

# Rubbing Shoulders

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ANNE TONER FUNG

*Se remémorant les moments de son enfance, une femme devenue adulte, s'occupe de sa vieille mère dont la santé est déclinante.*

My fingers grow tired and the thumbs begin to ache as I work on the knots in my mother's shoulders. Standing in the space between the wheels of her chair and the wall behind me, I am confined and restless, as I try to massage the stress from the muscles of her neck. I stop briefly to stretch my hands and rub the fleshy ball at the base of my thumb. "Don't stop," she says, so I continue until my hands and arms feel like falling off.

I stand slightly to one side, applying the most pressure to her left shoulder, which bears the brunt of her lopsided movement. Looking past the fine black waves of her hair, I watch *MacMillan & Wife* on the 14-inch TV, and wish that I could get back to my book, to my homework, or to my friends. I notice the scattered, motley freckles across the top of Mom's back. They're just like mine. Her skin is very soft, but spotted with red now from the pressure of my hands.

Sometimes she prefers to have hair brushed instead of the shoulder massage. Her hair is soft, too. She wears it short because washing it is such a major undertaking: mom hanging over the kitchen sink, holding on for dear life, while I reach over and around and under, scrubbing thoroughly. Then I rinse and rinse and rinse because she doesn't like shampoo residue. Of course, in the middle of this the rubber hose attachment will fly off the tap, twitching and splashing us gleefully. If the frustration and exhaustion levels haven't peaked, the soaking makes us laugh. But we limit the full hair wash to once a week. In between, I brush her hair.

It falls just below her ears, slow soft waves, so fine and full. She has a lot of hair and she likes it brushed vigorously. That's what she always says, "brush vigorously Anne, my scalp gets so itchy and the brushing feels good." One hundred strokes on each side, and one hundred strokes

down the middle. My arm gets sore so I switch hands, keep brushing.

I remember when I was little. She used to brush my hair, also fine and full. My waves are wild and willful though, and the brushing seldom brought relief as mom struggled for control. Sitting on a footstool in front of her chair I flinched and squirmed as she dragged a brush through my tangled mop. One hundred strokes on each side, and one hundred strokes down the middle. She talked to me as she brushed, told me that her hair used to be just like mine, golden waves tumbling down her back. But it turned black when she was in her 30s. I often wondered if her MS could be the cause. Or, could it be that her unhappiness seeped from inside her to change the colour of her hair?

As I brush, the television flickers in the periphery of my vision, occasionally intruding on my thoughts while dominating hers. It seems to be her only interest, a constant distraction from the reality of her life. Her legs are getting worse. She stays in the chair all day now, never using the walker, which serves as a makeshift clothes-horse. The swelling of her legs is effecting her circulation and she feels cold. Sometimes I sit on the floor beside her and rub her legs to warm them. But they feel stubbly. Poor circulation makes the hair fall out. The tingling irritation on the palms of my hands soon grows unbearable and I have to stop.

More and more I resent the helping. Trying to ease her pain and discomfort while she disconnects from life and hides here in this dark, tiny house. I know she would keep me here with her if she could, to rub her legs, to brush her hair, to work the kinks out of her knotted shoulders.

Through the open screen door, I hear the other kids playing chase on the street, their feet pounding down the laneway between our house and the Mallia's next door. The late spring air is fresh with the smell of wet grass.

"Can I go out now, mom?" A hint of whine creeps into my voice.

"Oh, Anne, It's getting dark, the streetlights will be

on any minute,”

“But—”

“No, you can’t play out on the street after dark, now why don’t you make daddy and me a nice cup of coffee.”

I close the heavy inside door and kick it shut, glaring through yellowed net curtains as the streetlight at the front corner of our lawn clicks on and splashes its puddle on the road. Children scatter like insects in the growing darkness, goodbyes are shouted and doors slam up and down the street. I shuffle, shoulders drooping, to the kitchen and turn on the heat under the kettle.

*A professional member of the Canadian Authors’ Association, Anne Toner Fung has been writing since childhood. Over the past 20 years, she has had articles, children’s stories, various poems and one non-fiction book published. Currently, most of her writing takes the form of technical reports and marketing materials for various business clients.*

## FRANCESCA CALABRESE

### Limes

Someday when I find a space  
I want limes  
In a glass bowl  
On my kitchen table  
Screaming green that I’ve come of age  
And found a verdant page  
To plant my life upon

*Francesca Roberta Calabrese graduated from California University of Pennsylvania with a degree in Creative Writing. She has also completed poetry and writing courses at Bath Spa University in Bath, England. She currently resides in New York with her fiancé, David, and her cat, Lucy.*

## CARLA COIMBRA

### Aunt Dot Said Aunt Flow’s in Town/Aunt Rose is Visiting Aunt Ruby

When the end of a good sentence makes me cry, I check myself into the Red Roof Inn.  
My mother has paid for the board since the day Communists occupied my Summer House.  
It first happened the year I followed Scarlett on her return home to Tara  
and found her mother, too old to plow, mucking out.  
Watching Mammy dice tomatoes on a knotted table  
I listened as she wails of freedom, of no more planting cotton down South.  
Her breasts, limp as unyeasted dough, the folds of her elbows damp as molasses,  
her pores cry out  
and the cypresses listen and weep too, because she is old  
too old to plow.  
And they tell me the visitations are natural.  
My father calls it  
the wound that never heals.  
My mother tells me  
it is nothing  
but a weeping  
clam.

*Carla Coimbra is a writer who constantly abandons Toronto for the roaming goats, fresh sardines, and towering eucalyptus trees of Fonte Arcada, the small Portuguese village where she was born. Her poem “Aunt Dot Said Aunt Flow’s in Town/Aunt Rose is Visiting Aunt Ruby” was awarded York University’s 2007 President’s Prize in poetry. Coimbra is currently working on her first book of poetry.*