at the guy, snarling like a she-wolf protecting her den, and in a voice I didn't

recognize as my own, told him that if Abby had been injured, I would have ripped him apart, piece by piece.

I recently shared with my writing group a short essay about the regular letters I used to receive from my mother over a twenty-year period, until her sudden death ten years ago. I reflected on the abrupt end to the correspondence she received from her own mother during the war, as she anxiously waited for news from Nazi-occupied territory. At the end of the piece, I made brief reference to the long letters I also exchanged in the past with one of my best friends in England. These letters had petered out over the years, as our lives became too busy. Occasional emails and Facebook postings have taken their place.

That didn't work, said several group members. There was not enough balance. I should either explore the relationship with the friend in more detail, or leave it out altogether. Fair enough.

But then the *blood and water* woman raised a stronger objection. Letters from a mother cannot be grouped in the same genre as letters from a friend. The relationships cannot be compared, she maintained. One is lifelong and inescapable, the other "seemingly close, but not long-lasting".

I found myself bristling again. I remembered her earlier comment from three years ago. But someone else suggested I should consider ending instead with reference to communication with my own daughter – now a college student – maintaining the mother-daughter theme. I made that change, and I suppose it was successful, because the essay was accepted for publication.

And then, two weeks later, came the bombing at the Boston Marathon. My daughter was a senior at Boston University, finishing up her honors thesis. She's also a runner. She has completed three half-marathons over the past two years.

I heard the news while still at work. I was shocked and horrified of course, but as I learned the details, I was not unduly worried for Abby's safety. She did not run in the marathon, this I knew. The plan was for her to volunteer at a water stand at Mile 17, a long way from the finishing line where the disaster occurred. And she was able to text right away. Her shift was just ending at the moment of the explosion; she was on the T, going back to her apartment.

But no one else knew that. The phone rang all evening. Nancy and Lynn called. My ex-lover and her partner called from Palm Springs. Judy posted on Facebook that Abby was fine, and ten friends jumped in immediately with comments expressing relief. At ten o'clock the phone rang again. It was Jill from London, the friend who used to write me long letters. It was 6am in London. She'd just heard the news, and wanted to check in. Then an email arrived from my dear friend Ulrike in Hamburg, in upper case: IS ABBY ALL RIGHT??? A text from another friend in England came through an hour later.

If my father were still alive he would have called, I'm sure of that. But I have two brothers, a sister-in-law, several cousins, a niece and nephew. Not a word from any of them.

Thin blood, I guess.

I know who my real family is.