



Voyage round my mother and father

In this extract from her memoir, **Kate Llewellyn** finds, after her mother's death, a closeness and understanding the two could not achieve in life

I DID not love my mother unconditionally until the hour she died. From then on, I understood her. What it was between us, I do not know, but barely an hour went by when we were together that there was not some quarrel or tension between us. That my mother loved me, I did not doubt. But somehow I seemed to aggravate her. To look at me seemed to annoy her.

I did not spend time imagining my mother's grief when my father died, nor her battle to learn to live alone. She seemed to manage well enough, and when she told me, years later, that she sometimes drank sherry to help her bear the pain, she was deeply ashamed. But I thought it was sensible and told her so.

She was never a drinker, except for sometimes sipping from my father's small glass of muscat that he had some nights before dinner. When I published my first book of poems, *Trader Kate & the Elephants*, she said because I had used some four-letter words in the book, "I was so upset and drank so much sherry that I fell down in the passage. Now I can't go to the bowling club because what will they think? And what would your father say?"

I thought coldly that since he was dead there was nothing he could say. Then she added, "I have sent your book to Tucker!" — in other words, to the oldest living male in our family, because she thought he could now deal with me and my vulgarities.

I had a long letter from my mother adding further thoughts about her disgust and disappointment. I took the letter outside and burnt it in the incinerator.

I learnt a lesson over that book. I rang my mother one day and said, "I have written a book about female sexuality. It is a book of erotica. Please don't read it. I don't want you ringing me up and saying that you had to get drunk or were too ashamed to go to the bowling club. So I am warning you, if you decide to read it, I don't want you ringing me up." She said, "Right, I won't read it," and she didn't and from then on the problem was solved. Until, that is, I wrote *The Waterlily* and she rang me up and said, "I nearly burst with pride!"

When Persephone went down to the under-

world with Pluto, did she mourn her mother as her mother mourned her? I don't think so. And it did not bother me too much when I left my mother and went to live in Sydney, taking my daughter with me. I left blithely and heartlessly as a bird from its nest. I knew she would be upset but did not think how she would mourn and how isolated and lonely she would be. It was Demeter who mourned and caused winter to fall on the earth, and what better description of grief is there than the word "winter".

When my mother died in her 94th year, I was holidaying on my friend's orchard in Queensland. After Patricia rang and told me my mother had died, I watched the television news. I found it amazing that they did not announce her death. The world had altered and I thought that the world would be interested. But it was not. I discovered that as Icarus fell out of the sky, as in the Auden poem, *The Musee des Beaux Arts*, the ploughman went on ploughing and the dog went on about its doggy business.

After the funeral, my friend Wendy and I went to pack up my mother's room at the retirement village. I kept her dressmaking scissors and her reading glasses, thinking that soon enough I would be needing those glasses. I had, it is unpleasant to admit, a feeling of freedom. My mother was not there to run the show. I could do as I wished. And it was not displeasing to me. No, not at all. In fact, I felt triumphant.

My mother used to send wooden fruit boxes every fortnight or so to me by train, or with any friends who she knew were driving to the city who could drop the boxes in to me. They were filled with three or four dozen eggs, bags of unshelled almonds, jars of fig and apricot jam, lemons, honey, cough mixture, homemade biscuits, and anything else she could fit in that would travel safely and be of use to me, the one she worried over. And how glibly I greeted these gifts. I never understood the love and anxiety behind them, the effort and the work; I took it all for granted. I took it as the air I breathed. When, years later, I had to buy eggs in a carton for the first time in my life, I felt resentful, as if I had been asked to buy a box of air. (That was long before plain water was sold in bottles.)

I think that it did not matter to my mother how



old I was — the worry was there. Now I see that the dose of oxytocin I got at the birth of both my children lasts lifelong. It does not matter that they are in their 40s. The anxiety, that even though you know it is foolish, even comical, you can do nothing about.

My mother had a pithy way of expressing herself that was crammed full of eloquence and imagery. “The cauliflowers I planted took off like fire up a cat’s back!”

“Giving birth is like being run over by a train.”

“Never go to your husband first. Let him come to you.” (Her bridesmaid Jean opened her arms to Russell, later her husband, and Russell, behind Jean’s back, was making eyes at my mother.)

“You children are so lucky. You have a wonderful father; Dad only has one drink at the hotel with his friends and comes home.”

And when I took her for an outing when she lived in a retirement village, “Oh, I’m like a dog let off a chain!”

Then later, “Nouns elude me.” This comes to mind increasingly as I have the same problem.

I was, I suppose, besotted with my father. He could do no wrong. Nor, as far as I can glean, did he. Loved by the citizens of the town as well as his family, he seemed incapable of doing anything wrong. Once I saw him lift a large jug of milk to his lips and drink from it. I was astounded. I did not know that you could do such a thing, and to find my father of all people doing it shocked me. I have tried to find something to hold against him, to blame him for, to have him taken from the pedestal on which I had him firmly lodged, and on which my mother had long before installed him. She then, not unkindly, turned my head upwards to this marvellous man, the man she had and the one whom I could not possess as she

possessed him first. Was this the source of our grief, our trouble? The reason we could not be in a room 10 minutes before we found something to quarrel about?

My father escaped both my mother and myself by dying young. My mother grieved for him for years. She said, “It is like having your leg cut off. To bear it, I pretend he’s only gone on holidays.” I, on the other hand, hardly grieved at all; I just took it in as a silent disaster and, having shed so few tears, chose what seemed a completely sensible thing to do and tried to kill myself. Before this, for months I had thought that I must get into the grave with him and warm him up. My unstable grip on reality was growing in those months after my father’s death. It was, in the end, writing that saved me. What I couldn’t say, I



Lifetime of memories: Author Kate Llewellyn

could write. I always thought, and those who knew us would say, that I loved my father in a different way to the way I loved my mother and that I loved him more. But whom do I quote, whom do I miss, whom do I think of daily? Whom do I wish I could make it up to? To be a better daughter to? No, it is not him; it is my mother I think of. And it is to my mother, whom I now understand in a way I never could while she was alive, that I am grateful. I see what she was trying to do. Although she drove her children mad with admonitions, scoldings and advice, I see she tried to guide us.

*This is an edited extract from *The Dressmaker’s Daughter* by Kate Llewellyn (Fourth Estate, \$33).*

The author will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival.



Regret: Llewellyn with her husband, Richard, and son



Sweet frugality: And with her adored father, misunderstood mother and younger brothers