

“My Children . . .  
Cannot Awaken Life in Me”

**M**any women have been inspired by Madame Curie, this brave woman who defied the strictures against her sex. She has been lauded as proof that women can do it all—and perfectly. The perception abides that, in addition to having a spectacular career, she was a model mother for her two daughters, far ahead of her time in emphasizing the importance of a strong body, a good education, and an unfettered view of life. This too has become part of the Curie legend. The facts, as usual, are more complicated. Marie Curie certainly performed her “duty.” Was that enough?

In 1937, three years after Marie’s death, her younger daughter, Eve, wrote an award-winning biography of her mother. “I’d never written a book before. I wasn’t sure I could do it, but I needed to write this book because it was inevitable that people would write about her, and so few knew her at all.” The next thing Eve says is startling to the listener and unwittingly seems to crystallize a great deal of what one wants to know about Marie Curie’s relationship with this daughter. “I

called the book *Madame Curie* by Eve Curie. I didn't think it right to call it *Marie Curie* by Eve Curie; that would have been too intimate." As if to emphasize the distance between Eve and her mother in her book, Eve often refers to herself in the third person. She writes of her grandfather, Dr. Eugène Curie, "Eve was still too young for a true intimacy to be created between them, but he was the incomparable friend of the elder girl [Irène], of that slow, untamed child so profoundly like the son he had lost."

Eve Curie was only fourteen months old when her father died. She was never to know him or for that matter the mother who had existed before his death. She knew only a morose woman driven by obligation. Shortly after Pierre's death, Marie wrote, "I endure life, but . . . never again will I be able to enjoy it. . . . I will never be able to laugh genuinely until the end of my days." To a former pupil and close friend who felt Marie had been neglecting her she wrote:

I no longer am able to devote any time to social life. All our friends in common will tell you that I never see them anymore except for business, for questions concerning work or education of the children. No one visits me, and I don't see anyone and I haven't been able to avoid offending some people in my circle and my laboratory who don't find me sufficiently friendly. . . . I have completely lost the habit of conversations without a set goal.

Albert Einstein professed deep friendship for Marie, but described her as "cold as a herring." This was the mother that Eve and Irène grew up knowing. Were it not for Pierre's father, the girls would have endured a bleak life. Dr. Curie, a cheer-

ful, erudite man, had kept the household running while Marie and Pierre became increasingly involved in their quest to isolate radium, determine its weight, and study its radioactivity. He was physically demonstrative and delighted in playing games, joking, and reading to his granddaughters. He took them on outings and explained nature to them as he had to his sons. After her husband's death Marie never allowed Pierre's name to be spoken again. It fell to Dr. Curie to tell the children about their father while their mother was away. He humanized this ghost, relating tales of Pierre's childhood, and how he had a temper like Irène's. He described Pierre and asked, "Can you imagine your father . . . in shorts?"

Marie failed to understand the impact of Pierre's death on nine-year-old Irène. Jean Perrin and his wife, Henriette, lived next door and Irène played with the Perrin children, Aline and Francis. On the day Pierre died Irène was dispatched to the Perrins' and told only that her father had hurt his head. She did not go to the funeral. The following day Marie went to the Perrins' and told Irène of her father's death. The child seemed not to understand but when her mother left she burst into tears. Marie noted that Irène never spoke of her father's death and wrote, "She will soon forget completely." Marie was so cut off from feeling that she was completely unaware of her daughter's anguish.

For a long time after that Irène became angry and anxious if her mother left even for a short time. She woke up from a nightmare and asked pitifully, "Mé [her word for her mother] isn't dead too?" Marie noted her daughter's behavior but attributed no special significance to it; it did not occur to her that Irène suffered in silence. She wrote of her, "She doesn't speak of her father. . . . She no longer seems to be thinking

about it, but asked for the picture of her father that we had taken from the window of her bedroom.”

Marie’s pattern of insensitivity repeated itself when, five years later, Dr. Curie died. Eve, then almost seven, maintains that Irène suffered the most. “I was very young, but Irène was fourteen. My grandfather raised her from the time she was a baby and they had a close bond, a great bond. Irène was desolate when first father died and then her beloved grandfather, who had been everything to her.” Once again, Marie took little notice of the pall cast over her household.

The laboratory had become Marie’s safe harbor, the one place where she could endure life without Pierre. She drove herself relentlessly, often working until two or three in the morning, and returning to the laboratory at eight that same morning. One of Eve’s early memories is of her mother fainting and crashing to the floor. When Marie reached the saturation point of nervous exhaustion, she would retreat to her bed and allow no one to see her. Eve wrote of these episodes that Pierre’s brother “Jacques and Marie’s brother and sister, Jozef and Bronya, observed with terror the movements of this black-robed woman, the automaton Marie had become: Stiff, absent-minded, the wife who had not joined the dead seemed already to have abandoned the living.”

Marie wrote, “I have tried to create a great silence around me.” Eve recalled that her mother “would not allow anybody to raise their voice, whether in anger or in joy.” Her own voice became so muted, “it could hardly be heard.” The cruelest punishment she inflicted on Irène was simply not to speak to her for days at a time. The girls tried desperately to reach and please their austere mother. Eve’s and Irène’s childhood letters are full of love and longing. When they

were sent away for extended trips, Irène writes about how healthy she is, how she is learning her lessons, how much she enjoys mathematics. Marie, who in childhood had never received a mother's caress, rarely gave one, yet this frozen soul kept hidden every letter from her daughters, starting with the most childish scrawl, bound up with confectioner's ribbons. The letters were found after her death, a tacit acknowledgement of a love that could not overtly respond to love.

At a time when upper- and middle-class norms emphasized that women were "the weaker sex," when exercise, higher education, and participation in the world of business and politics were discouraged in favor of domestic skills, Marie created her own rules. She decided country living would be more healthful and moved her tattered household to a house in Sceaux, where Pierre was buried, although it meant an extra half-hour commute on a crowded train. In all seasons she saw that her daughters exercised daily, both at a gymnasium and at home. There were bicycle trips and instruction in swimming. She sent them to Poland, where they hiked and learned to ride horseback. Marie hired Polish governesses to teach the girls her native language.

Regular school seemed "barbarous" in their curriculum for women and their arbitrary restrictions so, with time and effort, this concerned mother organized a group of professors from the Sorbonne, who were her friends and who also had young children, to teach Irène and Eve and seven of their own children. They learned chemistry from Jean Perrin, mathematics from Paul Langevin, as well as "literature, history, living languages, natural science, modeling and drawing." On Thursday afternoons in an unused classroom at the Sor-

bonne, Madame Curie "taught the most elementary course in physics that these walls had ever heard."

This education lasted only two years before the overwhelmed parents abandoned it, but it demonstrated how much young minds could absorb. Perhaps it was a mixed blessing: In her eighties, Aline Perrin recalled those two years: "It was very good for Irène and my brother, Francis, as they were gifted. But for me, it was too much. Those great scholars working with a little girl. Oh no, really! It didn't make sense."

The admiration women afford Madame Curie for her views overlook the most essential nourishment of childhood: She wrote of her daughters, "They are both good, sweet and rather pretty. I am making great efforts to give them a solid and healthy development. . . . I want to bring up my children as well as possible, but even they cannot awaken life in me." All she had left to give was effort and obligation—nothing more.

The children spent summer vacations by the sea in the care of relatives and governesses. Although Marie carefully monitored their development the time spent with them was scant. From the time of Pierre's death, Irène seemed designated by her mother to fill the gap. Marie had written in her diary to the dead Pierre, "I said it to you often, that this daughter, who promised to resemble you in her grave reflection and calm, would become as soon as possible your companion in work."

As Marie's father had done, she mailed math problems to Irène during their long separations. At eleven, Irène was doing advanced mathematics and wrote apologetically, "I've forgotten a little what you have to do to get the derivation of a radical and of the two numbers that divide it." Eve Curie maintains that her mother was equally interested in both daughters, but in Marie's personal journal one can see that

Irène is the favored child, one that is marked to share her mother's life in science. Her entries often write of Irène's excellence and of Eve's "doing well."

The mother to whom Irène clung dictated that all fear must be conquered. Marie, who took every slight to heart but showed the world an impassive face, did not credit her daughter with the same trait. Irène was a child without a childhood, thrust into the role of her father as over the years she became her mother's confidant and co-worker. By thirteen Irène was traveling alone, spending long periods of time living with Marie's close friends Émile Borel, the famed mathematician, and his beautiful young wife, Marguerite, as well as with the Perrins, while her mother worked, traveled, lectured, and retreated into depression seeing no one. During those periods Irène often wrote her mother plaintive letters:

When it rains, I think that these dark moments spent waiting for light would be much nicer if you were in a chair next to me. And when I see the sun shine in the sky and make beautiful reflections on the water in the streams, I think that everything would be nicer if a sweet Mé were there, near me, to look at them.

At Sevigné junior high school, Irène so excelled in math and physics that she was allowed to teach these subjects to her peers. At fourteen, she passed the first phase of her baccalauréate and finished her first examinations a year and a half later with honors.

Eve moved in another direction: at three and a half this child began to demonstrate what her mother termed "astounding musical abilities." Marie had little affinity for music or

for that matter any of the arts. But when Eve was twelve, through her connections, Marie secured an evaluation by the great Polish pianist, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, who confirmed that Eve had "exceptional ability." This sparked an unexpected burst of emotion and perhaps relief from her mother. Could a Curie be less than exceptional? Marie, ever careful with money, splurged on a grand piano—a massive instrument of mahogany with ivory keys and swirled legs that is still in use in the house in Sceaux, which was inherited by Marie's granddaughter Hélène.

For open, joyous, emotional Eve, it was hard to be excluded from access to her mother. She recalls Irène and their mother discussing formulas and experiments. Eve tried to make the best of being left out. She imagined that certain algebraic terms employed by her mother and sister, " $Bb'$  and  $Bb^2$  . . . were really charming babies who Marie and Irène Curie were forever talking about. [In French,  $Bb$  is pronounced *bébé*, meaning "baby." The symbols  $'$  (prime) and  $^2$  (squared) have the same meaning in French as in English.] . . . But why *prime* babies? and *square* babies?" By transmuting this technical conversation to fantasy she comforted herself.

Like Marie, Irène was indifferent to clothes—cheaper and less were better for both. Eve loved clothes and even as a child tried to brighten the bleak rooms with bits of fabric and colorful drawings. Eve writes of her interaction with her mother as if she were a detached observer: "If Eve was going out for dinner, Madame Curie would come into her room, lie down on the divan and watch her dress." Commenting on Eve's makeup Marie would say, "I think it's dreadful. . . . You torture your brows, you daub at your lips without the slightest

useful purpose. . . . I like you when you're not so tricked up." In a mixture of regret and admiration Eve wrote,

The struggle against sorrow, active in Irène, had little success in my case: in spite of the help my mother tried to give me, my young years were not happy ones. In one single sector Marie's victory was complete: Her daughters owe to her their good health and physical prowess, their love of sports. Such is, in this matter, the most complete success achieved by that supremely intelligent and generous woman.

It is not without apprehension that I have striven to grasp the principles that inspired Marie Curie. . . . I fear that they suggest only a dry and methodical being, stiffened by prejudice. The reality is different. The creature who wanted us to be invulnerable was herself too tender, too delicate, too much gifted for suffering. She, who had voluntarily accustomed us to being undemonstrative, would no doubt have wished, without confessing it, to have us embrace and cajole her more. She, who wanted us to be insensitive, shriveled with grief at the least sign of indifference.

Even in this exculpation, as in much of her biography, Eve refers to her mother as if they were not related. The distance is ever present.