

# In Search of Mothers

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In the beginning there was the wave. There was darkness and out of it came a black wave: black in the dark yet clearly seen since it came with force bringing light of a kind. It soared high and straight, then dropped, curled back beneath its own surged peak. It was stored in the print, thick black print in her head, of an upside down “V” tipped at an angle. “I have a wave,” Maria sometimes said. But that meant little to anyone except herself, and even to herself it was often a matter of fact that she kept the black print of a wave in her head, until it was fully alive again.

But there are other beginnings. There are beginnings of my interest in Maria’s story, of my going back to find her, and my own longings to see patterns in the dark. She showed me not what I half expected. She showed me, most of all, not to expect anything more than surging shapes which then recede.

“Those designs you want,” Maria said, “made up of words beneath the consistency of light bulbs, might be exciting if it wasn’t that they stay in print through day and night, and get taken too seriously.” I went to Maria for a certain story, but learnt to see something of her story instead.

There is, then, another beginning: the beginning of Maria. Her father had hoped for a son, but when she was a girl, wanted her to be called “Mary” after his mother. His wife, Hannah, however, was quite determined on greater celebration than that dour, goodly lady, and the baby was christened “Maria”. Perhaps Hannah also saw the beginnings of Michael’s misgivings over his choice of bride, in his wanting a daughter to follow his homely mother rather than his semi-domesticated, vibrant wife. But, whatever her father intended by calling her “Mary, Mary” in time, he, like everyone else, called her Maria. Hannah was a well known singer and Maria remembers the first

years of her life resounding with song. She thought the songs were all for and about herself, but later recognised that few songs had, in fact, been generated for her alone; she could see that when she stood back to watch her mother singing on without her. Maria cannot recall a particular time at which she began to hold back, curled about herself, instead of singing along. There is no incident to mark the change, and the not singing almost certainly occurred on days when she also sang, but for all that it was a dramatic, irrevocable move. Maria considered whether it was made out of loyalty to her father, but decided it was not: it was made, more likely, out of a need not to be as carried along by her mother. She stood, instead, in wide-eyed silence just watching, and she saw things she had not seen before between her father and her mother, as she watched her father with an ache of concern. She said nothing. Occasionally words did come to Maria but they did not flow in song, not then and not for many years. Sometimes from behind the rich, heavy, blue velvet curtains, she would watch her mother practising at the piano. How often this happened is impossible to say. It is one of those memories that feel definitive, the certainty of its importance having nothing to do with the accumulated weight of recurrence, for watch she did, to feel the power and the loneliness of not singing, and of not being sung to either. She, who had been swept along in mother's song, carried along in mother's arms, felt something recede, and thinks the print of the wave dates from then. Certainly one vivid memory of the wave dates from when she might have been four; Maria, having flown at Hannah with angry fists, was sent smartly to bed, one evening over seventy years ago, and the wave came to her as a glory, shining with light and meaning. She must either ride, or be battered beneath that breaking surf! The wave was not new, it was something deeply familiar, but the seeing of it was something new. She would be caught out, under a crashing wave, time and time again, but, for all that, the "black wave" was the most glittering of her childhood gems.

At about the same time, but probably a little later, Hannah was in hospital having conceived and miscarried. Maria was not quite at school. Over the years Hannah had often been away singing, sometimes for a week at a time, and Maria had spent many days with her cousins, but father or Grandmother Mary had always been there for her to return to sleep in her own bed. This time Grandmother Mary was either too old or perhaps dead, and father too busy, so she stayed all night with her cousins instead. It is still a memory full of fascinations for Maria. The visit was certainly exciting, but she wonders how she actually breathed that week, for her whole chest was held fixed for the duration. There were four cousins: Katherine, almost grown up at eleven or twelve, Albert aged nine, and the twins Edward and George, who were nearly six and a year older

than Maria. When she was there for day visits, Maria, who adored Albert, relied on him in uncertain hope that he would not leave her entirely at the mercy of the twins. (Katherine was in a world apart and more severe with disturbances than any adult Maria knew.) But when Maria moved in with the twins, into Albert's bed, while Albert moved to share a room with Katherine, Maria discovered that her need for protection melted. Before the pair had united to tease her, but now that she had a place in their midst, she discovered power as each sought her allegiance. There were other changes too: by day she felt at home there, but to stay all night turned it into suspect territory. She found they ate bread after dinner at night! Maria had only ever been allowed fruit. Her uncle didn't do the dishes, nor did he bath the children, so that Maria began to shrink uncertainly from his easy friendly attentions, not as a budding feminist but because she saw with misgivings that he was not a predictable father after all. And through everything was the strange warning in the smell that accumulated over night and during breakfast. Even outside during the day Maria could feel her nostrils twitching to make sense of the hidden but ominous, which surfaced as oppressive, smell.

That time still puzzles Maria, not because she was a little bewildered, flattened and too wide eyed, but because that time seems a concentration of how she was for years in going out into the world. "Of course," she added, "I would also say that my childhood was fortunate. And a picture of those years, from around four to twelve, is certainly not a consistent one, for it is also easy to recall the magic of that time – the sheer delight of willing suspension and of stepping out into somewhere." Hannah, on rare evenings, would come dressed in glitter and sparkle to kiss goodnight the child lying in bed by muted lamplight. If she was singing locally Hannah usually left before Maria was in bed but there were the times when she would sing at a ball, or only in the second half of a local concert, and then she would leave the house already dressed in low cut evening dresses with jewels, and Maria being kissed goodnight would be sent riding high through a night of stars. Even by day, with her boy cousins, she could find herself in magic worlds. But Maria feels that it was not until her teens that a certain vitality came flooding back actually within herself. She recalls being eleven and swirling in excitement with a new found friend.

"At last there were forces to ride once more. For years I'd kept, quite matter of factly, the print of a wave in my head. For years I'd paddled round in the shallows, with the breaking waves and foam, watching and wondering, a wide eyed rather irritating little thing I expect."

"Even the self-forgetful play had been in the shallows apart from the magic times."

Then, suddenly, she found she was back in deep water where riding the waves or falling off became a serious matter, to Maria at least! Her childhood sketches which had been in black and

white, as far as she could resist the pressures of teachers and paint bearing relatives, became full blooded and rich with colours. She painted with fervour and semi-secrecy, paintings, easily melodramatic or sentimental, which lacked all discipline as she swung through grandiose hopes to great despair: drawn on by intoxicating friendships or dropped in total abandonment she poured out images. And she did, slowly, develop a sense of those fluctuating forces, her imagination and her desire, where wave after wave might reach a peak, only to recede.

When Maria was nineteen and an art student her still loved cousin Albert married Sylvie, and Maria became more fond of Sylvie than any other woman during those years of continuing tempest. Sylvie was tall and majestic, even at twenty-three, and stood with reliable assurance in the eyes of the nineteen year old Maria. Maria in dainty cream and tiny forget-me-nots was bridesmaid to Sylvie dressed in the heavy splendour of a queen. Maria wanted nothing of domesticity and children then, but delighted in Sylvie's competence and energy for such matters. Sylvie could take spirited and easy care of a husband, a child within a year, and a home, and keep these dubious treasures just in case Maria should ever want to share them. Not that that seemed likely. Maria dropped in for a meal whenever it suited her and took for granted an interest in all her dealings with a world that was proving too complicated. She did not see the effort it might take to feed extras, and give attention, as well as deal with one, then another, child. Nor was Maria the only one to share Sylvie's happiness and maternal generosity over those years. Her loving and giving flowed freely. This is a romance of Sylvie, of course, but it is how Maria saw Sylvie during those early years of friendship.

It was through Maria's pride in Sylvie that she could see what she admired and wanted in some part for herself. Maria did not, she was clear, ever expect to be like Sylvie, but Sylvie seemed to ride with both arms full open to embrace even sea spray or wind, while Maria who fell off regularly, to be crushed beneath for days on end, rode cautiously prepared for falling off, and through her love for Sylvie, she hoped to share that more sturdy balance and confidence. To Maria loving seemed a dangerous business and it was hard to stay open hearted for long, whereas Sylvie appeared unflinching, never seeming to curl away. Maria was twenty-two when she married Martin, who had been a fellow art student, and several years later when Maria was expecting their first child she and Martin moved to a flat near Sylvie and Albert. Sylvie at the time was pregnant with her third child and it became a tender time between the two women. Maria hesitated with every change to her body while Sylvie, recognising the familiar, paused only with the need to rest or curl about the baby in delight, but the bond of being together through the strange and amazing was far stronger than the differences of their experience.

Maria gave birth to a daughter and at last she sang again. Words flowed and fell into song for her child whom she loved deeply, but still the days stretched too long and it became an effort to sustain delight against the weight of dreariness. It was Sylvie who could emerge from a long morning inside with ill children or endless hand washing, to let the trees surprise her. Sylvie, at least, was fully occupied Maria thought as she set to fight the bleakness that threatened to seep in and saturate the days with a baby daughter.

“Sylvie and I hovered near the edge of trap, of my being weak and she being the capable, strong, one; that was how I engineered time for painting with small children. Sylvie would swoop and clear space about me for an hour or two.” But Sylvie’s greater attraction for Maria had always been that Sylvie staked out what Maria wanted strengthened in herself; she did not like to feel feeble, but did like to feel herself move fast, to move into competition with herself, with time, with others or with the sea itself, surging on and on and taking pride in coping with every wave. Maria knew well enough that it was easier to find company among women out to compare how hard it all was; the surf too rough and relentless when all one wanted was a break! With her first pregnancy Maria had sensed the powerful current drawing her into the large pool of martyrs and had fought it tenaciously, never daring to give in and complain that the baby kicked painfully through the night or ground itself into her bowels by day. In the end Sylvie was more important for keeping Maria in fighting spirits than for taking care of her as a weaker sister and it dawned on Maria that it was a strength in her which demanded a couple of hours for painting each day. She came to feel proud of needing that time, instead of collapsing and whimpering for it, and became strong in ordering both her day and Sylvie so that on alternate days each woman had two hours to herself.

The beginning of making clothes during hours free of children happened without plan. Sylvie loved bright colours. She was an extremely competent dressmaker and sewed for all the family – jackets, coats and all – with Maria designing anything special. The local women all made their own clothes, or went to the dressmaker, and there were few attractive clothes to buy. One year the winter materials in town were very drab and Sylvie decided on an expedition with all the children to look for something more cheerful in Auckland since Albert, an engineer with the railways, could get them all a free seat. The two women, with all their children, went exploring the city and came upon a shop full of impractical but exquisite materials where each urged the other to choose a luxurious piece before heading off to look for more useful fabrics. On their way Maria stopped at a boutique full of extravagance and flourish. Her eyes fed on the elegance. She begged Sylvie to go in and ask the price of a full skirted rainbow with fine lace thrown over the shoulder. The price, of course, seemed fantastic but Maria was loathe to leave that dress in the window.

“But you could design just as good yourself with materials from that shop back there,” Sylvie said. And somehow, there and then on the pavement they decided Maria would design, Sylvie would sew, and they would sell to smart stores. Sylvie marched straight back in to the immaculate boutique, trailing Maria and six children, grubby with city and palliative ice-cream, to announce that she was a dressmaker, Maria the fashion designer, and they wondered if the shop would consider taking their exclusive garments. She offered to send samples of material and the patterns within a week! Then Maria began to design clothes she never had occasion to wear. In her own life practicalities and “common sense” were against much indulgence in glamour apart from the annual ball, but it was a delight to dress the fairy godmother in sequins and a low neckline, ready to kiss a small girl goodnight. A small girl who might lie tight chested lest a good deep breath should blow the smell and glitter back to ordinariness. Sylvie sewed the delicate taffeta and silks into a swirl of colour or a stunning line. They never made two gowns the same but they sometimes had an order for “something similar”. However, they made only a dress a fortnight, or less if the children got measles.

Then Albert died in a train disaster. He was with the driver, waiting to be dropped off at an engine needing repairs, when the train turned a corner to crash into massive rocks on the line. The cliffs had collapsed. Sylvie had four children. Their home was a railway house which she had to leave and her meagre widows pension was a disgrace. At the time, Maria watched Sylvie cope with awe and admiration, any questions or reservations came much later. It seemed to Maria that Sylvie dared to grieve as fully as she'd loved without fear that she would slip out of living (as all the cliché advice seemed to imply was likely to happen if one gave way to lament) and the awful practical problems did not overwhelm her. While Maria felt numb and frightened after Albert's death Sylvie seemed to keep going through regular outbursts of weeping, with plenty of fight. In no time she moved house and within a year had set up a small clothing factory to cater for the local market. The factory made school uniforms, shirts and had a dressmaking service. Practicalities ruled now. Maria began to be less involved with the dressmaking since there was little design and once the factory was running reasonably she returned to painting. One day she found herself pregnant with a third child. Maria was sure that, soon enough, she would find herself beached, cold and wet on an endless path of stones up from the shore with screaming children every where, and yet that pregnancy was, on some days, an incomparable exhilaration. While for Sylvie, Maria's pregnancy became some fertility rite of her own. Sylvie would not have another child, of that she was decided, yet because it was so final she ached to be pregnant. Through Maria's unplanned bulging of fertility both women felt they had tapped once more into some source which pulsed firm and

relentless beneath the surface. Once in the current they could only go, astounded by the ride which seemed to have saved them from a stagnant pool, of death. After grief it was great relief to flow with a flood of tenderness and hope and be carried into the future. Even where their common sense wanted its weight of caution the two women were bound together where all that seemed to be required was that one be abandoned enough to go with the current. If some days of the pregnancy settled with misgiving or exhaustion on Maria, Sylvie remained determined to extract the maximum hope and excitement. She softened with aching tenderness for her memories and her own four children and drew them into sharing the coming baby. The throb of love Sylvie had felt for each of her children as new born creatures lingered round even bad days when their fights and her frustrations threatened to shatter any goodwill several times each day. And love flowed round them all when the new baby was eventually born. He was named Bertrand but called "Bertie" as Albert had been. Bertie no doubt disturbed his cousins' days, since Sylvie liked to take him regularly and loved him deeply, but it was his own brother and sister who made it clear that Bertie might be sweet sometimes, might have generated more gentleness in the world about them, but would definitely have been better if he had gone elsewhere. However, remarkably quickly, Bertie put his two mothers on short rations, since most of all he wanted to crawl after the bigger children, and his presence was taken for granted as the last of the seven children.

When the war came Martin went away. Maria found it very hard and began to be more puzzled how Sylvie coped with Albert's absence. Maria knew then that she understood little of Sylvie for all that they had been close to each other for over ten years. Martin had been at the centre of Maria's life, although the will to be there for him or not came only in part from what he drew, for the rest it was Sylvie, and the other women she loved, who kept her riding, open to him and to sexuality. Without the love of Sylvie, and the sharing of daily trials with her women friends, Maria knew she would have turned from Martin long ago. Now he was gone across the sea to a remote and brutal war. Maria was determined to cope but something vital was gone from her. There was a flattening weight deep on her chest most of the time. Sylvie did not like to see this in her friend and Maria learnt to hide it, but Maria also learnt to stand back from the friendship, and to wonder. Maria saw that where, at times, Sylvie felt no love she nevertheless kept going with sheer determination; Maria was more likely to curl defeated about herself. While Maria did not doubt that her own reaction was less attractive, at least no one could fail to distinguish her loving from her holding back. When Maria stood amid unwashed, unpyjamaed children, shouting with frustration and feeling battered by it all, both she and the children, exchanging knowing looks with

each other, were very clear it was a bad day! Whereas Sylvie in a low mood would have the children in bed faster than usual, and better scrubbed, and it was less clear to her or the children that something was wrong. Maria began to feel that Sylvie confused the satisfaction of taking pleasure in children with the satisfaction of managing them. She also remembered something Sylvie had said years before which had stuck. Maria, talking about the birth of her second child, spoke of how she faltered at the feel of the head ready to be pushed out – she remembered in a flash the sensation from the first birth of being wrenched apart by the vast, expanding mass – a sensation ridden like the prelude to a fantastic orgasm. But this time she cried out, “Not again! I can’t do it again!”

She had, of course, done it again and done it more carefully so she did not tear, but in speaking of it with Sylvie, Sylvie confided back that she had baulked at one whole labour. Sylvie’s invalid mother had died during the pregnancy and Sylvie’s grief came over her as the contractions began. Consumed by craving to keep the baby tucked inside her she was in fierce resistance to the labour. The only times during her labours that Maria held back, as against the head, she was convinced she would be shattered to pieces and pulverised, and could not comprehend how Sylvie had not screamed out for drugs or help as contraction after contraction smashed against her with excruciating pain, but Sylvie who was at home did not utter a sound. The pain and energy became concentrated until she understood perfectly concrete-chopping karate: she could have crushed a wall but contained the power instead. She had never felt stronger. At the end she gave in and with two pushes the baby was out. Maria shuddered a little in recalling that story. She could only be curious as to what would have happened if Sylvie had acknowledged the pain she could not ride and cried out against it, as she herself would have done.

Although the sparks of excitement there had been between the two women began to fade, and they were, perhaps, less intimate as friends, as “sisters” the two women remained entangled through the sharing of children and domestic chores. Sylvie’s life was hard but she had ways of keeping the world at bay. Sometimes there was only bread and cheese to take on a picnic but it would turn to a feast with a hunt for some onion and wild mint near the drain. Sylvie managed to keep a perpetual free rail pass for herself and her children, and thanks to the decency of the local ticket office could get free tickets for any friends sharing an outing. Perhaps there were not as many picnics, or trips to collect mussels, as Maria remembers but they are easier to recall than days of colds and long dreary hours, and outings with Sylvie certainly punctuate Maria’s memories of the war with three children. Maria’s now grown children remember the outings too, but they take Sylvie’s part for granted, and remember mainly the excitement of exploring and of maps, and

of not knowing where they were going. Like Martin they had to go into strange and alien lands to track down the lurking enemy. That travelling with seven children did not degenerate to shouts and slaps and ratty restrictions was the miracle of Sylvie to Maria, and that the children take for granted. Also Maria would never have thought of taking seven children on sometimes long journeys to unlikely places, as a pleasure, but the journeys became the highlight of their childhood years without Martin (and the fact that Maria cuddled with them longer at night, reading stories and chatting, because there was no Martin downstairs waiting for her). The children do remember, though, Sylvie's singing her deep throated songs of wild crocodiles. Perhaps Maria's pride in Sylvie's energy helped keep Sylvie going to sing or tell stories on those long train journeys. Who knows? Maria speculates for me only because years later she knew Sylvie just before her death as a big collapsed frame. And Maria could barely tolerate the weight of her.

During the years after the war Maria moved with Martin then went abroad. Her painting was recognised at last. She wrote regularly to Sylvie but Sylvie, always a bad correspondent, usually managed to send news of her children only at Christmas, and of herself wrote nothing. When Maria returned to New Zealand after an absence of over eight years she went straight to visit Sylvie, and her heart ached with guilt and lack of comprehension when she saw the slump in her friend. Sylvie's four children had left home and were scattered; each one of them as lively as Sylvie had been and everyone of them, except the youngest, in a rebellion Sylvie didn't seem to understand. Sylvie had sold her factory, to a much bigger company, several years before and was quite wealthy.

She had stayed on as manager, but "early retirement" was "suggested" because senior men of the owning company did not like a woman running the factory. Maria felt, however, that Sylvie had lost heart or had lost real interest in her factory before then, or she would have fought back. Instead Sylvie accepted it as the last blow. Nothing seemed to keep her going. Maria could only speculate that she, Maria, who had collapsed often had practice of surviving times of being underneath it all, while Sylvie who had thrown everything into staying on top saw collapse, not as a recurring cycle, but the failure of her life. Nobody needed her. She had no need to drive herself on, and saw no way out of depression. Maria tried but nothing helped draw Sylvie out, and within three months of Maria's return Sylvie was finally battered. She walked across the road, almost certainly with no conscious intentions, but too dulled to be alert, and was knocked down by a speeding lorry. She was dead a day later.

That was twenty years ago and I was barely twenty at the time. When I came back to find Maria, she said, “I know it’s Sylvie you really hope to find, but her I cannot give you, only something of what she meant to me.” And, she added, having read several articles of mine, “I doubt I can help you salvage Sylvie by showing she was an early feminist after all.”

Sylvie was certainly the only woman in business on any scale, in the town, but she saw no need to stand out, embattled, to assert rights. Albert’s death left a vacuum, a need for a money earner, and she moved to fill the gap. It was not until after the war when masses of women had moved into men’s roles, and there was a reaction, that Sylvie faced much challenge from the business world about her.

Besides, “Our struggle to make our lives was something we didn’t talk about really,” Maria said.

Although, while young, Maria had certainly pondered the different futures of her three boy cousins and herself. The boys were to become “something”, that was clear, and planning what “thing” they might become was a frequent preoccupation. Maria envied them. She could not imagine being transformed into anything, but expected to stay, half formed, waiting to be drawn out to, at least, flower once. As an adult she, and Sylvie, could see that many men had walked into strait jackets and, indeed, become “things”. They also saw that if they were to make more of themselves they must fight. For Maria it was a fight with herself to keep painting, to make time for friendships, to enjoy and love her children better, or to stop and celebrate the world rather than scuttle through it with ever recurring shopping lists in her head. While Sylvie was in perpetual and amusing battle with bureaucracy, to keep it in its place, and enjoyed challenging any pompous idiocies she saw in the world about her, just as much as she liked to close her door on the world and disregard it. Even during the years of greatest economic worry when she had to throw herself into financial concerns she would equally cut out to get on with picking apples or playing hide and seek, and had no patience with “indulgent men” who let their worldly struggles hang around the house. Other ideas and attitudes which undoubtedly influenced Sylvie, Maria could not pull out for me. “There are so many ideas, often contradictory, which take one along. It just isn’t possible to catch them all by the tail to haul them out,” Maria said. Her own daughter’s interest in feminism did set Maria chasing a legacy of ideas from being witness to her parents’ marriage, but “they were not the kind of ideas Sylvie and I were chasing, not then, although they were a vital part of us.”

“Certainly neither of us were carried along by our mothers’ values. Sylvie’s mother was, as you know, an invalid from Sylvie’s birth, with her husband managing everything. I presume that was why Sylvie could never let up being able to manage for herself. My own mother, Hannah, however, was fully confident of her power both in relation to men and to money. She was an asset. Her

voice was a real commodity, whereas my father owed his place to incessant bargaining with the world. Poor man!”

Michael managed a theatre as well as Hannah’s working life. He became thin and withered, then died, while relatively young, of cancer. Hannah still taught singing at eighty and sang, herself, at a local church concert in the week she died. It was easy for the child Maria to see that Hannah could afford to offend while Michael felt he could not. And Maria, very early, hoped that her painting would be good enough, and determined that her standards be rigorous enough, that she be not too much at the mercy of worldly judgements. She saw how easily men were corrupted and rarely envied them their easier place in the world. But she also wanted to be less overriding than the often imperious Hannah. Although Maria had no wish to be “instated as an early feminist”, as she called it, preferring instead to have her own struggles recognised, she could not help speculating whether, if feminist ideas had been in the air, she would have gone off with Martin in those years after the war.

Sylvie had four children and a factory and could not easily move. Maria cannot regret those enlivening years abroad, yet she had made her life as much with Sylvie as with Martin, and even before Sylvie’s terrible death Maria had never felt quite easy in accepting the traditional priority of going with a husband. However, if Maria has lived long enough to move with another current of ideas, and been able to reflect on certain of her previously unquestioned assumptions, Sylvie did not.

“And,” Maria said gently, “even if I could see more of Sylvie’s ideas, they would still not give you back Sylvie.”

It is undoubtedly true that Sylvie’s ideas about being female and a business woman, which I had hoped to unearth, would be so little of that Sylvie who has become part of the ground I stand on and the way I breath. This story is what I have understood of Maria, and how she sees Sylvie, though through Maria I find surprises, as well as openings for stories of that Sylvie who was my mother.

When I heard Maria was dying I felt panic; something of Sylvie would be irrevocably lost to me if I did not make contact with it through Maria. While she lay recuperating after an operation I managed to clear the hours to sit at her bedside. For two weeks Maria reclined and I sat by her. She talked freely of the past and Sylvie, and barely mentioned her unexpected recovery or recent operation except just before I reluctantly had to leave (although with promises to return with my family at Christmas) when she began, “I loved Sylvie’s company once, I know, and had more sheer fun with her than anyone in this life, except possibly my own children when they were small, but

they were a more mixed blessing. Sylvie could be very funny and outrageous, and I can convey so little of that at this time.”

“Before the operation I was filled with nostalgia for all my loves and held them close. Amusing anecdotes of Sylvie might have flowed freely if you’d come then. But the picture has moved, the waves are through everything: that is how it is now.” She lives, she said, in waiting for that one last wave which she will ride out alone, (although doctors say Maria is no longer dying).

While under anaesthetic Maria found herself floating above the operating table. Watching the pulsing blood below she watched the heart beat turn to waves: dark waves going back and back to a black tunnel. In following them to source she traced over all her days – a pattern both seamless and inevitable – and completely about her was her dead mother, fully present. Once through the black tunnel waves began to pulse with a haunting light, and she was drawn on exquisitely slowly to where all dissolved, at last, in a softly golden light. Then there was no movement, no wave: Maria became nothing other than the total peace.

Until, suddenly and with a great jarring, she found herself yanked back into living – they said later her heart had stopped – to be battered by violent pain. Nothing was explained. Certainly living and remembering could not revive the experience of dying, and there was only her faith that what had been had meaning such that waves pulsed with life again as Maria spoke of her past for me. She may well live another ten years now, she hopes she might, and, like the child she has been, she lives with a wave again; the wave that now promises her the sea one day.

