

Raymond J. Barry

Barbara Constance Barry

Mist rises from the Hudson River's surface, forming a gossamer cloud that dissolves softly into the gray sky. Ducks fly in the distance, settling in the faraway river bank. The water is placid from the moving train's window, its smooth, shiny surface reminding me of a shimmering looking-glass that reflects the closest bank. I remember myself, as a young boy, playing on a lake. Once playing on lakes was a frequent pastime. Those were carefree times of fishing every day. Nowadays I never fish and I shall never fish again, have no interest in fishing. When I was a boy, fishing was my first love. The love remained, but the fishing gave way to other boyish activities not worth mentioning. Today there are more important things than fishing. I am older now, and it is time to wrap up my life, time to tie loose ends together. One of those loose ends is my mother, saying my final goodbye, speaking a few loving words to her, telling her that she means a great deal to me. It must be done.

The river is a comforting sight with its placid beauty and flying birds. Mother is unaware that I am coming. I shall surprise her with my unexpected arrival. If I warned her with a call, I might not show up. I cannot trust myself when it comes to showing up. I have been known to change my mind. When that happens I leave everyone in a lurch. I have been known to disappoint people. In mother's case, disappointment would be too much for her to take. My promises are not always kept, but I do the best I can.

It's January 24, 2006, 1:46 in the afternoon. I must arrive at mother's doorstep feeling right about myself. She deserves the truth, and the truth is that I do love my mother. She will soon die at the age of ninety-four. I'm making the necessary visit to show I still care. I do care, but I do not care. How easy it is for me to say, "I do not care". During the earlier part of my life, I lived without caring and without loving; that is, until my daughter was born. Later came two sons and much later another daughter. Gradually I was softened by my love toward my children and my wife, and that has been a small miracle. I appreciate my love for my family. I do love them. Today I know what I mean by the word 'love' when it comes to my children. But with mother I do not call anymore. She doesn't answer the phone, and I hardly ever visit her. I depended upon her when we worked together in the theater. A strong bond of love still lies between us. We both lent a helping hand when creating plays. But today our relationship involves a few sentimental visits thrown in on holidays and birthdays. This meeting represents one of those visits. This might be my last. It will be awkward being there. But I have said that.

The town is approaching. Our meeting is imminent. Time to prepare myself for my role, the dutiful son paying a visit, the responsible

son, showing he cares. The birds fly off in the distance. Mist comes off the river. It is quiet out there; a lovely river, a lovely sight. Outside the air is brisk. I am somewhat chilled by that coolness. The sun is beginning to burn off the mist, rising above the river. The train has stopped. I hear birds outside, along the river bank. How fortunate they are with their ability to fly, their simple approach that finds happiness in mere survival. They know what is best for them. Ignorance is bliss. Their mothers have flown away, never to be seen again.

Upon entering mother's living quarters, her paintings line its walls, as they did our bungalow during my youth. A large one in the living room is composed of bright yellows with a few bold reds that vitalize the somberness of her tiny dwelling. Mother created that painting when she was in her forties, a configuration of blazing color and brazen brush strokes that holds forth an unpredictable maze and teases the viewer's eyes with radiant circles collided against rigid, right angles, each upon another. A dynamic explosion of line, form and color reflects the roadmap of mother's mind, complete with its numerous detours and dead ends that represent her life's complex journey.

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In the beginning, Barbara Constance Barry was satisfied by marriage. Then she had children. Mother never planned that. We were born, that's all. We were born and needs were again temporarily satisfied, as well as created by responsibilities that came from raising us. Screaming infants with outstretched arms demanded undivided attention, while mother dutifully toilet-trained us, delivered us to and from school, washed stains from our underwear and cleaned up our mess when we were sick. During the father's worst drinking nights, she huddled us together in her bed, when his car pulled into the driveway in the wee hours, its headlights casting a bright reflection upon her bedroom's silver asbestos wall.

He was usually drunk.

The nightmare that had become our family's evening routine would follow, the man of the house, stumbling over his own vomit, after crashing through the front door like Frankenstein bent on destroying all that had wounded him, the accusatory shouts of, 'bum' and 'pig' that mirrored his twisted impression of his wife, smashed lamp on plaster wall, broken furniture, tuna fish dragged home from a bar in Freeport, foul smelling with bleeding gills, smashed Christmas tree during the holidays, vulgar songs about mother's alleged, sexual diversions, rowdy barroom ditties that described her as a 'whore' and a 'slut,' foul songs, foul language that she, no doubt, had encouraged somewhat with frequent jaunts to New York City to visit her artist friends, thereby making his protests all the more viable to himself. How convenient it had been to use that word, "whore", when he'd returned from a night of whoring himself with barroom battles etched upon his body, split nose, face puffed out like

a watermelon from being punched, knife stabs in his back and hand, crashing his car, wrecking it, losing his license, staggering through the house on wobbly legs in a drunken stupor, while his fumbling fingers tried desperately to fit a rubber onto his cock.

A truce would be called at the end of each night, when every member of the family would retreat to separate corners, our bodies cloistered in close quarters, personalities needing privacy, space to think, space to meditate, to stretch, and mother caressing herself as a lonely woman would, when at last the fury of our household gave over to troubled sleep. The man of the house often slept sprawled on the living room couch, his penis hanging from his shorts, and upon awakening, a quiet, repentant expression on his face after beating his wife bloody with drunken fists the night before. In the aftermath of each crisis, reconciliation between husband and wife produced exaggerated, theatrical embraces in front of the children to show they truly loved each other in spite of their indefatigable rage.

Not a pleasant place, called home. Blaring noise described its ambiance, flooding the area with echoes of father's nightly, slurred, drunken fugue. The man hated his marriage but passionately loved my mother, although the word 'love' was never mentioned. Husband and wife had become a violent habit to each other without mention of 'love'. There had been a sprawling battle then, continuing from morning till night and igniting again, whenever a family member came home. There was no space in that tiny bungalow, only a few tiny rooms and kids and dogs and cats and bodies impinging upon one another's rights, pushing you out of my way before you push me out of the way and all of us pushing each other through childhood, while daddy pushed mommy and mommy cried and they both screamed and the notion of confronting each other without punches and pushes was foreign to us.

Memories too of blaring music of Bartok from mother's kitchen radio to drown out the family conspiracy against her. Modern or classical composers' music played from her favorite radio station, reverberating loudly against its walls, a symphonic backdrop of Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff or Bach on any given day. Piano or violin concerti were usually accompanied by her shrill whistle, as if she were one of the orchestra's violins, emitting from her pursed lips piercing notes that covered the boorish sound of her husband's booming voice, while he lurched about the living room, a raging elephant in a zoo, venting his loneliness from being cooped up too long in his cage. Without realizing, my consciousness was being expanded by mother's appreciation for Bella Bartok, Igor Stravinsky and Hindemith constantly blasting through the house.

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In between filthy diapers and screaming babies, Barbara Constance Barry's passions were satisfied by publishing short stories and exhibiting her paintings in New York City galleries. Numerous New York art shows followed. One painting hung for a year in the Museum of New York. She'd already published a number of short stories by then, one entitled 'Herbie'; the main character a midget adored by a lonely, half insane woman for his overwhelming kindness. Kindness from men meant a great deal to Barbara Constance Barry. Vincent Van Gogh impressed her as a kind man in the face of his torment. That brilliant, insane painter became her hero, while she was slowly going mad herself in a violent, alcoholic marriage that limited her time to paint and write. The woman was an artist, not a housewife. Van Gogh's insanity justified hers, as if his mental imbalance were the source of his genius. Similarly, she believed her instability was the source of creativity. I questioned her theory later, after going off the deep end myself in my mid-twenties and still wonder if artists can live well-balanced lives.

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Mother's old face expresses shock at the sight of me. She doesn't believe I came, so used to being separated from her son is she. She asks why I haven't visited in so many months. There is no answer, aside from my guilt for not having done my duty, for having neglected my mother when her death is imminent. I am guilty, mother's guilty son, offering no gift or flowers for her. At least there should be flowers to smell, while we talk. But I bring no flowers. There is no fragrance to accompany our conversation. Instead we deal with each other's smell, the odor of an aging woman and in my case, the smell of an actor's 'hand to mouth' struggle that eventually evolved to success. Possibly we meet for the sake of old times. What else could there be? Love? I could say, "I love you, ma," but "I love you," is a phrase that seems insufficient. I look at mother's wizened face, as her broken voice sends sweet platitudes my way. An old bird she is, croaking away.

"Oh, my, how wonderful you came, my son. How wonderful to see you. And you look so marvelous with your broad shoulders and your fine face. Oh, yes, and you're doing well, I trust? Oh, yes, very good, very good."

She does not listen to my responses. Her ears are blocked with decades of built-up wax. Between us lies an urgency to make something big happen during this short visit, to pack within a few hours what is left to say when life is running out. She is ninety-four years old and I am sixty-six. The importance of this meeting is palpable, how both of us would like for something meaningful to occur with so little time left. She can barely walk. The most she expects from her remaining days is endless hours of television and naps during the commercials. I sit and smile, the dutiful son, feeling guilty, expecting her death soon after this last meeting together.

I imagine what it must be like to be so old, things that are too intimate to share, the loss of independence, inability to walk easily to the bathroom; asking myself how she bathes herself, how she looks naked with her skin so wrinkled, so shriveled, so loose. Surely she must be horrible to herself, that foreboding aging process that leaves her forgotten, the unfairness of being allowed consciousness enough to value life, while knowing death will arrive soon, the paradox of loving life, when it will soon be taken from her. But mother wants to die. She has said as much. I am here to ease that passage, to affirm that things went well between us. She had a hand in my life. I had a hand in hers. Whatever went wrong during the difficult years gives way to gratitude for all we did in each other's behalf. She was a paradigm of courage when it came to sticking to her personal rules of life, provided wisdom that I still value today; the miracle of creativity, the value of beauty and art in a crass world that worships only money.

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When I was eleven or twelve, Barbara Constance Barry introduced me to the local movie house, the Arcade. Tickets were fourteen cents to see great films; *'On the Waterfront'*, *'Streetcar Named Desire'* and *'A Place in the Sun'* with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift to name a few. Marlon Brando was bigger than life in my young mind. Brando, Montgomery Clift and later James Dean were fearful, fragile men, atypical of the usual masculine personae of male film stars during the forties and fifties. These new actors seemed accessible to their vulnerability, as opposed to the John Wayne types, flaunting their exaggerated macho image to the public at large. Male sensitivity had suddenly taken its rightful place in the world of film. As a boy I identified completely.

In that tiny movie house, mother chain smoked non-filter cigarettes, as I watched Marlon Brando vent his passions with Vivien Leigh in *'Streetcar Named Desire'*. The two of them were brilliant, igniting their passions that were seemingly so out of control and yet so artfully performed. Brando's poetic genius mesmerized me as a ten-year-old, mostly for his vulnerability. His fragility paralleled my own young life; the depth of his feelings was mine, his pain mine as well. I became Brando, as I watched him perform and fully identified with his struggle within the confines of that tiny movie house screen. In my innocence, his character was a real person, who happened to be in a film.

I was an introverted boy, painfully unsure of myself and very close to my mother. Being macho wasn't in the cards. This new, vulnerable image of male movie stars appealed to me. They and I were cut from the same cloth, so to speak—didn't fit in, out of place, not suitable for public consumption. Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift seemed more than willing to show their fragility, which was similar to mine as a boy. I identified with that sensitive, male image, so inept to the ways of the

world. It never dawned on me that these two brilliant actors had studied the craft of acting, that acting skill could be learned. I had no idea that I would become a professional actor someday.

My paralyzing shyness, as a boy, excluded me from normal interaction with people, let alone acting before an audience. The thought of it never entered my mind; that is, until a decade later. Meanwhile, my introduction to film I attribute to my mother. Her appreciation influenced me whenever she took me to the Arcade Movie Theater. At that early time, however, Hollywood represented a foreign, inaccessible world of ‘stars’ and ‘fame’, so very alien from the small town in which I was raised.

Other times, early in their marriage, mother went to the cinema with my father on Friday nights. They would dress up for their movie date, mother always looking beautiful and my father so handsome in his suit. During their movie dates there was never any drinking. Movies became an island of safety for me, since mother and father seemed to love each other whenever they saw a film. A sense of security accompanied those movie nights with no drinking and more importantly, no violence. They always came home sober and in good humor and were even what could be called “happy”. I always stayed with my younger sisters back at the house, but I didn’t mind. I knew my parents would be in a good mood when they returned.

On Saturday mornings after my parents’ movie night, mother and I would sit in our tiny kitchen with its green Formica table and sun blazing through its single window, listening to her colorful description of the film she’d seen the previous night. Lilacs I’d planted years before bloomed outside that window in the spring. During the winters, icicles hung from their branches and lots of snow, while mother brought characters she’d seen the night before to life. Our kitchen became her stage and I her audience, both of us losing track of time, while mother performed each actor’s lines. Her skill as a performer was so very obvious, while imitating Betty Davis or Ann Baxter in *‘All about Eve’* or Vivien Leigh in *‘Streetcar Named Desire’*.

During those Saturday mornings, mother and son were bonded by a world of film fantasy. Her performance over our kitchen table liberated both of us into an imaginary, lush world of Hollywood, enhanced by the message of the film she’d seen the night before. Hours would pass, and the films she described educated me about the evils of racism and anti-Semitism with her description of Robert Ryan playing an anti-Semitic soldier, who killed a man because he was Jewish. This was the first but not the last time I witnessed mother perform. She was a brilliant actress in our kitchen. Years later, I would see on television the same ‘black and white’ film she’d fully brought to life. Those morning sessions, years before, had fooled me into believing I’d actually seen the movie, when in fact it was mother’s vivid performance so firmly fixed in my memory.

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*I look out the window, observing the gray clouds that hover above the river. The sun is momentarily blocked, producing a winter ambiance that embraces the mood between mother and me in her bedroom, where she lies helplessly, while groping for something nice to say. I forgive her. Human activity means little to her at age ninety-four. All she has accomplished in her life has been set aside to make room for death. Death is her preoccupation now rather than life. Random activity for its own sake makes little sense. My visit is all she can handle now. Talk is arbitrary. Serious subjects are avoided for fear of the upheaval they may bring.*

*The day is passing, and things are somewhat blurred. I am bewildered by mother's empty chatter. Her words are evasive, avoiding any clear theme that might be meaningful to either of us. I thought it would be a good thing to visit my mother, a good thing to stand before her and express my love to her. Rejuvenating our friendship that once was so strong is my purpose for this visit. There have been times in our past when we laughed together, our conversations abundant and rich, demonstrating our mutual interest in theater and painting and writing, but now, as I look into her aged face, there is little reference to our past, our art, our work together with Quena Company, our love for life. Has she given all this up? Has she allowed herself to lose interest in the things that once imbued her with such vitality?*

*In recent years, mother hasn't left my sister's apartment building to take advantage of nature's pastoral scenery. Ninety-four years of living have exhausted spontaneous excursions through the verdant banks of the Hudson. Her bed is more inviting. How useless her life seems, as I witness the old woman before me, who has opted for a sedentary existence. She was such an active woman in her day; horrifying really, to allow oneself such passivity, after surrendering her independence. That is a big one, to allow other people to take the reins of her life. I couldn't do that easily; a daunting possibility really, to be so out of control, while living out each purposeless day. I must remind myself not to end up like mother before me, lying in bed at two in the afternoon, watching television to fill time.*

*Perhaps 'doing things' and general 'busyness' may not be all they seem to be. A certain degree of futility is involved in life's sleepwalk, the feeling that one has been here before, and it didn't make much sense then, beyond an endless treading of water without noticing where it spills and little by way of purpose in any of it - aside from the children. They make sense somehow, the love involved in raising them, caring for their welfare. When they grow up, they can figure out what existing on this planet is all about. I haven't much of a clue myself, and yet I've had a decent life and consider myself lucky.*

*Mother and I stare at the television, as if it might offer a clue as to what to say next. There is nothing to say really, and nothing to do. Time passes. We watch a game show called 'Strike It Rich' that offers a free refrigerator to a couple from Iowa, visiting New York City for the week. According to the husband, they owed themselves a vacation and decided*

*to do something exciting by coming to the big city. In their wanderings, they purchased tickets to the show. Already they won a washing machine, and if it's possible to answer the next question correctly, they might walk out with a new refrigerator. The fat wife is nervous. The poor woman can barely speak, so taken is she with being on television. Her dutiful husband is gleaming with expectation, eager to get on with it, so he can win his refrigerator. With his washing machine already in the bag, he seems confident. They are Christian, so God is on their side. The wife says as much.*

*"I hope he wins," my mother says, apparently delighted by the man's prospect of going home with a new refrigerator. She has been watching television all day from her bed, the same routine that has filled all of her days from the time she has been moved into this little space. That is what a ninety-four year old woman does nowadays, lies in bed and watches television. There is little conversation, while the eager couple struggles to identify the victorious general of the Civil War battle of Antietam, but as soon as the question has been wrongly answered by the disappointed gentleman, the couple forlornly walks off the stage, having won only a washing machine.*

*There is not much to say, considering the circumstance of competing with the talking box, although I embark upon various subjects, none of which hold mother's interest. My flourishing acting career certainly does not, nor my children, a baby daughter, two young boys and a grown daughter, who give me great joy in my life, but mother never liked children much, relates to them as if they are an imposition upon an artist's busy existence. Her enmity towards children is derived from the restriction she experienced when raising her own brood, three little ones, all of whom impinged upon her career as an artist. Changing dirty diapers simply was not her thing.*

*Back to the television - the thought of forcibly turning it off occurs to me, but that would be too much of a violation, one which mother wouldn't tolerate. At this very moment she is laughing and making comments about the humorous talk show host, relating to him as if he were an old friend.*

*"Ma, how do you like your new apartment? Do you like it here?"*

*The question is asked in earnest. She was moved out of her house by my oldest sister, who took matters into her own hands without consulting me or my youngest sister beforehand. The move seemed logical, after mother had fallen one day, while hurrying to catch a bus. She injured her leg, and my sister took it upon herself to move the old woman into the downstairs quarters of her apartment building. I never trusted the situation, mainly because of my sister's husband, whose name is just plain "Tom," a Neanderthal creature at best in the habit of cheating people whenever the opportunity rises. He's an underhanded fellow, always looking for an angle that might make him richer at the expense of others.*



*The man is basically a petty thief. Once he sold our uncle's furniture he was storing in his barn to make a few bucks. But that's another story.*

*"Why don't you turn the television off, mother?"*

*I should not have asked the question. It popped out of my mouth without thinking. I have taken this trip to find clarity about what we have meant to each other. Right now this squawking box before us is in the way of that.*

*"Why, son, don't you like the program?"*

*Mother didn't ask for my visit. I came without warning, hoping she would welcome me, as she certainly did with an open heart. But after the initial salutation was done, it was over, the warmth, the joy of being together for the first time in a year. Back to mother and her television and how to separate the two. I ask her again to turn the machine off, whereupon she again looks at me surprised and repeats herself by asking if I don't like the program she's watching. I try to be gentle when I explain that I would like to spend time together without the television interrupting us, a reasonable request one would think, considering she might be dead tomorrow, or even in a few minutes, although her wizened complexion suggests strength enough to survive a few more months, maybe even years.*

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An evening comes to mind. I was thirty years of age and living a 'hand to mouth' existence on the New York stage at the time. Mother paid me a visit at my SoHo loft in New York City. We talked late into the night. Numerous subjects were discussed, including the war zone our family had become during my youth. During the passing hours, my father's roustabout adventures in bars were discussed at length, along with his infidelities. Deep into our conversation, I boldly asked her if she'd had affairs during their marriage. The question was awkwardly answered that an affair had occurred with a painter, whose name was 'Anton', an alcoholic, similar to my father's drinking. Furthermore, she explained, this affair took place before my mother had a romantic relationship with a woman named Mazi.

I knew her partner well from frequent visits to our house, always adorned in men's suits, men's shoes and sported a 'butch' haircut with a 'part' on the side, similar to a man's hairdo. Mother found an island of security in their relationship, away from the suburban shambles of her marriage. Her women friend provided a sanctuary, a safe space away from home. Mother's partner recognized her worth that was never given credit by her husband. Mazi supported mother's creativity, her womanhood, and provided a stable anchor in her life for the duration of their twenty-seven year relationship, when Mazi died.

Mother was always in a good mood when Mazi visited the house. That was enough for me. Their relationship didn't bother me, as long as she was happy. Meanwhile, B. Constance Barry's artistic pursuits allowed

a breath of fresh air in the midst of my father's punches and raging basso voice that spewed contempt toward all "Jews, Negroes and queers". In truth, he didn't realize that my mother and Mazi were lovers. In his limited perspective, homosexuality was reserved for flamboyantly effeminate males but never women. Essentially, he had an uninformed, primitive view and was naïve about the subject. His few, male drinking buddies in bars were as ignorant as he about homosexuality. Mother's sexuality was never revealed to him, which might have been unfair, but on the other hand, he surely would have dealt with it in the same manner he dealt with anything he didn't understand - with fists. We were all afraid of him, and aside from our bonding fishing trips, my father's violence ultimately made him a stranger to all of us.

At any rate, mother admitted she'd had affairs, and her revelation bonded us with the agreement that a woman must fulfill her personal needs in order to live fully. Her creative spirit would have died had she chosen a more conventional path. We talked for hours into the night, discussing her friendship with Mazi, among other personal subjects. Her visit ended late into the night, and days later, I received a poetically written letter, provocative for its honesty. The letter took the form of a 'no holds barred' confessional that encapsulated her life as an artist, a mother and a wife. In brutally honest terms, she described the shambles of her marriage, her toxic relationship with my father and her preference for woman companionship.

Mother's letter hit the pit of my stomach like a rock. It suddenly dawned upon me to invite her to perform selected, edited sections of it between scenes of an original play I'd been directing with my New York theater company, Quena Company. The play was entitled *'Blue Heaven'* and focused upon the universal, psychological complexities within the American family unit. I suggested she wander on stage between scenes, letter in hand, reciting its poetic prose that she'd originally written to me, and then to exit off stage, only to return at chosen intervals to read other parts of her letter.

Barbara Constance Barry began her acting career at age sixty-one. When I was a young boy, she'd introduced me to the beauty of film and specifically to the poetic naturalism of Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift. Twenty years later I returned the favor by inviting this same woman, my mother, into my New York theater company, Quena Company. We rehearsed Saturdays through Tuesdays in 'The Annex', a space provided by Joseph Papp of New York's Public Theater. The entire cast enjoyed her contribution to our work. She commuted from the Long Island suburbs, always arriving on time and adding a unique voice of experience to a company of thirty-year-olds. Young and naïve about life in general, this band of actors favored the dark side, a natural inclination of youth, who hadn't the vaguest appreciation for the goodness that had been bestowed upon them from their parents. Mother's role in the play balanced their point of view. She was a parent, after all, and had raised a

family, while living a long, creative life. More importantly, she'd been a loving parent to her son.

Our working relationship was a healthy one. Mother trusted my direction and was always willing to try something new. We had always been unequivocally honest with each other. Without any sign of resentment, I could ask her to drop the tension in her shoulders while delivering parts of her letter, so eager was she to perform well on stage. And she did learn quickly, always listening intently to my notes after performances, always seeking discovery that might improve her skill. A 'natural' performer with a wonderfully resonant and articulate voice, her stage presence was exemplary with her white, shining hair and radiant, expressive eyes that pleased audiences to no end. Performing strengthened her will to live well into her nineties. At age sixty-one, the last stage of her life, acting in my company immediately vitalized her spirits. Theater stimulated her creative juices, rejuvenated her sense of purpose and ultimately liberated her. Her love for audiences was infectious. The prospect of spending four nights each week with her son also appealed to her, as it did me. My father was dead by then, and her three children were grown, otherwise leaving her a lonely woman living in the Long Island suburbs with little to do with her life.

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*I mark the minutes, the delinquent son and his aged mother, aware of the shortness of time, the lack of communication between us, without a simple phone connection that might make weekly calls possible. My sister hasn't provided a mobile phone at the side of her bed. Mother's hearing loss would make normal conversation difficult, but some words might pass between us by means of a phone. I cannot help thinking that regular conversations between us would be feared by my sister's husband. Tom's pilfering of mother's bank accounts would be a taboo subject. But that is another story. On the other hand, anything can be brought up in this room; little to lose between mother and me at this stage of the game.*

*Conversation resumes again. The television is still a major distraction for mother, dear woman, unable to resist its addictive lure. Her eyes constantly divert back to the screen, while I attempt to sway her focus with idle conversation.*

*"What have you been doing with your time, mom" I ask during a commercial break.*

*I know the answer to my question. Don't know why I asked it. Her sedentary condition annoys me somehow. I feel the urge to challenge her.*

*"Oh, son, you don't want to know what I do," she says.*

*Mother has always been creative with her time. She's been an accomplished painter, a published writer and late in her life embarked on a full acting career in theater and film. Art in all its forms provided the freedom to create at will. One of her paintings on her wall today was*

*exhibited decades ago in the New York City Museum on Fifth Avenue for an entire year, part of a prize she'd won in a downtown art contest.*

*"You'll find out someday what it means to get old," she warns. It doesn't much matter anymore what I do, and I just don't care the way I did when I was younger. You'll find out what I mean someday."*

*A smile on her face accompanies her caveat.*

*I wonder how she cannot care, and why she smiles while admitting it. Having given up certain activities myself recently I once imagined I would do forever, I choose not probe the question. Perhaps I am afraid of the answer, and how it applies to me. Mother had that drive at one time, an overpowering will to achieve. Maybe it was her desire to be famous that drove her. In my case, there was certainly a touch of that. The old woman's strength took an exit upon entering her nineties. For some people, the drive to achieve disappears in their sixties or even in their forties, and complacency takes its place. Years pass and then final death. Most people never had that drive to begin with. An ambitious person cannot fully imagine the transition to complacency. Once a person is lulled into a state of inactivity, it is impossible to explain to others. This certainly is the case with mother.*

*"I'm old too," I say, the statement accompanied by an apologetic chuckle.*

*"Not as old as your mother," she retorts. The intonation of her voice suggests that she has a secret. What I observe before me is a woman who has allowed herself to become irrelevant. For me, mother is not irrelevant. We have this chance to speak from our hearts. My heart is open. My love for her is full. I do love you, my mother. Let us speak. Let us relate to each other as mother and son.*

*"I love you, mother."*

*"Oh, and I love you, my son, with all my heart."*

*"I feel there is a barrier between us that prevents us from communicating."*

*"What communicate? We are communicating."*

*"Yes, we are communicating."*

*"How nice you came, son, to communicate with your mother."*

*"Yes, ma."*

*"It's so kind of you to visit."*

*"Yes, ma, I feel we aren't really talking."*

*"What was that?"*

*"I feel we don't really talk."*

*"Talk?"*

*"Yes, mother, we're talking, but we aren't talking about anything important."*

*"Important? Is that what you said?"*

*"Yes, ma, we aren't discussing real issues. It's all small talk between us."*

*“Small talk? I’m sorry, son, my hearing has gone to hell. I’m ninety-four years old, you know.”*

*“Yes, I realize that. You’re ninety-four years old, and it’s difficult to hear. But it would be nice if we could discuss real issues.”*

*“Real?”*

*“Yes, mother, issues that really matter between us.”*

*“What real issues?”*

*“Well, I haven’t been visiting you as much as I would like.”*

*“It’s so nice you visited me, son.”*

*“Yes, ma, I should have visited you more often, but work has prevented me from doing that. I’ve wanted to come, but I’ve been acting in one play after another. I’ve had so many conflicting emotions about this. It’s been easier to shut the whole thing out of my mind.”*

*“It would have been nice to see you at Christmas.”*

*“I know that, ma, but it’s been so complicated to visit with all the work I’ve been getting lately. It’s not like I can stay overnight with eight shows each week.”*

*“Oh, don’t talk about that, son. You’re here now. That’s what matters.”*

*Mother is partly deaf. She cannot hold a normal conversation and seldom reveals what is really going on. Anything she offers to our conversation is little more than a platitude here and there with her bubbly speech patterns imitating the notion of joy and hiding any signs of despair. I do not believe her for a second. We have made an agreement not to make waves. She has established that agreement, and I am happy with it. Peace between mother and son is better than conflict. It is too late for conflict. What could come of battle between us – wounds that have no time to heal? Old wounds are enough without adding more.*

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Barbara Constance Barry knew immediately that the acting profession was right for her. Performing on the New York stage came naturally and suited her adventurous spirit. Fully savoring every moment before audiences who loved her, playing roles before audiences became her calling that she’d missed during her youth. When we made theater together, she was always present for me. I too was available in spirit or to visit, to call, to write a letter. Both her director and son, I was obedient to her needs when asked. There was never much to give, aside from meeting for coffee before rehearsals occasionally. What I received in return was her enormous performing talent that’d had its beginnings over our kitchen table years before. She also provided the support that only a mother can bring, while fulfilling the arduous role of directing a company of eighteen, inexperienced actors.

One performance led to the next at New York’s ‘Theater for the New City’, New York’s ‘La Mama’, ‘Saint Mark’s Church on the

*Bowery*, Baltimore's *Theater Project*, as well as theaters in Philadelphia and New Paltz, New York. Before long, she'd memorized her letter and was performing it fully on stage, a little old lady with marvelous, expressive blue-green eyes and extended arms and, oh, so radiant a performer. Life itself burst from her body, from her spirit. Audiences were riveted by her presence on stage, a magnet for all to watch. Barbara Constance Barry needed that outpouring of love, needed so very much to be appreciated, both as an artist and as a human being. Beautiful to behold on stage, her entrances were a magical addition to our productions. By the time she'd performed for a year, she was well on her way to becoming our company's leading actress. Audiences truly loved her. She became an actress at age sixty-one and continued to be a member of Quena Company for its nine-year duration, always with absolute commitment. Theater encapsulated a unique, euphoric experience that she came to depend upon. This has also been the case with her son.

One morning mother and I met for coffee before rehearsal. She was very excited.

"Raymond," she exclaimed immediately after we sat down. "I had a visitation last night."

Constance reached for my hand and squeezed it, as if to say the epiphany she'd experienced was not only real but also life-giving.

"A spirit visited me. A presence came into my bedroom. It told me everything I was doing in theater was good, and I was sure it was a sign of the future. The blankets on my bed flew up and suspended above me for a full minute before they came down again. The visitation was joyful, so extraordinary and absolutely joyful."

At that moment, she was enraptured with the spiritual potential of life itself. Theater had become a magical adventure for her. Each moment on stage she cherished with her full mental and physical being, experiencing life at its fullest during that final stage of old age. Creativity by any means possible had always been her passion, whether it be painting, writing or acting. But performing before audiences she loved most, when aging would have otherwise cast her aside from the world.

Sometimes we performed *'Blue Heaven'* on the New York City streets. Once, after a performance from a loading dock in SoHo's lower Manhattan, mother exclaimed euphorically, "Oh, Raymond, acting makes me so much more alive! I feel so alive! Today when I was doing my monologue, I looked up and saw a woman watching from across the street. She was hanging out of her window and listening to my words. We made eye contact and she smiled at me. I just love this acting business. I just love it."

This is my sentiment as well and the reason why I've stuck to the profession all of my adult life. Acting set my mother free, as it has set me free; freedom to express, freedom to dream and always with standards set by me and not by others. Her belief that all forms of creativity and her children were the most significant parts of her life is my belief as well.

Yes, acting, painting and writing, not to overlook my four beautiful children establish the wholeness of my life, as they did for Barbara Constance Barry. Mother's values have stood the test of time, and after six decades, they've garnished the goodness they once promised. By fully living up to her standards, I've endured both the sacrifices and self-examination necessary to enjoy escape from the mundane, to find my wings and take flight beyond my wildest dreams.

After years of creating theater together, I found Barbara Constance Barry a New York agent, Jerry Kahn. She found her wings in the commercial world of theater, having been cast in some twenty films, including *'Arthur'* with Lisa Minelli and *'Trading Places'* with Eddie Murphy, as well as numerous soap operas and commercials. Two commercials featured her during one Super Bowl halftime. For years, she played David Letterman's mother on his original television show. By then her neighbors related to her as if she were a movie star. A highlight of our relationship was when we played 'mother and son' in Sam Shepherd's *'Buried Child'* with Holly Hunter at the St. Louis Reparatory Company, and later we both performed *'Antigone'* with F. Murray Abraham, directed by the brilliant Joseph Chaikin at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Company.

At the ripe age of sixty-one to age eighty-eight, performing in plays, films and television rejuvenated mother's interest in life. Performing set her free, providing an opportunity for self-examination and escape from what otherwise would have been dreary isolation and final death in the Long Island suburbs. When mother performed, she was on high alert and was transformed into a paradigm of joy. Nothing else provided that heightened degree of vitality. The challenge of acting heightened her appetite for living.

Barbara Constance Barry never studied painting, writing or acting. She simply engaged herself fully in all three media. She wrote and created art without formal training and without questioning how or why it should be done, approaching each media with intelligence and an indomitable will that needed self-expression for the very health of her soul. Willingness to 'try it' was enough, the 'how' of her skill guided by wary instinct alone and demonstrating by example that 'permission to dive into the thick of it' in front of a critical audience was all that was necessary. Willingness to 'try it' was enough. 'Learning by doing' has also been my way, as it was hers. Blind courage to simply 'do it' enriched her life, as it has enriched mine.

Barbara Constance Barry's legacy has been a source of inspiration at every turn, having followed her footsteps, first by learning to appreciate art and then by actually making it. Since she represents the fountainhead of my creativity from which most of my values have been born, she has inadvertently molded the shape of my entire life. I am she in so many ways. We are interlocked in some mysterious fashion, artists both, who live with the understanding that creativity in any form is the most

important activity any human being can undertake - not wealth, power or status in society. For mother and I, art has become a way of life, each medium a conduit that allows escape from meaningless activity so visible in the world. Life is a bore without art. The only thing I would add is children, something that mother recognized in her later years, when she could finally embrace us. Before that time, her children were an obstacle to finding her creative voice, which had become her life's mission. The role of motherhood obstructed that mission.

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*"Are you happy, mother?"*

*I have a nerve asking such a silly question.*

*"Of course, I'm happy. How could I not be happy?"*

*The vigor of her delivery fends off any possible challenge. The subject for many women her age could easily be uncomfortable.*

*"You ask me if I'm happy, son, as if you know what happiness is. Everyone is somewhat 'happy' and also somewhat unhappy, depending upon the direction the wind blows. I don't know if I'm happy. Then again I do know. Happiness is this bed I lie in, or maybe happiness is you visiting me. These give me happiness. Your presence in this room, sitting by my bedside warms my heart. I love my boy, my son. You're growing older, son. Life is passing. Grab onto it with both hands and allow it to take you for a ride. That's what I did, son. I rode on the back of my life and allowed it to take me anywhere it wished. Now I'm resting. I'm waiting for the next stage. Death will come, and I shall ride with that too. I'm looking forward to death, son. I'm tired of this existence. It has nothing more to teach me. I've loved. I've had my children, and I've made art in many forms. There is nothing more to do in my condition."*

*"'Happy' is such a strange word. Happy about what? Nothing seems important anymore, son, except my children. Concern for my children overrides concern for anything else. Art has fallen by the wayside somewhere along the line. I'm not sure when, but it's taken a back seat to my children. You still mean a great deal to me, you three kids, but you're not kids anymore, are you?"*

*"No, we're not kids anymore, ma."*

*"I remember each one of you when you were children. You were a sweet child, son. And the girls, they were so very beautiful. I sometimes wish I were a better mother to all of you."*

*"Don't think that, mom. You did fine."*

*"I could have done better. So many things were going on then. But I did the best I could, and you all turned out fine, didn't you, son?"*

*"Yes, ma, we all did fine."*

*"You've had a good life, son, haven't you?"*

*"Yes, ma, my life has been very good."*

*"Makes me proud to think of all you've accomplished."*



*“I did what I could, ma.”*

*“You imitated me to some extent with your creativity, and I’m proud of that. I’m proud that you saw something worthwhile in my life.”*

*“You should be proud, ma. You were an inspiration to all of us.”*

*“Was I, son? Oh, how wonderful to be an inspiration to my own children.”*

*“Well, you were. Certainly to me. You taught me that art was important. I’ll never forget the value of that.”*

*“Oh, son, that’s so kind of you to say. You see? Now I’m happy. You asked me if I were happy, and now your words have made me happy. And I’m conscious of that happiness, which makes it all the better. You’re good for me, son. I’m so glad you came to visit your old mother.”*

*“I’m glad I came too, ma. And I’m glad you’re happy.”*

*Mother perks up for the first time since I arrived, and all I asked was whether she was happy. I never expected such a response. It was as if she had something to prove, that she can be happy if she so chooses, and what’s more, she’s going to convince me of her happiness. I am convinced. The woman is still in control of her faculties. Her alertness, when stimulated, rises to the challenge. Combativeness is well intact, having been such a large part of her personality years ago. Mother’s fight is still in her, which means, of course, that she’s quite a bit more aware of what’s going on than she reveals. That’s encouraging. The old woman’s spirit is alive and well. We can do business on this day.*

*“We should discuss a few things before something happens,” I say.*

*The mention of death is not comfortable. I refuse to say it.*

*“Before I die,” she states defiantly. “What do you want to bring up, dear?”*

*“We should talk.”*

*I’m suddenly at a loss for words when I should be more to the point. This opportunity must not slip by. But my thoughts are muddled. What was it I wanted to say? Something related to love? Or was it her money that is fast disappearing? Yes, her bank accounts, I suspect, have been pilfered by my sister’s husband, that scoundrel. But I cannot prove anything. The accusation is irrelevant, unless proven. Upon bringing it up, mother will certainly ask for details, which I cannot deliver. I am at a loss for words, faltering when about to speak. The time is now – not later – but now, and here I am wordless, inarticulate and a bit stupid. Why so stupid when it is time to state my case? And what is that case? Why so inarticulate when I should be clear? I am her oldest child with a right to speak. I am the only one who can fend against her exploitation - the stealing of her money, which she allows by behaving like a helpless child. Her helplessness is partially real and partially a sham. It is true at times she suffers from dementia of sorts, just the thing Tom was waiting for to take advantage. I open my mouth finally.*

*“You’ve put yourself in harm’s way by behaving as if you are too old to take care of yourself.”*

*“What harm’s way?” she asks.*

*“You’ve given the impression that you can’t handle your own finances for one,” I say.*

*The look on mother’s face shows her aversion to this subject. Immediately I am losing her. Flustered for a moment, I become aware of my surroundings, the temperature of the air, the brightness of the sun shining through the window, its warmth when it bathes my face. A healthy mix of sunlight and fresh air washes the room with their balm, softening the energy between mother and son. I am more relaxed than before and do not wish to bring up unpleasant subjects. It is not the time. It is rather time for meditation between us. It is time to reflect upon the memories we have shared of the good times, our laughter together and theater experiences that made us appreciate what we meant to each other.*

*It is important to be in my own skin at this moment, to be aware of what I am really thinking, rather than disguising myself with empty words. I notice in detail the room’s ambiance. There is an assemblage of wooden sticks in one corner, marking the beginning of an unfinished project, for which someone has brought materials; perhaps the beginning of a bookcase for mother’s books. A mattress stands against one wall, slightly ripped. It has seen better days, seems ready to be thrown out. Someone else will do that for her, unless I offer to take it out today.*

*“Would you like me to take that mattress out to the garbage, mother?”*

*“That mattress? Oh, yes, it’s been there so long that I’d forgotten about it,” she says.*

*“I’d be happy to take it out.”*

*I am in a helpful mood, although I do not move to take out the mattress. Mother does not seem to notice. She is in her own world. Any task that might comfort her would ease the void between us. Any errand completed would show I came on a peace mission. The mattress stays leaning against the wall. I don’t make any effort to move it. Paint-spattered rags hang from a screw in the wall. Some workman left them there. An outboard motor runs outside, propelling a small craft along the river’s shores. Birds cry out above the shoals of its banks.*

*My mother died a month later at age ninety-four.*

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How could I not notice how Barbara Constance Barry lived? How could I not be aware of her very high standards when it came to choosing the direction of her life? Survival to her meant survival of the spirit, not of the body. She would have been willing to starve for the sake of expressing what lay so vibrantly beneath the surface. I watched this process for years, realizing that something was different about my mother. Her passion separated her from the other mothers. Her choices seemed erratic and eccentric. There were times she was not present when I wanted her to be.

But I grew strong and independent, and learned not to need anything or anyone in order to be self-reliant. With her guidance, work took on a new meaning to me. There were two kinds of work; work for money and the other, more spiritual kind of work that mother did for the very survival of her soul. With her paradigm to follow, my soul became important too, my ‘inner self’ that knew of a creative world of which most men were unaware. Performing roles in the theater has imprinted upon me a deeper understanding of life itself, regardless of the difficulties along the way that are part of every person’s experience anyway; might as well risk a life that delves into the essence of the soul and by doing that, make something beautiful from nothing.

Those ominous chapters of her life, where layers of insecurity forced her to hide from the world, I recognize in myself. As a boy, my fantasies flourished when brutal, domestic reality no longer satisfied. The realm of imagination was pliable to whatever suggestions suited my fancy, not unlike the inspiration of an artist, but instead of canvass and tubes of paint, the medium was the receptivity of my mind to create something beautiful from nothing. With regard to my mother, the miracle of our creative partnership is what I imagined. Mother became a great gift to me in that collaboration. At times, her bewilderment became mine. Her search to make sense of things also became mine. Art in all its forms became our salvation. We searched together in theater, searched to find light above the darkness, knowing always that I could not become one of ‘them’. No, I could not live an ordinary life. There had to be some risk involved, freedom to create, freedom to find my own voice. That’s what you were about, my mother—always finding a way to speak from your heart, to express the sensations that lay simmering beneath the surface, aching to be released at every step of your life.

The answer to the question of “Who am I?” changes with each breath, with each heartbeat. I am constantly in motion, as mother constantly transformed throughout her life. There is no argument about that alteration. The insecurity of constant transition does not bother me for I have found safety in my observance of you, mother, who like a chameleon, has undergone radical alteration from decade to decade. Change is so very common that even your deterioration from old age to death has not moved me.

Does this mean that I am callous and unfeeling? No, I think not. I am merely sobered to the ways of my family. Mother taught me not to be shocked by right-angled turns in the middle of a straightaway. I have learned my lesson thoroughly, not to be surprised, not to over-sentimentalize and not to be moved by the loss of any kind. Mother and I lost each other long ago, when our fierce independence required us to take our own paths. Those winding trails led us to our true selves for sustenance alone, for breath in the middle of this suffocating world. Most of what we discovered along the way is ordinary, but you were not ordinary, mom. The ‘others’ could never understand you. You never fit in. You were

conditioned to ignore anything false that might have lowered you to standards set by others. Pining over mother's death is not in the cards, for you have taught me indirectly to avoid the trappings of social mores by living the life of an artist-warrior. Your fears never became an excuse to stop believing in yourself. Joyful enthusiasm was always part of your energy, even in death, for having lived so very well and for so very long a brilliant, creative life.

It is difficult to imagine not existing. To me, thinking involves consciousness and consciousness is life. Consciousness flying out every which way describes the activity of the universe and then death, consciousness in limbo. What happens to all those little souls floating in space? Do they communicate to each other? Will we communicate, mother, now that you've gone? Is my dead father out there trying to speak to me? I feel not. Rather he exists in memory only, sending messages of approval every now and then, supporting my choices when they are sane enough. So much has escaped into thin air; too many thoughts and yet not enough of them.

Heaven is not it, nor hell, nor any pat solution to explain the loss of a mother. There is something simpler going on. Perhaps the incomprehensible nature of things is right and proper; the laws of nature, death, birth, more death, bodies, souls passing on to other plains, this sensation of 'self' when I pay attention to my thoughts. I put my heart and soul into all of it, all the failures and new beginnings. I tried to complete all of it as best I could. God was never in the mix. Maybe that was an error of judgment but probably not. I did it myself with mother's help, the little tasks involved, the workaday involvements that amounted to a life and then what?

Craving a cigarette. Why? Smoking won't solve much. A story lies here, somewhere. I am not completely in the dark. Indeed, there is a kernel of a story here. The idea is forming, some relationship maybe, a linear thought to the finale and possibly a meaningful existence in the end? Wouldn't it be nice to find a beginning? But the beginning was birth, which unfolded into a life, and those dying all around me suggest what this is leading to—those floating souls again in limbo, a kind of purgatory waiting for the next level to happen.

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Raymond J. Barry is an actor, writer and visual artist. His screen credits include major roles in the television series *Gotham* and *Justified*, and the movies *Training Day*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Dead Man Walking*. More on his life and work can be found at [raymondjbarry.org](http://raymondjbarry.org).

Image: Wappinger Falls, New York