

A Letter to My Daughters

November 15th, 2020

Hi Girls,

If you are reading this letter, I must be dead and you've been rummaging in my underwear drawer among all those unopened pantyhose packages. Welcome. I hope you can read this scrawl and I promise this is the only unexpected letter you'll find. Do you remember this box? Those carefully designed flowers on the blue paint. One of you gave it to me for Mother's Day years ago. I wish I could remember which of you it was.

I'm sorry for dying, but I don't think I'll mind being dead. For heaven's sake, I'll be ninety soon. I've had a wonderful life—two husbands and you three lovely daughters. And stories. So many stories. But I do have something on my mind.

It's been seven years since that dinner in Stockholm in 2013. You were right. I shouldn't have gone. It was too much. Too far away. Too many time zones. I was too old. I should have done what Bob Dylan did a few years ago when he sent Patti Smith to sing his song for him. Margaret would have gone for me if I'd asked her. I've been ashamed to tell you what happened at that dinner.

At the beginning of the evening, the guests pestered me with questions. It was rude but I didn't take them seriously. At most, they'd skimmed a few of my stories, read a New Yorker review or scanned Wikipedia. But I managed a few platitudes—*Yes, my childhood days in Ontario were influential. Yes, raising children and divorce were difficult. Writing is just a matter of instinct and hard work, lots of hard work. The best way you can become a writer, the only training is to read*—that seemed to satisfy them. At any rate, they moved on to annoy someone else.

Finally, we were seated at the long banquet tables. I sat in a line of spectacled men squeezed into tuxedos and accompanied by taffeta-gowned

and bejewelled companions. The faint scent of mothballs and beeswax hung over the table. You girls were right. Those patent shoes did crush my toes but it would have been wrong to kick them off under the table.

Each table setting had six sets of gold cutlery and five different sizes of crystal goblets, all glistening in the candlelight. The gentleman beside me caught my eye and introduced himself. It was impossible to hear what he said over the loud conversations and the chinking and tinkling of the glasses and china. My hearing aid had packed it in during the previous night's dinner and I'd forgotten to bring the kit with all the supplies and extra batteries.

Physics, I think he said but then I remembered I'd met another fellow who was also physics—particles or something. He seemed to be at a loss for words particularly after I identified myself as a short-story writer from Canada. It was difficult for me to talk to him without staring at the food stains on his bow tie.

The waiters were serving dessert, a frothy fruity meringue thing when the physics man picked up the delicate coffee spoon off the table and slipped it into the pocket of his white waistcoat. To do such a thing at the Nobel Prize dinner?

And before I could stop myself. "Did you just steal a teaspoon?"

He glared at me, wide-eyed behind his smudged spectacles, propped below bushy white eyebrows. "Everybody takes one. We're expected to."

I flushed and turned away from his stare. "They do?" I stammered.

How did he know that everyone stole a spoon? Did scientists talk about such things at their meetings or in the corridors?

I clutched the gold-stemmed crystal goblet and focused on the tiny bubbles rising in the remainder of my champagne. We sat silently while I worried about the next reasonable thing to say. I should have asked him if he was also planning to take a dessert fork.

And then I thought about those other writers. Who had Doris sat beside when she attended? Did she steal a spoon? Did she put it in a shadowbox over the fireplace? Was it listed in her will for a particular grandchild? And what about Nadine or Toni? Or that Polish woman whose name I have difficulty remembering? What did they do? But suddenly, I wanted to have a spoon too.

What was I thinking? And this is the part that's difficult for me to share with you. I stole a spoon because I was jealous of all those men I imagined were tucking coffee spoons into their waistcoats.

Over the following few months, my spoon became a talisman—a magical thing. Each morning, I'd remove it from the box, polish it with the same cloth I use for my glasses and place it on my writing desk. "Good morning spoon." I'd say. "Let's see what we can do today." I'd squeeze it in my palm, feeling the firmness of the cold metal and the quieting of my worsening tremor. It was my ally, a source of strength. I believed it would help me write. Perhaps, complete another collection of stories. I did draft a few stories but not enough for another collection. And I know now that what I truly wanted was more time—time to resist my advancing frailty, time to keep writing. I'm sorry I didn't tell you girls how fragile I felt.

You'll find my spoon wrapped in its cloth and tucked inside the box where you found this letter—my magical spoon. Maybe you'll find some magic in those drafts I wrote. But my poor stolen spoon cannot delay the progression of my dear life. It was wrong of me to steal it. It doesn't belong here. Return it to Stockholm for me, girls.

Love you, Mum.