My Mother’s Singer

My mother’s Singer folds down into a little wooden cabinet, completely out of view. It had become for me no more than a piece of bedroom furniture—a sort of table for my pills, a water glass, and whatever book I was reading to help me fall asleep at night. One day last March, soon after I had finished reading Jonathan Rosen’s book about birds, *The Life of the Skies*, I lifted the Singer out of its cabinet for the first time since the machine had come into my house. Three Men and a Truck had delivered it to me in 1991, right after I sold the small Tudor house my mother couldn’t live in anymore.

For years my husband had been suggesting that I fix Annabelle Coyne’s old machine. I’d known he was right, but machinery has always intimidated me, and my mother’s Singer was such a heavy thing. I had no idea what I’d be facing once I peered into the dark interior and saw the sewing machine hanging there, upside down, like a roosting blue jay, or a bat.

“You should do it,” he’d say.

“I will,” I’d reply. But I never did.

Until I read Rosen’s book. He drew a connection between the extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker and the Singer Sewing Machine Company. The juxtaposition surprised me, and I rubbed my sleepy eyes. Rosen alluded to land where, seventy years before, the last official sighting of an ivory-billed occurred—wooded property in Louisiana once owned by the company and known as the “Singer Tract.” In 2000, Rosen traveled south to do a story for the *New Yorker* about an unofficial sighting in a different area of Louisiana, and in 2005 he went to Bayou de View in Arkansas after other sightings were reported there.

How odd, I thought, that the last confirmed sighting of the ivory-billed took place on property that Singer owned.

I kept glancing at the cabinet while I read, realizing that I didn’t know
Joyce Dyer

anything about the company, and not much more about my mother’s machine. I could barely even picture her Singer now, so many years after I’d last heard its hum. All I knew was that it was black and heavy and had been my mother’s daily companion. I wasn’t even sure if it worked anymore. While it rested in its cabinet all those years, it had become an antique, and perhaps now its age was the only value that it held.

I learned from Rosen that the last official sighting coincided with the controversial removal of ancient trees from the Singer Tract by loggers who had leased the land. The ivory-billed was a very specialized bird that lived on the grubs of decaying trees in old virgin forests like the Singer Tract. Rosen said the ivory-billed preferred trees that were five hundred to seven hundred years old, though some ornithologists thought they would feed on trees only one hundred years old. In 1944 the last ivory-billed refused to move, even when the loggers came. She just sat there, cocking her head when the tractors rolled in, and then she vanished. For fifty-five years no one claimed to see another.

Rosen’s book did exactly what I hadn’t wanted—it kept me awake. I could not dismiss the odd coincidence he’d drawn my attention to. The book had begun to expose my ignorance, and when I turned off the light
those nights I read its chapters, I began to fuse birds and sewing machines
and mothers into a single thing—some strange hatted creature with metal
quills and presser feet.

During the days, I would try to remember whatever I could about my
mother’s Singer. The Singer my mother loved became a puzzle to her, and
now it was a puzzle to me. Sometime in the early 1980s, when Alzheimer’s
announced itself in her life, she lowered her machine and never took it
out again. She soon forgot what was inside. She forgot it had an inside.
She forgot “inside” altogether. By the 1990s her confusion was so profound
that I moved her into an Alzheimer’s unit—something I vowed never
to do—where she lived five more years in a single room surrounded by
three pieces of blond furniture from her old bedroom set, all of which she
stripped of their wood veneer with her thumbnails.

I had wanted to keep my farewell to my mother orderly, and final. I
wrote a book about her after she died and had thought its pages made
sense of her life and held my goodbye. But in the years since writing it, I
had begun to suspect that I had left something out, and thinking about
her Singer because of the Rosen book made me quite sure of it. I had told
only about the Alzheimer’s years, omitting all the long, healthy days of her
life. It was easier that way, though people thought I had done something
brave. After she stopped sewing and dementia sealed off her brain, she
was all mine. She was caught. I could love her and study her the way that
Alexander Wilson and James Audubon leisurely studied and painted birds
they had captured or killed. I could invent her. She was finally still, as safe as
the Singer inside that cabinet. But when she sewed, she belonged to no one
and she was as elusive as an ivory-billed. Opening up her machine seemed
too great a risk, for couldn’t something unexpected fly out and devour me?

But that ivory-billed woodpecker had started to tap away in recent days.
Singer’s trademark was an “S” with a woman behind it, her body visible
between the loops of the letter. The woman sat on a chair, working at a
machine. Tap, tap, tapping, hoping someone would notice her.

I began to wonder who she was, and I knew I would have to remove
My mother’s machine from the cabinet in order to find her because my mother and the woman suddenly were the same, both hidden from me.

I couldn’t recall a day when my mother didn’t sew—well, until Alzheimer’s interrupted her work. I would have to look at the needles and tension and light inside.

I hadn’t been very attentive to the Singer when I was around it. It was always there, and my mother was always leaning over it—the woman behind the “S.” I just hadn’t watched them much. Besides, in our house my mother, not I, was the seamstress. I used the Singer occasionally, but she was definitely its mistress. My mother would look at my stitching when I asked her for help on projects for my home economics class in school (she’d actually sew for me, if I asked her to, never bothered by the ethics of this) or show me little tricks when she saw me stall: how to adjust the tension on the machine, lift the presser foot so the fabric turned, remedy a jam. But her instruction was so infrequent that all of it barely added up to a single lesson. She was very casual about my sewing. She put no demands on me to be better than average (which was about my level of proficiency). She never praised my good work or criticized my bad. What she did at her machine seemed to have nothing at all to do with me.

I wasn’t worried when she stopped sewing. Maybe I had asked about the disappearance of her machine, and she told me her arthritic hands could no longer thread a needle. I may have nodded my head. I would have wanted a simple explanation, and that’s what she would have given me. Perhaps I hadn’t even inquired.

The house felt different to me after the retirement of the machine. I do remember that much. It was far quieter than it had been all the years I’d grown up in it. But now, so many years later, I was beginning to recall something else: Annabelle, at exactly the moment the Singer vanished, had begun to grow more restless. How had I missed seeing the connection between these two things—the disappearance of the Singer and my mother’s gradual fall into madness? Not until reading Rosen had I made this association, but when I did, a new thought arrived: What kind of courage had it taken that day for my mother to lower her Singer into its cabinet and leave it there? What kind of courage to bury herself in dark and dust?
I removed all the items from the top and folded out the panels, little wooden wings. The right panel extended the length of the cabinet’s surface about six inches—a good place to line up thread and attachments and shears—but the left panel, by the needle, was twenty inches long. It fed the fabric into the machine. Almost everything I wore for the first twenty-one years of my life passed over the grain of that piece of wood, urged along by Annabelle.

Now the cavity was exposed. I looked inside and saw the Singer there and almost pitied it. It had hung upside down in that dark place for decades—roosting, but unable to fall into flight. I found its neck and struggled to lift it out, but the machine was even heavier than I had thought. This was no bird with hollow bones, and it was resisting me.

I tilted the Singer to an upright position, placed it gently in its wooden groove at the front, and released it into light. Dust coating its enamel finish, it resembled a relic I might have unearthed from the sand. It was not plugged in. I looked at the wires and realized I couldn’t operate this machine, even if I dusted it off, even if I could remember how to thread it (which I could not), even if the motor was undamaged by time. Wrapped around the wire that ran from the machine to the foot pedal were pieces of tape—some black electrical tape, now dry and loose; some brittle, yellowing Scotch tape. I imagined my mother, her disease darkening, reaching for something sticky to repair these fraying pieces, trying to keep them together a little longer. An impossible riddle for her.

Toward the end, right before her disease completely claimed her, Scotch tape was her universal remedy to life’s problems. She put it over cuts on her skin, rips in lampshade covers, broken glass, dirt on carpets, clocks that stopped, tears in nylons, hangnails, acrostic puzzles in the local paper that she no longer could solve, broken stems of flowers in her garden bed—and now, I saw, the bare wires of her Singer sewing machine.

I removed all the tape from the connecting cord and then dusted the Singer, lint rising from the machine and floating into my eyes and up my nose.
I would have to get the Singer fixed if I ever hoped to use it. I wasn’t sure that I cared to sew again, but I still wanted the machine in good repair. I’d grown to value old objects more than I once had, and if I ever needed a machine, I wanted it to be the Singer.

There were a few very small scuffs on the paint at the front edge, but otherwise it was beautiful. So nearly perfect. No surface scratches, all the decorative letters and borders intact—The Singer Manufacturing Co. on the top, SINGER spelled out in large letters facing the seamstress, the Singer “S” in the middle of the base (under the light), a decorative gold edging all the way around the border of the base, including the curves at the soft corners. I had purchased enough appliances over my lifetime to know that this sturdy thing—made of steel and cast iron—was going to be far better than anything I could buy today. I didn’t care what it cost to fix it.

I looked in the yellow pages under “Sewing Machine Repair” and found that there were still five places close to my home that fixed machines. I was surprised there were any. I remembered a sign for sewing machines in the front yard of a house I always passed on my way to a local mall, so that’s the shop I chose. I knew where it was, and I liked the idea that the work would take place in a house.

I would have to remove the machine from its cabinet to transport it. There was no way I could wrestle the whole thing down the stairs—cabinet and all—and then fit it into my little sedan, so I removed the screws behind the machine that secured it to the cabinet. They popped out easily, but the rings of metal underneath the screws were difficult to dislodge. I had to force them. The wire to the foot pedal (the one Annabelle had so hopelessly patched) was the greater puzzle, though. It began at the base of the machine, passed through a metal ring in the cabinet—drilled into some sort of grille work—and then disappeared into the casing of the foot pedal. I couldn’t figure out how to release the wire from either the machine or the foot pedal so that I could thread it through this small opening.

I could cut the wire, but I thought that would be rash. I think I was
afraid of damaging the machine in some irreparable way. As illogical as it was, I sensed that my mother’s old Singer could be lost with a careless snip of the shears.

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Annabelle was absolutely at ease with her machine. My understanding of mechanical invention was far less natural than hers. I was puzzled by a small wire that was ruining all my plans.

I’d been reading about Isaac Merritt Singer since I’d come across the allusion to Singer in the Rosen book. Singer wouldn’t have sat all afternoon, as I had, trying to figure out how to free up a wire from a sewing-machine foot pedal. It took him only eleven days and nights to discover how to build a practical sewing machine (with a few refinements added on the twelfth)—a little longer than it took God to make the universe, but not much. In 1850, in Boston, Singer was working in the machine shop of Orson C. Phelps at 19 Harvard Place in Cambridge when someone brought in a Lerow and Blodgett sewing machine for repair. Early machines were temperamental and seldom sustained continuous sewing. Singer studied the machine—processing the inventions of other people in his great brain and planning improvements of his own. What he invented—or perfected—made him a wealthy man: a vertical needle, a transverse shuttle, a foot treadle (freeing up both hands), improvements in tension that greatly increased the number of stitches that could be sewn per minute.

No, Isaac Merritt Singer—second-generation immigrant, the youngest of eight children, the son of divorced parents (his mother walked out on his father when Isaac was ten years old, and became a Quaker), neglected child—would not have had any trouble detaching the wire from my mother’s sewing machine. Then again, neither would she.

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I entered the Akron Sewing Machine Center. There was a neon sign that said “Open” in the window, and a second sign, handwritten, posted by the buzzer: “Please ring before entering.” A woman with stringy brown hair and glasses let me in.
She said her name was “Dawn” and squinted at me (I didn’t have a machine in my hands, so I probably looked suspicious). I began explaining the problem I was having disconnecting the sewing machine wire, but she grew impatient and yelled up the stairs. “Lora! There’s a woman here who has a Singer she can’t get the wiring through. One of those models with the metal grille.”

A small woman quickly descended. Lora, I learned, was the owner whose family had been in the business of sewing machine repair for three generations. Behind her was a former customer who had fallen in love with sewing machines and now was a collector—and Lora’s friend.

“All you have to do is take that screw off the pedal,” Lora said, speaking very rapidly and then disappearing into a back room. She was small and moved like a bug. She seemed to be thinking of several things at once, and darted toward one of them.

Lora’s friend was standing next to me, and I could tell she wanted to help. She spoke slowly, the way a schoolteacher does to very young children, and told me how to undo screws on the foot pedal so that two wires inside could be detached from metal hooks, pulled out, and then threaded through the hinge. “Do that,” she said, “and it’s free!”

“What if—”

“You can always take the foot control apart. Always. Just the way I explained it to you.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

Dawn and Lora had come back. “I’ll give you a stub when you bring the machine in,” Dawn said, probably wondering why I still was standing in Lora’s house.

I smiled and left the building, not sure I’d ever be able to gather this thing in my arms.

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In Akron, Ohio—my hometown—the Singer Manufacturing Company branch managed by D. L. Foust stood in the late 1870s at 174 South Howard Street. It was one of Singer’s first two hundred stores in America. You can buy a Singer at a Walmart now, but you couldn’t then—only at a Singer
store. The Akron store moved several times, but I remember it in the 1950s at 203 South Main, just across from O’Neil’s Department Store.4

When my mother and I rode downtown to shop, she often would leave me with my aunt Marie, a younger sister of Annabelle’s who worked at the cosmetics counter of O’Neil’s. My mother would disappear, but soon return, happy, with some product for her sewing machine—one day a new buttonholer with templates; the next, sewing machine needles or motor lubricant.

I seldom went with her. I was much more interested in having my aunt dab my arms with new fragrances, and in staring at the glittering bottles and bright tubes through the glass case my aunt Marie kept free of a single smudge. Elizabeth Arden’s porcelain apothecary jar that held Crème Extraordinaire, fingernail polish by Charles of the Ritz, a new line of Dorothy Gray—every product held some sweet secret for me. My aunt, with her unlined skin and perfect legs, always smelled like the first rush of lilac in early spring, not like Singer sewing machine oil, the way my mother did.

The sewing machine was beside me on the front seat, detached from its cabinet. I’d found the screw on the foot pedal when I got home from the shop—just as Lora and her friend had told me I would—and released the wire. The airbag alert began to sound the second I turned on the car, the weight of the machine having fooled my Toyota into thinking a person was sitting next to me, not just a piece of metal. The buzzer stopped after a while, but the airbag light kept flashing all the way to Lora’s parking lot.

From the window of the house, Lora saw me struggling and ran to open the door. “Hey, Dawn!” she yelled. “She got the machine out!”

“See, it wasn’t that hard, was it?” Dawn said.

I just smiled.

“Set it right here,” Lora said, leading me to a table by the entrance. And then, “Well, let’s see what her name is.”

Lora raced toward her desk—which was in the room down one step from the area where I was standing—and retrieved a Blue Book with model
numbers for every Singer machine ever made. She read the number on my machine and then flipped the pages of her manual. “AH369694,” she repeated, going up and down the columns. “That was 1947 or 1948.”

“Really?” I said, surprised. “I thought it was earlier than that. My mother won a Singer contest in high school—that would have been the late twenties. First prize was a sewing machine, and I thought that was the machine in our house.”

“Nope,” she said. “Yours is about 1947.”

“The year I was born.”

“Women do that, sometimes, when babies come,” she said. “She probably traded her old machine in. Singer always encouraged people to trade up.”

My mother’s “new” machine, the one I was having repaired, was my age. Lora was suggesting that my mother’s machine had something to do with my arrival in the world, and for the first time I looked at it as if it were a reflection of me.

Dawn came into the room with a small tablet, and Lora suddenly disappeared.

“OK, now what we’re doing is basically cleaning and oiling and rewiring for you. It’s not cheap, but the final cost depends on how bad the wires are.”

She looked more closely at the hinges I’d removed.

“You shouldn’t have taken those off. It’s a part of the cab—”

“They just came off,” I explained, humiliated. Now I realized why the machine hadn’t lifted out easily after the screws had been removed. I’d taken off the metal hinges along with the two small rings of cabinet wood they were attached to.

She showed me something. “See these? They’re called ‘set screws.’ You just loosen them. You took the hinges off the cabinet instead of taking the machine off the hinges.”

There was one more thing: “Where’s your slide panel that covers the bobbin?”

“I think I remember seeing that in a cabinet drawer,” I said. “Silver, isn’t it?”
“Well, you need it. Our machinist won’t work on this unless he knows you own the part. You can’t get all the parts for old machines like this, and you can’t sew without covering up the bobbin.”

“I’m sure I have it,” I said, not sure at all.
I could tell she had had enough of me.

Lora called me about the slide plate. As Dawn had suspected, the machinist wanted to know if I had it at home. I had checked and found it.

“Good!” Lora said. “Then he can go ahead.”

“Oh, by the way, Lora,” I said, “would you ask the machinist if he finds anything recognizable inside the machine to save it for me? You know, a little piece of fabric or maybe a strand of thread? Something substantial in the lint?”

“Sure,” she said, not seeming to think my request at all odd, even though it sounded pretty strange to me.

My mother was a silent woman. So was her mother. I come from a long line of Women Who Seldom Spoke. I can’t reconstruct a single conversation I had with my mother. I can barely hear her voice in my head anymore.

I remember that she often called my father “a big stubborn Irishman” when he did something really stupid—pry off a window frame and ruin the living room wallpaper, force us to plow ahead toward free lodging with relatives in Poughkeepsie during the worst winter storm I can remember rather than pull off at a Holiday Inn we could see from the road. She never spoke unless spoken to, wrote “Congratulations, Darling” or “Thank you” on cards to me instead of the long epistles my father gushed, and usually remained quiet, sewing, while other people talked. A piece of thread would say more to me than my mother ever had.

Lora was just driving out when I arrived to claim my Singer. She rolled
down the car window. “Have to fix some machines at a uniform shop in Barberton!” she said. “Yours is ready, though. Just go inside.”

Since Lora had seen me, I knew I couldn’t drive away.

So I entered the house and spoke to Dawn. “Did the machinist have any problems with it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “He didn’t talk to me about it. He talked to her. I think the only problem that he had was that he couldn’t put the foot control back together, since you forgot to bring in the screws and the bracket.”

She spent the next few minutes instructing me about how to reassemble the foot pedal.

“I can do that,” I said.

“So, $95.57 total,” she said, writing out the bill. “It ended up being a little less because some of the wires were all right. You got off lucky.”

“I did.”

“I’ll carry it out for you,” she said.

“I can do it,” I told her.

“No, I do that part. That’s how we do it here. I carry the machines out. You might set it down the wrong way and get oil on the seat or hurt the machine. What you want to do is lay it over so it doesn’t tip when you drive. Sewing machines don’t like bouncing on the road, they don’t like fire, and they don’t like water.”

She lifted the machine, carried it easily to my car, and laid it on its side in the trunk. Then I drove away with it, Dawn’s words in my ears.

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I’d never associated my mother’s Singer with natural disasters before. It seemed such a curious thing for a person to say. Peril to a domestic machine from earth, fire, water? Annabelle’s Singer seemed immune from any forces other than herself.

But Dawn’s words made me think of the famous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in Greenwich Village, the worst workplace disaster in U.S. history before 9/11 and the Twin Towers. All my adult life I’d found my way to books about its story, never understanding my strange fascination.
I was neither a pyromaniac nor a person fond of disaster movies. But this story was different, somehow. On March 25, 1911—one hundred years after Singer was born—146 people died in a horrible fire, and 123 of them were women. Most were seamstresses.

It was a photo from a book I’d just read that I thought of as I drove away from the repair shop. The picture, in David Von Drehle’s *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, was taken on the ninth floor of the Asch Building—where there were 278 sewing machines, and where the majority of the deaths occurred. It was a photo of several tables in a far corner of the room, some still partially standing. Everything else seemed to have melted. The only light in the picture came in through openings that had been windows once. It was not a black-and-white photograph, but black-on-black.

After I had stared at the picture through a magnifying glass, I saw a familiar shape. There, on the tables that remained, were the sewing machines—Singers, the word on the front still recognizable. Up and down the tables, row after row, were machines very much like the one I now owned. It was obscene. Each weighed thirty-three pounds, and they had survived, but the women who worked them had not.5

My mother was lucky. She was a generation removed from most of the women who burned in the fire. She had escaped the sweatshop.

But on the way home I began to sense that my mother was still somehow connected to the women who died in that fire. She, too, was the daughter of immigrants; she, too, had talent in her hands that held the promise that she would not be poor. I could see the other women, and then see her, living in a tenement house near Greene and Washington Place—see her walking one morning to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company because she needed work and she could sew and her parents had told her it was time. I could see them, then her, taking the elevator to the tenth floor of the Asch Building, where a man would hire her in a minute, never telling her about the hazards of his shop, never telling her that her machine might run right over her like the little black locomotive it resembled, with its decorative chrome grille on the front, its powerful wheel on the back, its spouts for oil, and its deadly chug, chug, chug.
She never said how she felt about her Singer, but I always knew she loved it. It was her whole world. When she sewed in the dark, and the light from her machine was on, the Singer cast a shadow on the wall as big as a continent. Little circles of light scattered on the ceiling, like tiny stars.

I think my father and I were afraid of her when she sewed. When we walked by her Singer, we did it quickly and reverently. Sometimes I think we did it jealously. She seemed more fond of her machine than she was of us.

There was so little emotion to read in Annabelle. I never felt she was in trouble, or knew what trouble was—until the Alzheimer’s years. She was not nervous. She never bit her nails, the way I did (and do), never seemed to suffer from “hormonal imbalances” or insomnia, the way the current Xanax generation does. She loved her job ordering food for the Akron City Schools and never complained. She rarely saw a doctor and was a model of equanimity and good health.

She just didn’t speak. That’s all. It wasn’t a malady, anything treatable. It was merely a fact. I don’t mean to imply that she was rude or neglectful or unloving, because she was none of those things. She just never thought to give direct advice to a daughter, or to worry about her very much. Those heart-to-heart talks that mothers and daughters are known for? We never had a single one. Not in all the years I lived in her house. She talked more in the Alzheimer’s unit than she ever had before—though seldom uttering anything intelligible.

I don’t know what her dreams were, or her fears. I don’t know what she saw when she looked in my direction. I don’t know any of these things. All I really know is that she loved to sew.

She liked clothes—surprising clothes, beautiful clothes, clothes that worked against the properties of a particular fabric. She sewed on the bias. In early photos of my mother, she wears hats that tilt at sexy angles and often have feathers at the side, coats with fur collars, sleeveless evening dresses with low necklines (her sisters wear dresses with stiff, high collars and long, tight sleeves), shiny rhinestone buttons that dot wrists and bodice fronts. She made everything she owned.
When I knew her, she sewed with darker colors than I think she wore as a girl (as best as I can tell from photographs) and made tailored clothes for “work,” but even her later wardrobe began with difficult Vogue patterns (seldom McCall’s) and always introduced a little danger. She would change a dart, remove sleeves, join jarring colors, pinch and lower a waist. She knew her body, and guided her machine in its direction.

She loved using that Singer of hers, but I don’t think it was ever for the reasons Singer and Edward Clark, his business partner, said she should. She didn’t sew because advertisements told her it would save her labor. It created labor. She didn’t sew because it saved her money; we were working-class, but we could easily have bought all our clothes at Penney’s. And she certainly never expected to make money from owning her own machine—a promise from the manufacturer that was lost on her.

She was practical, so perhaps that was part of it. But she was practical only in the way that Admiral Richard Byrd was practical when he carried six Singers on his Antarctic expedition in 1930 and the Wright brothers were practical when they used their mother’s Singer to create the fabric of airplane wings and Mahatma Gandhi was practical when he learned to sew on a Singer while he was in prison during British colonial rule.6

It didn’t “civilize” her in any way that I could tell. Clark proposed that it would be a sort of missionary tool for “primitive” people in remote nations around the world. There’s a company ad from the 1890s that shows the King of Ou (Caroline Islands) sitting at a sewing machine with a grass skirt and a bone in his ear. The caption reads, “The Herald of Civilization—Missionary Work of the Singer Manufacturing Company.”7

As far as I can determine, my mother’s Singer made her no more social than she ever was. She never sewed with other women (it was always a private affair), and she generally made her trips to fabric stores and the Singer shop alone.

Nor did she sew for others. I liked the clothes she made for me, but they never felt like mine. They always reminded me of her. It’s easier for me to say why she didn’t sew than it is to say why she did.

I want to think she sewed because she loved me. I want Lora’s theory
that she bought her new machine for me to be correct. I was her daugh-
ter—the only child she would ever bear. But I know this is self-flattery
(self-foolery) and has very little to do with the truth of my mother’s sewing
life. I’m inventing her still, wishing for the kind of mother little girls dream
about: someone who vanishes in adoration of a daughter, who surrenders
all too easily, and all too soon, to new growth and doesn’t fight to remain
(the way the ivory-billed did in the Singer Tract). It’s much more likely that
the Singer was her way to escape motherhood, not to embrace it.

Neighbors and family would enter our house and look at my mother
hovered over that machine, or admire my clothes, and sometimes say,
“Annabelle is so domestic! Oh, my, that woman can sew!” When she sewed,
I suppose she did look domestic, but for her, domesticity was a ruse—the
feathers that she grew so that others wouldn’t see what she was really up
to, or what was underneath. Neighbors and family would not disturb her
when she sewed, because she was politely perched where she belonged.

But I see so little that was domestic now. Her hair was wild; she per-
spired; there were pins between her teeth. You might have thought her
machine was a sort of weapon when she put her arms around it and turned
it on. That vertical needle was a dangerous, powerful thing, and she had
an arsenal of needles in a box—in all sizes, with replacements ready for
those that broke.

The sewing machine allowed her to avoid encounters with the domestic
world, not to have them. She could escape the kitchen, the basement (where
most women kept a wringer washer, but we never owned one), vacuum
cleaners, furniture polish, dust, and Saturday errands (except those that
took her to a fabric store). She was so busy with her sewing that she only had
time to make stuffed peppers twice a year, but never any cookies, cakes, or
anything that required a sauce. Her menu was the same, week after week.
Our food was simple and dry.

My mother had little ambition to rise in this world, the way that
Isaac Merritt Singer did. Or to live multiple lives. She was not, like Singer,
a polygamist in any sense. She didn't take lovers, didn't run off with a theater troupe, never did anything extravagant that I recall, seldom cried (never from self-pity), ordered a lone daiquiri when we went out to a fancy dinner (which was once or twice a year), had her hair done on Saturday mornings by her friend Maxine, filed and polished her own nails, did the taxes, paid the bills. All she really seemed to want was to sew. Her life was focused on that one task.

Annabelle left me no words of comfort. When sorrow and worry have stopped my breath in recent years, I've had only this to call on: the image of a woman on a stool zigzagging her way across a piece of cloth with a silver needle going up and down.

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I take the objects off the top of the cabinet, fold the side panels down, and raise the machine in the air to position it. I tilt it back toward the wall, slide it into the spokes of the cabinet hinges, tighten the set screws, and then lower it. I thread the wire to the foot pedal through the metal grille as Dawn has instructed me.

I plug in the Singer. Switch on the light.

I place a spool of red thread on the spool pin, but after looping the thread through the first guide that carries it over the neck to the left side of the machine, where the needle waits, I can't remember how to pass it between the tension discs. I consult my mother's old instruction manual and successfully draw the thread into the take-up spring on my second try. I close my eyes, open them again, and complete the upper threading on my own. I can't remember what direction to thread the needle, but my hand tells me right to left, and so that's what I do.

I remember how to draw the thread into the slots of the bobbin. Right to left again. I close the slide plate when I'm finished, turn the wheel of the machine, and let the needle down to pull the bobbin thread up and make it visible. I place an old linen tea towel I found in a drawer underneath the presser foot.

As eager as I am to see a red stitch race down the fabric, I don't feel any
My Mother's Singer

desire to buy a piece of beautiful cloth for some summer occasion I hope I'll be invited to. I don't want to sew. All I want is to hear the machine, and so I press the pedal down.

It begins in little chugs, or chirps. It's noisy, but its sound does not unsettle me. The machine feels like silk under my fingers, like water or my mother’s hair.

I think of the tendency of bird watchers to turn birdsong into human language so that they can more easily locate a species. In the trill of bird-song, they hear words. The white-throated sparrow is said to sing Old Sam Peabody, according to my Backyard Birdsong Guide. The Baltimore oriole, the mnemonic Here, here, come right here, dear. And the red-eyed vireo, Here I am . . . over here . . . vireo . . . listen now . . . believe me . . . that's right. To David Kullivan, a turkey hunter who claimed to have spotted an “extinct” pair of ivory-billed woodpeckers in 1999, the sound of the male call was a “loud nasal kent.”

I want to believe that the sightings of ivory-billed woodpeckers in 1999 and 2004 were real, just as Rosen did. Cornell University announced that there was enough material evidence to call the return “definitive” after David Luneau caught a bird on a piece of video, but an expert on the ivory-billed, Jerome Jackson, soon declared he was not convinced by the footage.

I think of the return of the ivory-billed to trees that had been planted after the old virgin forests were cut down, to trees that were starting to decay—finally ready for the birds’ return.

Now that my mother's machine has been repaired, I think I'll catch a glimpse of her. If you can recognize the sound of a bird, the American Birding Association accepts that as evidence of a sighting. You don't have to see it. You can check it off your list.

So what is my mother saying to me in the familiar voice that I hear again today; hear after an absence of so many years; hear, perhaps for the first time, with ears and heart that are ready for her?

Is it, Work work work work work work? Perhaps. It sounds a little like that as the needle engages and races down the cloth. But sometimes I think I hear No no no no no no. Or, Yes yes yes yes, or Truly truly truly truly. The
thing that puzzles me is that the sounds repeat and are absolutely regular as the needle smoothly punches through the cloth, and yet, each time I lift my foot to stop and turn the fabric, and then press again, I hear a different word. Sometimes the tune sounds like a warning; other times, sheer glee.

She spoke every day to me. I know that now. She sang with the mockingbird, the owls, the titmouse, the Carolina wren—with all the mysterious birds that sing at night. She sat on her little leather stool—her night roost—and called.

I rest my head on her Singer as I slide my hands up the cloth, watching the needle strike. The only noise in the whole house is my mother’s sewing machine. There is no one with me, and even the pipes and planks of this place are still.

I’ll begin to translate her song tonight, though it won’t be easy. I had thought that fixing her machine would solve everything—would quickly bring her back—but I was wrong. I should have listened to her more carefully when she was here, but it’s too late for that. Now I know my only chance is to name her as a birder would. I will jot down a notation in my Composition Book—maybe catch a syllable before midnight comes. Tomorrow, a split-second phrase could arrive, and I’ll write that down. This elusive creature I’d give anything to know may have a different song for morning, noon, and night, and for every season of the year. Deep listening is what birders call it—this thing that I’m about to do. It’s a new technique for me.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 55.

4. Akron city directories from the University of Akron Archives in the Polsky Building provided specific information about the nineteenth-century Akron store.

5. The details of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire are taken from David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 105–6. The photo referred to is included in the text and comes from the Archives at Cornell University.

6. References to Admiral Byrd, the Wright brothers, and Mahatma Gandhi come from Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 1, 6.

7. The photograph of the King of Ou is in Davies, *Peacefully Working*.


9. The translations of the songs of birds mentioned in this paragraph are found in Donald Kroodsma, *The Backyard Birdsong Guide: A Guide to Listening* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008). The book is a Cornell Lab of Ornithology Audio Field Guide, and the relevant audio numbers for the birds described in the text are 113 (sparrow), 126 (Baltimore oriole), and 048, 049 (vireo).

