

My Mother Lived Through Nightmares
By Sumiko Saulson

The first poet I ever loved was my mother, Carolyn Saulson. When I was a little one still in pigtails back in the Seventies, she had already been published as a poet, whose poem about the darker sides of love graced a velvet poster sold in record stores and headshops. On the dayglo poster was the silhouette of a Black woman in profile, long-necked, regal, and powerful. A queen whose head was crowned with a gorgeous round Afro that glowed at its edges. For many years I was convinced that the woman was an illustration of my mother, brilliant and proud, even though Mom wore a Beatle wig and not an Afro.

She was born in 1948 and lived through racism I could not imagine. The eldest of six children, she lost her oldest brother when he was denied dialysis and died when he was only fourteen due to medical racism and ableism (he was developmentally delayed). When she was twelve, her father came home from the Korean War traumatized not only from the war itself but from having been assaulted by some racist members of the troop he served with. Mom told me how her mother was forced to work as a maid for racist people in the same era as *The Help* who did not want Black folks using their toilets and insisted that she and her sisters wear masks and gloves if they came in the house. According to Mom, despite the fact that California had no segregation laws regarding bathrooms, white people would chase her and her sisters out if they tried to use the bathrooms at Venice Beach.

Mom also told me about how a racist nurse at the hospital tried to refuse to give me to her, because she'd named me Sumiko and because I was born with straight, black hair. She tried to give me to a Chinese couple down the hall. Sumiko is a Japanese, not Chinese, name. The nurse asked if my mom was sure I was her child and my mom cussed at the woman, explaining that she just saw me come out of her vagina. She told me a story about how she was stopped by law enforcement when she was nine months pregnant with me and charged with prostitution for being in the car with a white man—my father, Robert Allen Saulson, to whom she happened to be married. Although she was able to get out of it in court, the law officers' behavior was indicative of attitudes at the time. Loving vs. Virginia passed three months after my parents married and around the time I was conceived. I was born in 1968, and even though Rodney King and the 1991 riots were still decades away, the Watts Riots had been just three years earlier. The LAPD already had a reputation for being corrupt. My parents, being an openly interracial couple, were dangerously challenging the status quo. Shit rolls down hill, and my mother, being a dark skinned black woman, had to deal with the brunt of the abuse from these kinds of authority figures.

“A woman? And an attractive woman, at that. I had no idea, sorry Dr. Jekyll, pleased to meet you.” - Cecil Carrello, from *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, by Carolyn & Sumiko Saulson

One of my mother's major works (which I co-wrote) was, *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; the major themes are familiar. They concern the difficulty of keeping one's distance from a served population of clientele while serving them, and how people who have themselves been impacted by things like drug addiction and mental health issues are then told by those who already think ill of the

impoverished that they are too sullied to serve those communities unless they are extremely pure and upstanding.

When I read my mother's writing in *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, a play we wrote together while taking playwriting courses from Mary Webb at Berkeley City College between 2016 and 2018, I wonder how many of its themes related to her own moral quandaries and struggles in life. Like myself, my mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder with psychotic features. Her father, my grandfather Leon, was diagnosed with schizophrenia after he returned home from the Korean War. The oldest of twelve children, Mom was tasked with helping her mother raise her siblings while her father's mental health declined.

Mom turned twenty just a month before I was born, and had divorced my father by the time I was seven. She was always a very creative person and had hopes and dreams that my brother Scott (a year younger than myself) would be creative as well. I still remember her taking us out to cattle calls (open auditions for plays and movies where you show up unrehearsed, receiving the script for the first time once you arrive) for acting as children. I remember going to one for a made-for-television movie about Annette Funicello. We sat in a room full of other aspiring actors and their parents for hours. I tested and was sent to another section where they were taking photos of actors depicting previous casts to stick on the wall to see if I could portray an African American cast member in a still. I remember my brother and I were in a printed pizza advertisement once. It was frozen pizza and tasted like cardboard, but we had to pretend it was delicious. My mother rewarded us with a shopping spree. I got watercolor paints.

“Amelia’s grandmother, Sally Fae was a very intelligent woman surrounded by others who were not that bright, but what could she do? She had been born at the wrong time for a Black woman.” – from “Amelia’s Tale” an excerpt from *Living A Lie* by Carolyn Saulson

After I became a young adult, my mother told my brother and I many times that her youthful goals and dreams in life had been stolen from her when she met and married my father. Dad went to college with her and developed a crush. One day, her car stalled, and he offered her a ride home. On the way back, he stopped at his mother's house and, much to my mother's surprise, introduced her as the woman he was going to marry. My father was twenty-four and my mother only nineteen when they married. She said she wanted to wait to have children, but much to her surprise she got pregnant with me very quickly after they married. Many years later, my aunt Vivienne disclosed to me that my father took a hatpin and pricked holes in my mother's diaphragm to get her pregnant immediately despite her wishes.

If I wondered whether or not *The Strange Case of Dr. Henriette Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was based on my mother's life, with “Living a Lie,” there was no question. Although the central protagonist, Randolph James, was a white-passing grifter with telekinetic powers hiding the fact that he was a quarter black, his mother Amelia was a full-fledged tragic mulatto tale. My mother was not biracial and I am, but it was very obvious that she was mixing various aspects of my life, hers, my nieces' and my brother's, to come up with this character. In the story, Randolph is taken away from Amelia as a toddler. In my mother's life, she lost custody of my brother and I when we were 11 and 12 after she got involved with my father's drug trafficking. She went to jail. My father didn't, so my brother and I went to live with him.

“Why had he allowed himself to be seduced into this emotion that threatened to unravel his whole world? Love. If that’s what one should call it.” – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James” an excerpt from [Living A Lie](#) by Carolyn Saulson

Just months before my twelfth birthday, my mother was separated from us. My grandmother Eleanora had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and she and my mother had been quite close. My mother was bipolar with psychotic features, as I am, and my grandmothers Eleanor and Ruth thought, unwisely, that reintroducing my mother to my father would be a great idea. They thought my father would support her emotionally, and she’d be more stable. They were unaware that my father was not only a heroin addict, but a drug dealer. Mom was unaware, and Dad said they were going on a “second honeymoon” to Thailand. Once we got there, it turned out my dad was dope sick. He roped my mother into smuggling dope with him. She was manic and thought she could get enough money that way for her mother to get surgery, saving her life. My dad ripped her off, so she made a second trip with a drug buddy of his, wherein they both got arrested. My mom was in jail in Thailand for 7 years, and by the time I saw her again, I was just shy of eighteen.

After she came back from Thailand, my mother took a correspondence course where she was tutored by Billy Hayes, who wrote the autobiographical *Midnight Express* about his imprisonment at Sağmalcılar prison in Istanbul. My mother had been imprisoned in Bangkok and Changmai in Thailand. She’d been given a life sentence, but sent a letter to the King of Thailand to ask for a pardon and received it. Later, she corresponded with Hayes about writing the life story of Ivy Nicholson, the mother of her boyfriend at the time, Gunther Ethan Palmer (whom she dated for seventeen years, from 1988 to 2005). Ultimately, neither of those projects was completed, and my mother and Ivy fought with each other so much that on a trip to see an agent in Los Angeles, they were told their bickering was hilarious and they should start a comedy routine. but my mother started both a band and a public access television show called *Stagefright* with Gunther, my brother Scott, and myself in 1993.

“Long ago, he had decided that love was a delusional state necessitated by the overwhelming reality that death was the only outcome to existence. The joke was death. No measures could be taken to prepare for it; after all, who could predict the accident, or murder, even. Too much randomness to process.” – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James,” an excerpt from [Living A Lie](#) by Carolyn Saulson

I was eighteen when I got in a band called Poetic Justice. This inspired my mother to follow her own musical dreams. She worked on a number of musical projects with Gunther Palmer and Ivy Nicholson before, and eventually, she and I started working on projects together. By the time I was in my twenties, we were in a family band with my brother called Stagefright. A few years later, in 1996, we started the African American Multimedia Conference, and a year after that, in 1997, the Iconoclast Black Film Festival.

The 1990s were a fury of creative frenzy for my family that went on strong until August 2009, when my mother got sick with multiple myeloma cancer. Just before she got sick, we put on a successful on-campus Juneteenth Festival at City College of San Francisco that featured acts such as Rappin 4-Tay, Hugh EMC, Sick YG, Fly Mar and She-Go, as well as the school's gospel choir and Blues legend Bobbie "Spider" Webb. Stagefright also performed there. Although we played a few shows after she got cancer (including a show at the Whiskey A Go Go in 2015, our second performance at the venue we first visited fourteen years prior in 2001), my mom's cancer marked the end of our band's heyday. The public access television show continued until 2018, although it moved from San Francisco to Vallejo and Berkeley, where my mother and brother lived, respectively.

“So in the back of everyone’s mind, he imagined, was the fact that any moment on any day could be their last. How could a self-aware being stay sane? He imagined this all-encompassing simple solution to dark thoughts was the distraction of love and romance—to keep these thoughts at bay, and to continue the human race through families and procreation. – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James” an excerpt from [Living A Lie](#) by Carolyn Saulson

In addition to the band, we spent a lot of time at open mic poetry readings between 1993 and 2009. This had a profound impact on my brother's oldest daughter Franchesca. My niece also became a poet (find her on Instagram at [TheFriscoPoet](#)) and says she can remember going to open mics with us at Brainwash Cafe when she was only ten years old. She won the 2022 Serena Toxicat Memorial Grant for her unreleased book of poetry with the working title of *Hard Times, Dope Rhymes*.

When I was in my 40s and began pursuing my career as an author in 2011, my mom started taking writing classes with me at Berkeley City College. We also started attending conventions, festivals, fairs, and book reading and speaking engagements with my friend Serena Toxicat and groups such as the Ladies of Literature. My mom joined us, reading from her work-in-progress “Living A Lie.” By the time she died in January 2019, the work had become a novella; she also hired me to illustrate the first in what was to be a serial publication of the story “Living a Lie.”

“Giorgiana! I very much recall the sour expression on your face and snide tone in your voice when you refused to accompany me to what you called a ‘frivolous social pandering party’ this morning. Whatever are you doing here?” - Cecil Carrello, from *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, by Carolyn & Sumiko Saulson

The last project my mother and I worked on together was a play called “[The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll](#),” which we put together in a screenwriting class at Berkeley City College between 2016 and 2018. I remember putting on the play, which features a multiracial and very queer cast, in the classroom. In the story, Dr. Jekyll, a woman, changes gender when she ingests the potion and becomes Mr. Hyde. The

scenes with Dr. Jekyll and her love interest Cecil Carrello take place in a clean, sterile, dot-com-economy San Francisco. There, Mr. Carrello's older sister Giorgiana, keeper of his parent's estate, tries to prove that the civic-minded Henriette and Cecil are naive, being swindled by the poor. To prove it, Giorgiana lures Henriette into a world of BDSM and queer nightlife with colorful characters like a drag queen named Peppermint Schnapps and a leather daddy barman named Steely Dan.

Once she arrives there, Henriette becomes a man, and starts dating an exotic dancer named Andre. Writing these scenes with my mother as a still closeted nonbinary person, I often wondered if my mother knew some things about me that I didn't know about myself. Or maybe there were things I didn't know about her. However you view it, we learned a great deal about one another working on the play together.

In August of 2018 my mother became ill and went into the hospital, where she would remain for most of her remaining life on life support until her death on January 15, 2019. She was too sick to write, and we spent time watching television together, although for most of those months she was unable to speak. During the waning months of her life, I applied for a grant from the Ara Jo Fund, to put together a zine (a homemade magazine) called [*Carolyn Saulson: Tale of an Iconoclast*](#) which honored her and her life's work and included images, writing, and remembrances of her as a community activist and an artist. It came out on November 20, 2018, just two months before she died.

My mother was an incredibly creative person, and one of tremendous imagination. She was a bright and shining star, so much so that while she lived I felt often in her shadow, and when she died, I reeled, trying to see who I was without her.