



MOTHER  
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"Do you remember?" My father asks me.

"No," I reply.

He steeples his hands, looking at me charmingly.

"Well," he begins, as he does when he is about to relate something humorous, "you were about seven..."

I groan.

But he continues.

"It's true. You used to go up to your mother at her desk and peer over her shoulder while she was working. She'd tell you 'I'm typing.' Then you'd whine, of course, and ask how much longer she'd be busy, and she'd say until she was done. You'd look at her petulantly and tell her, 'Well, type faster!'"

I shake my head. "What a brat."

"No," he says, taking a sip of his coffee. "It was sweet."

We are sitting across from each other in a cafe in San Diego, where I now live. My father has traveled from New York to see me and, over lattes and chais, we have fallen into a conversation about my childhood. This particular moment he has mentioned I absolutely cannot recall.

I bite my lip.

"I just don't remember," I tell him.

He nods. He knows.

There are many lost memories. They are just gone, misplaced somewhere in my transition to adulthood, never to be recovered. I sigh heavily into my cup. Would I be able to call them to mind if she were alive, I wonder. Would I feel the same need to remember these moments? If she could just be there in front of me, in the flesh, would they hold the same weight? I ponder this a second, then decide, No, probably not.

Probably not.

What I remember about my mother—something I am often asked—is not an entire picture. Assembling her is, for me, a little bit like sifting through the finds of an archeological dig; things must be examined and then fitted together to make the whole. There is, first, her physical self: the long sleeves of her sweater pushed up to her elbow; the Chinese gold hoops she wore in her ears, so pure I could bend them in my toddler's fingers; the loops of her hair, held back with combs; her feet, often tinged blue-black by her flat-soled shoes. Then there is the feel of her, both tangible, like the soft, slight oiliness of her cheek against mine, and intangible, like her presence at my elbow as we mixed batter side by side.

In the mirror, I see her, at odd, startling moments that send me running for my camera. I can isolate the part of my face that resembles hers, capture it for a moment in order to study it. Sometimes it's my mouth, which turns up at one end when I smile; sometimes it's my eyes, though they are lighter than hers and don't hold the almost haughty cast hers do in photographs taken when she was around my age.

It scares me, our resemblance does, when it decides to appear. It can overwhelm others as well, particularly old friends of hers, who see our likeness more than most. After looking deeply into my face some time, one mused, "It's like looking at a ghost I haven't seen in forty years."

I don't have the memories these people have. They are the ones who give me the pieces I need to assemble her, the stories that give her shape. They tell me of her fantastic dinners, multiple-course affairs full of wine and laughter; of her favorite phrases, like "morally bankrupt" and "out to lunch"; and the quirky songs she used to make up to entertain me as a small child. There are her cookbooks, which I have read cover to cover, that serve as chronicles of our life together. Although written for the public, they are invaluable to me privately, a blueprint of sorts for what things were like back then. They weren't written for this purpose, as my mother had no knowledge of her impending death. She couldn't know that my sense of her would have to rely so heavily on her essays and stories, that her words would take on more than she ever intended. For me, her cookbooks are not the product of her as a writer. Instead, they are one of the biggest parts of her that I still have. In them, she is purely my mother.

In many ways, I am like her. I have navigated parts of her life she has not been here to share with me. I've read the same books she did during her childhood, antiquated and fanciful stories of adventurous families and plucky children, of cats that walked by themselves and magical babysitters living in upside-down houses. During a particularly angst-ridden time, I played her old Beatles records, learning every skip, every crackle. I live now in a small, one-room apartment as she did, making my meals in a toaster oven. I have a cat, too, will probably always have a cat, her favorite animal, no matter how beastly hers could be. Our deepest dreams even coincide, her desire to sing backup in a Motown girl group meeting my longing to do the same in a rock band.

And I, too, am a writer.

But I am also not like her. I cannot cook, a failing many will attest to. I do not dress in her "uniform" of black skirts and striped shirts, opting instead for sweatshirts and shorts. My limbs are long; hers were short. At five foot six, I would be half a foot taller than my mother, and would have to stoop to hug her, to whisper something silly in her ear the way I used to.

I think of her often. She is always there, a presence even in death. The oddities that once peppered her desk now hold special places of honor in my tiny home; the red-and-black-speckled fountain pen, the trinkets box, the little yellow clay cat she made and shellacked. The books she wrote sit on my shelf. I can be driving down the endless California freeway, sitting on my surfboard in the middle of the ocean or walking down my cracked neighborhood sidewalk and there she'll be, at the forefront of my mind. Mom.

And I'll wonder what she wanted for me, what life she imagined I'd have. Would she ever have thought I'd settle three thousand miles from the home we once shared? That the eight-year-old girl would grow into a writer, a (terrible) surfer, a girlfriend, a runner, a drummer, a computer nerd? Would she, too, look over my shoulder as I work away at my computer, pushing my hair away from my face to tell me, tongue-in cheek, to "type faster?"

I don't know. I like to think she would have.