

Laura Bissell

The Ancient Parchment: Legacies of my Mother

Bio: Laura Bissell (she/her) is a writer, performance-researcher, educator and poet and her creative writing has been published in *New Writing Scotland*, *Tip Tap Flat* and *From Glasgow to Saturn*. Her first non-fiction book *Bubbles: Reflections on Becoming Mother* (Luath) was published in December 2021 and she is co-author/editor of *Performance in a Pandemic* (Routledge, 2021) and *Making Routes: Journeys in Performance* (Triarchy, 2021). She lives in Glasgow with her partner, daughter and two cats.

This story is about being a mother but also being mothered, being a daughter, and the ways in which new motherhood has brought my understanding of this into sharper focus. The legacy of my experience of being mothered impacts how I mother, a lineage passed down. My mother is a matter-of-fact Scottish woman who has been the single biggest female influence on my life. At the age of 30 she had just found out she was pregnant with me when her own mother died suddenly of a heart attack aged 56. My mother hadn't told her yet that she was pregnant so my grandmother never knew about me, the life that was to come. My mother (now in her early 70s) has solemnly told me many times over the years that she walked around with a towel round her neck for a week after her mother died to catch her tears. As a child I felt the loss of my mother's mother keenly, even though I had never known her. When I found out I was becoming a mother myself, I wanted to tell my mother immediately, should the same sudden loss inexplicably happen.

During pregnancy, I began to wear the pendant my mother had given to her own mother. It was round and silver, the size of a two pence piece with a ridge around the edge and the symbol of two fish intertwined in the middle. Pisces. We were all Pisces: my mother, her mother who I had never known, and me. On the back, word welts: *With Love*. Curving, looping, flowing letters scratched into the solid metal. I had treasured this pendant since I was young as a talisman of the women that had preceded me. Although my interest in astrology waned as I grew older, my affinity with water increased, and I would hold the silver pendant in my hands until the cold metal grew warm. I liked to feel the rough engraving under the pads of my fingertips. I had never seen my grandmother's handwriting and I knew that this curving hand was not it, but the hand of whoever had engraved it over

40 years ago. Nevertheless, I felt that this *was* her hand, that I could recognise the trace of my own mother's curving, left-handed loops in the shape of the cursive letters. My daughter breaks the chain of women in the family born under the sign of water but I will pass the necklace on to her nonetheless. I also pass on to her my surname as we gave her my family name (which I kept on getting married) rather than her father's, traces of both the matriarchal and patriarchal lines being woven into her story.

When I became a mother, I often felt an oscillation between my roles and relationships. My daughter sees me as mother, but to my mother I am daughter. This feeling of being simultaneously adult and child occurs frequently when we are all together, all generations in the same room. I missed this so much when the lockdowns began. I look at pictures of my mum when she is my age. We look the same.

One of the traditions in my family has been my parents, sister and I (and more recently my daughter) making the Christmas cake every year. In late October or early November we would congregate in a kitchen, usually my mother's, to put together the alchemy of ingredients that would result in our family Christmas cake. This would be a vast volume of mixed fruit, some rustically chopped glace cherries and walnuts, chopped almonds, dark brown sugar, flour, large globs of ginger (left in big chunks, my mum loves to get a big burst of taste of each of the ingredients) and a heady mixture of cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and dried ginger too (for good measure). Thick black spoons of treacle would bind together the concoction (only ever used at Christmas, after which my sister and I would alternately take the rest of the red and gold tin home to languish in the cupboard till the next year when a new tin would be bought regardless) and then each of us would heave the wooden spoon around the hefty batter and give it a lucky stir where we would make a wish as we bound the ingredients together. Why so many months before Christmas? So that the near-black cake that would emerge after three or four hours in the oven could sit, wrapped in two layers of greaseproof paper and two layers of tinfoil, in a darkened cupboard being brought out every fortnight to get doused in whisky. In these weeks of steeping in the dark, the plentiful fruit would grow rich and boozy, ready for its appearance at the table for Christmas dinner. It would emerge a few days before and day by day be armored with: first a layer of apricot jam mixed with boiling water to form a seal for any wayward crumbs; then a thick layer of marzipan (my cousin's favourite); then finally, on Christmas Eve, after an excruciating arm-juddering session of beating egg-whites, glycerin and icing sugar (with a

dash of lemon) using my mother's hand mixer (which is around 30 years old and looks it) the final layer of royal icing, manipulated into peaks with a flourish to resemble little mounds of snow.

The recipe for the Christmas cake is a (now brown and stained) ripped-out page of a 1982 *Women's Own* magazine. Referred to as 'the ancient parchment', for the last 15 years or so it has been kept in a plastic poly pocket to keep it from falling apart. My sister and I have taken photographs of it, should it completely disintegrate and (horror of horrors), the recipe be lost from our family. One year, my mother thought she had lost it and Christmas was very nearly ruined seven weeks before it happened. Luckily, it appeared squashed beneath the pages of the *Hamlyn All Colour Cookbook*, another of my mother's classics, and the ritual of baking the Christmas cake was able to go ahead as planned. The recipe for the royal icing was from *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* – a Victorian tome which lived on the top shelf of a kitchen cupboard. My sister and I used to mimic my mother by saying 'Mrs Beeton says!' while my mum would heave the book down to consult on some recipe or another when trying to prepare for a dinner party. The ritual of making the Christmas cake, from the buying of ingredients (always the same but still worthy of discussion every year), the day of combining ingredients and lining baking tins, in a kitchen full of the smell of spices and the warm house as it baked for hours on end, allowing the essence of Christmas to permeate the entire house, its regular dousing, then the days of various layering until it was ready to be adorned with the traditional decorations. These were: a Fimo angel my sister made when she was younger (the running joke in the family being that the end of a pencil my sister had used to indent her mouth has made the angel eternally look like a blow-up doll), a lopsided Santa made by me and, if we are with my aunt's family (as we usually were), some ancient decorations from my uncle's mother, devoid of all paint but apparently once a Santa and snowman. These various oddities on top of the beautifully peaked snow of the rock-hard royal icing perhaps made for a strange looking final offering, but everyone round the table always said it looked beautiful.

In the first year of my daughter's life, only five weeks old, she was there in the kitchen, a little starfish in her Pavlik harness, held over the cake to do her (supported) good luck stir before falling asleep on her papa's fleece for the remainder of the proceedings. The next year, at one year old, she was more animated, enjoying the stir, bopping about in my kitchen with my parents and my sister. My mum shrieked that she was going to get the

mixture everywhere and we all laughed. I have it on video. I am holding her, she wears a red festive dress and I have on my Christmas jumper for the occasion. We are happy and laughing, we are together. You can't tell from the video, but the kitchen smells enticing and we all retire to the living room for a glass of wine while the oven does its magic in turning the brown gloop speckled with a million raisins and orange bits into the magical cake we all love.

In the run up to Christmas 2020, we talk in somber tones about what will happen to the Christmas cake this year. My parents buy the ingredients alone and my mum says she will make it herself in her kitchen. I ask her to FaceTime us and think that maybe we will bake along, together but remote, continuing the ritual at a distance. On the Saturday she makes it herself, sending a blurry picture of my dad's lucky stir. We are not together, we can't be, and the ritual of decades is broken. The cake is baked. I don't smell it and no-one apart from my parents had their lucky stirs. I am bereft. As Christmas together seems less and less likely, my mum sticks the cake in the freezer for a time when we can be together again. Once we contract COVID-19 in mid-December, the cake is joined by the turkey and the pigs in blankets, waiting patiently until the pandemic is over and we can defrost Christmas. We did it last year due to mum's surgery and had Christmas 2019 in February 2020. Christmas 2020 finally happens in July 2021.

The ancient parchment sleeps in its poly pocket, tucked inside a recipe book to keep it flat. The traditions of our childhood will be passed on to our daughters, my sister and I now mothers to our own girls. Even if the paper finally disintegrates, the ritual will continue, the lineage of cooking together in a warm kitchen, the intoxicating smells of cinnamon and cloves filling the room and our hearts will persist, a legacy of my mother.

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