

CONNECTIONS

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[Long before I had a sense of "I", I felt my mother's incompleteness, her almost there-ness, a disconnection I could not put my finger on. Sudden and abrupt—mom unplugged like a record needle lifted off mid-song. And always surrounding, swirling as a clue, was the fiction of those, one generation removed, who had come before me. Photographed people, fragments of the past: contributing to or taking away from the greater whole? I was never sure. Familial connections stuck in time like a blinking clock after losing power. Hour after hour after hour. I learned that family is a stone tossed across the water landing audibly on a high note sinking directly as if by appointment, leaving a legacy of ever widening waves, a second generation ripple echoing with thoughtless predetermination, the mold from which it was cast. Family is a dream fragment picking at memory throughout the day like a forgotten item on a grocery list. I want to remember.] ?

There is a chair I sit by waiting for my mom to come home from work. I am three. I am four. I am five. I am six. The chair is simple, straight back, no arms, short legs, originally flowered, now serious and reupholstered to a somber

wheat. It's still the same chair, still my spot, we are now just a little less comfortable with each other.

I am seven. I am eight. I am nine. I am ten. Keys in the door give a joyous ring. Heeled shoes clacking on the slate confirm any misgivings. From around the corner I see a puff of brown hair and catch the smell of perfume. Then coat in closet. Purse on the chair and up the stairs where it's sandpaper sound of lowering skirt against hose and the scratching and "ahhh" of the belly that's freed. The bra unsnaps and breasts swing loose. I sit on the bed and watch my mom get naked.

Back downstairs where pork chops fry we orbit each other as I set the table.

I never tell my mom I am lonely. I just wait for her to come home.

I am lighting a Yahrzeit, a 24-hour commemorative candle for my mom's mom, Raschen who died 51 years ago tomorrow. After watching my mom light these candles year after year I've decided to feel what it's like to light my own, to invite these strangers into my home.

Using matches from a local bar I light the candle waiting for the wick to catch. Making something out of nothing, pulling spirits out of the ether with a 99-cent flame, I turn her on. She must be confused, I think, suddenly pulled forth

into the porcelain dance hall that is my sink. I watch her, a yellow flame, swaying in time to the memory music I have composed just for this moment. For I do not know this woman. I only know her daughter and I go to the dance as her date.

I think of my mom lighting her candle for the 34th time—34 times Raschen called into the light. Does it get old like making love or does the act of striking match to flame awaken the sleepy fire within?

Maybe surrounded by all of you in the flesh I'd be disappointed, I think to the flickering flame. Maybe I'd find you pedestrian, nagging and smelly but here, in my fantasies, you would've changed things—you would've delivered my mother whole.

I am five and I am crying, sitting in the kitchen under the blue fluorescent lights. The dishes have been cleared and knock gently against one another as the wash-cycle storm rages behind the dishwasher door. A green and white handi-wipe dries over the sink and I am sitting at the table alone. I look upstairs towards my mom's bedroom and hear the white noise laugh track of my stepfather's ubiquitous TV.

How or where I got the idea, I do not know but soon I am up out of my chair at the utensil drawer. Not the one for general forks and spoons, but the one next door, the one with ladles, spatulas, a turkey baster and knives—real cutting

knives, serrated and smooth, thick handled and narrow, this was where the knives that meant business gathered.

I reach in and lift the handle of the wide, silver cleaver, the one my mom uses to make beef with tomatoes and green peppers, authentic Chinese style. It's too heavy. Lying next to it is a small serrated steak knife. It's just right, a knife I can go forward with.

I practice placing the tip of the knife against my chest, right in the center, the point precariously balanced on my bony breastbone. I look towards my mom's room again, drop the knife down by my side and leave the kitchen.

Slowly, I climb the gold carpeted stairs to the third-floor landing. The knife, pointy end down, swings by my side. Quietly, I knock on the white, slatted accordion doors. There is no answer so I knock again, louder this time. "Come in," I hear my mom say and push against the hinge of one door and slipping sideways through the opening. I drag my feet through the green shag carpet alternately raising and lowering my wrist and the knife along with it as I round the bed corner to my mom's side.

I stand beside her, the knife wobbly against my chest, while she knits. The burnt orange yarn dances around her clacking needles willingly looping its way into the sweater that appears below. "I'm going to kill myself, mom," I say, tears dried tight on my face. She looks up. My mom looks up at me and almost as

quickly she looks back down, at her knitting. She looks at the pattern book and at the row of stitches on her needles and, in between counting and catching her place again, she says, "Laurie, go back downstairs and put the knife away."

I stand there a little longer, distracted—thoughts turn to the scratchy sharpness beneath my nightgown, my tired arm, an achy head. Stick it in, I think. Make her sorry. Make her something. "I am, you know," I say burying my toes in the carpet. I look down at the knife poking into the flower appliqué of my nightgown and watch as it falls away. I turn to leave, hiding the steak knife in the folds of my gown as I make my way out of the bedroom. I am careful to close the doors behind me.

Back down in the kitchen I put the knife away wondering if I should wash it first. I don't. I sit down at the kitchen table and look upstairs wondering how my sweater is coming.

Mom, you said you married again because you thought I needed a father. Chocolate fondue for dinner. Eating wild mint from the side of the house. Green icing for birthday cakes. Seashell collections by the seashore. Chocolate-chip pancakes for breakfast. Sitting on your lap and finishing morning coffee. Your mom teaching you to knit and you teaching me. The skin on the back of your hand that stays clamped when I pinch it. Crying at the end of *Watership Down*.

Didn't you know you were enough?

Crying when you couldn't while sorting through faded photos of dead parents. Wanting to step into that cracked brown suitcase that held all your memories and feel what you felt as the images moved you to silence. Let me in. Let me lie like a favorite pair of jeans on the bottom of that case. Let me in there with you. I want to travel through memory and time when things were good and these pictures were real. I want to experience you whole.

Sad mom. You're busy as a bee but it never escapes you. Your pain. It follows you diligently around, tucked in the slump of a shoulder or the bend in a knee. You carry your pain in the remotest places but I see it. I hear it in the words you don't say or the choices you make.

I wear your parents' death in the roots of my hair and on the back of my tongue. Your losses have become a part of me like trees that grow too near one another entwining root systems and crossing branches until one is no longer distinguishable from the other. The sadness was too heavy for you so I carry it in the pocket of my coat and the mirrors that reflect, in the way I hold a pen and the lovers that I take.

Don't forget, I watched you.

"My mom's parents were dead by the time she was sixteen," was the refrain I grew up with. I liked the compactness of words-to-meaning. When Judy, my sister, would lay blame I would repeat, remind, rephrase the impact of such an awesome reality and she would back off.

When I was younger my dead grandparents lived as photos in a cracked brown suitcase my mom would bring out and cry over. Curious about what they took from her, I tried to get to know more of her through them. Once a quarter or so we visited them in stacks of yellowing pictures. I watched them carry my mom down into her memory basement. The finiteness of the recorded images, the sitters literally no longer available at any price, struck me each time with greater and greater finality.

Over time I got to know them in limited poses and set costumes. At the beach, Raschen, her mother, dark and round. Samuel, her father, a "skinny malink" and my mom with light blue eyes and skin so fair these childhood jaunts turned her freckles to the size of pennies—a face covered in overlapping Lincolns, the copper color reflecting in the noonday sun. Each time the pictures were the same but our meetings were different. Closing one eye I'd hold up photos at arm's length placing "grandpa" in the yellowy-taupe chair across the

room or "grandma" in the downstairs kitchen and, for a moment—a crack in the window—I'd see these people around, in our lives, the fact of them unprecious.

Depending on our moods and ages we entered the suitcase differently. Searching for answers to what-if fantasies and might-have-beens, I hoped each time for new photos, perhaps hidden or overlooked from one visit to the next, photos that would bridge the gap, images that might somehow bring my mother home to me.

The dead are walking again. They're wandering around at parties. Eating chips and scooping dip. They're creeping out of yellowed photographs, smiling plastic smiles. Maternal grandparents live six feet underground in Newark, NJ. Dotted-line people who took parts of our lives with them. The finality is alluring like a job well done. Papers filed. A desk cleared. Bills paid. A final stack of mail retrieved from the US Post Office.

The dead are walking again, this time at a 40th med school reunion. Last summer my mom went, looking for her parents. What are the chances? Fifty-years dead sipping 7-Ups at the bar.

It came as a feeling, afterwards, that somehow she had missed them. Surrounded by images of an era gone by—the comradeship of gray hair and expanding bodies stirred the impossible. They were there! But she missed them?

“If only I’d stayed longer,” she thought, “at the reception maybe.” But instead she turned a corner as they turned theirs. Maybe leaving half an hour before they had arrived. The cruel timeliness of it all; dead for her at age sixteen and late at sixty-six. Picking at a hang-nail thought, my mom leaves missing them.

Short-lived parents seek rest from the weary schedule of day-to-day thoughts and memories. Even I, a generation removed, call them forth, reviewing cracked photos for answers. People I never knew I memorialize in a collage. Trying to keep them up to speed in a continuing saga they, stone-faced, watch go by. Freed from responsibility, they trip through our lives like shells tumbling on the ocean floor.

Yes, the dead are walking again, robustly in our mind’s eye where people live. Showing up like projected slides in the emotional gaps. The wordless places we find ourselves, sucker-punch surprised at our inability to do the dance. They are there, exhausting us in their silence, asking too much of us if you ask me.