

## A Eulogy for My Mother: Alison Norma Fisk by Bruce Norman Fisk December 17, 2003

Someone we love is gone. Some of us have lost a trusted friend, a partner in worship, a listening ear, a big sister, a grammie. My father won't grow old with his best friend—the love of his life—at his side. My two sisters have lost their confidante, and all four of us children have lost a rock-solid, faithful, prayerful mother, who will never again come for a visit, never again linger in quiet, thoughtful conversation, and never again leave Tupperware filled with raisin scones and oat cake. I did some time travel this week—I needed to—and what I saw, most of all, was a remarkable *mother*, a very good gift to her children, someone whose life mirrored her convictions.

- Through the eyes of a child I can see her pausing from housework to embrace dad, as he arrives home from the office. If we kids rarely commented on this daily ritual, it was surely because we naïvely assumed that *every* married couple was just as much in love as our parents were.
- In my mind, now, I'm peering through a bedroom door, slightly ajar, where I see mom, with dad, on her knees in prayer. Somehow we kids *knew* they were talking about us. And somehow I *know* they kept on praying night after night, long after we moved out, for us and then for *our* kids. One of the last things mom expressed to my sister Val was her deep prayer that all ten of her grandchildren would one day join her in heaven.
- Now I can picture her fixing lunches for school, always including some bit of home baking—baking that was so ubiquitous I would sometimes trade it away for store-bought junk food.
- And there she is working into the evening in the kitchen or at the ironing board or the sewing machine. When mom was awake, she was up to something. Never frenetic but always engaged, without complaint, without resentment, without hesitation.
- I can picture mom-the-scribe, making to-do lists, taking notes, inscribing family vacations into little coil notebooks. Did you know mom penned letters to *her* mother, faithfully, every week, for 34 years from her wedding in 1952 to her mother's death in 1986?
- I can still hear mom's quiet questions. Mother knew just how to pose questions that conveyed, mysteriously, the only *correct* answer and why it made such good sense.
- I watch as mom passes on her skill in the kitchen, patiently, to my sisters and then, in good time, to my daughter whose name, oddly enough, is Alison.
- I remember mom's steadfast refusal to complain, to suffer publicly, to evoke pity, to attract attention. Ask her how she felt, *during a migraine* (!), and she would answer honestly but quietly, and then find a way to change the subject from her to you.
- And I remember her laugh. Some odd comment or crazy story over dinner and mother would grow strangely quiet. You wouldn't know she was laughing unless you looked over. There she sat, quietly convulsing, red face and tears spilling down her cheeks. Even when out of control, she didn't draw attention to herself.

Only as I came of age did I begin to realize that mom ran an entire cottage industry on the side, ministering to people whose lives know the pain of rejection, the ache of disappointment. In mom, these people found a safe place, a strong shoulder, a rare blend of strength and tenderness. She never took a course in caring, yet she lived a life of servanthood. She never set up a website, never charged a fee or solicited donations, never flashed a business card and never went on tour. What she did instead was open her life, along with dad, to the sad and the harried, the naïve and the cynical, the rough and the refined. And she did it out of a deep, gentle love for people. David Wilcox wrote a song that describes mom nicely. The song is called *Kindness*, one verse of which says:

I love your wisdom, your knowledge of the past  
your willingness to listen, your taste for what will last  
I love your compassion for the suffering and your solid happiness,  
but it's your kindness that I love best.<sup>1</sup>

Back in July, mom and dad joined most of the Fisk clan at Janet and Matt's cottage on Doe Lake north of Huntsville. It was a week to rehearse stories from the olden days, to paw through yellowed photographs, to feel the breeze and watch sunlight conjure diamonds on the water as the dock rocked gently beneath us. We would carry her up and down the hill from dock to cottage like Egyptian slaves ferrying a princess to her palace. One day she bravely let me paddle her along the shore in a canoe. One evening I got to rub her feet, something I don't think I'd ever done before. It took the tolling of the bell and the writing on the wall before I seized the honor of honoring the feet of a woman who spread good news wherever she went. I suppose we could have talked more, or more deeply, that week, or prayed more. But staring death in the face is hard and sometimes you have to look away.

Today we look away no longer. Last Monday, I had the terrible privilege of watching my mom slip from this life into the next. It would be hard for me to say which experience was more profound and compelling for me: watching my mother die, or watching my father watch my mother die. Through my tears I saw a man remain resolutely faithful, impossibly tender, deeply caring and intensely in love, until the very end. Dad: you kept your vows, you both did, until death did you part. I wrote a poem this week, to honor the love you and mom had for each other. The poem is called *Death Did Them Part*. (I should add that most of my poems sound rather like Dr. Seuss, but I think that's because mom read to me too much.)

#### **Death Did Them Part**

He pledged her his troth, a mere child to his lover,  
With nothing in hand but the will to depart  
On his quest to be faithful to her and no other,  
Sealed with kiss, ring and promise "til death do us part."

Came he lately to shield her, now grievously ill,  
From the poison of minions whose talons dug deep.  
'Neath menacing shadows and winter's deep chill,  
His resolve only hardened a promise to keep.

Now her hand held in his as she lets go the tether,  
Now he looks in the face in whose eyes he once swam,  
Now his arms lend embrace in their final together,  
Her ring as it was when their journey began.

Pray do tell us, sir William, with aid from your muses:  
Can your sonnets ascend 'til they capture such art?  
Let your Romeo learn from this one who refuses  
To loosen his grip until death did them part.

I learned much about love last week, in those few short hours—much about the deep, deep love between mom and dad, and about what it looks like to love when someone can no longer love you back.

What happened last week? Into what mysterious fellowship has Alison been ushered? Does she now sleep until a Voice calls her forth, like Lazarus, on the Last Day? Or is she now fully, consciously present before God? I don't know. But this I will profess: when death, "the last

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<sup>1</sup> David Wilcox, "Kindness" from *Turning Point* (1997).

enemy” (1 Cor 15:26), is abolished and when God’s every promise is fulfilled, the reunion will be sweet and there will be joy.

The stories of C. S. Lewis often found their way to the dinner table in my parents’ home. Our family had no cabin in the woods or condo in Florida, but we could always escape to Narnia. Dad would read while mom brewed the tea, and we children would listen to a magical tale of slavery and redemption, of death and new life. If you know Aslan’s story, you know what happened when the great lion rose from the dead, made haste to the Witch’s castle, and began breathing life back into creatures long dead and hardened into stone.

Picture the scene:

Everywhere the statues were coming to life. The courtyard looked no longer like a museum; it looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing round him till he was almost hidden in the crowd. Instead of all that deadly white the courtyard was now a blaze of colours; . . . And instead of the deadly silence the whole place rang with the sound of happy roarings, brayings, yelpings, . . . , cooings, neighings, . . . , shouts, hurrahs, songs and laughter.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you don’t normally picture the resurrection as a time when sleeping statues return to life, but it works for me. Especially the part about songs and laughter. When that day comes, be sure to look around, for somewhere in the crowd, close to our Lord, you’re sure to see my mom, laughing along with the rest. But you’ll have to lean in and listen closely, for when she laughs, she hardly makes a sound.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 166.