Mother Love

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I missed my first high school interview—the one at the Stephens School for Boys—because on her way to pick me up, Mom's car collided with a semi hauling three hundred gallons of petroleum.

Though my dad and I shied away from news reports, fragments of information found their way to us and soon we knew it had been a spectacular death. For one thing, there was no body. An officer came to the house with what remained: a zip-lock bag containing her blackened wristwatch and two scorched rings, engagement and wedding, fused by intense heat.

We took the officer's advice and avoided that stretch of the highway for days, but from our back porch, I could see the cloud of sooty air that held Mom, devoid of bone and muscle, heart and loin, hovering, then dispersing into a thin gray mantle before dissolving into the sky's familiar blue. I wondered if, like the phoenix, she would arise from the ashes in rebirth. The myth of that Grecian bird of paradise was one she'd read to me. Because our shared encounters on the rare days she felt well enough to accommodate me were so few and far between, I can recall each of them with complete clarity. I can conjure her scent, the texture of her hair, the way her voice resonated in her chest where my head lay against warm cotton or soft silk, rising and falling with the quiet pattern of her breath.

We didn't have a service. Mom had few local acquaintances and never spoke of her family. Once, I borrowed Edith Hamilton's *Gods and Heroes* from her office and a photo fell from the pages: seven people, all tall, all with dark blue eyes and pale skin, no smiles. I would not have been surprised to learn that they were being held at gunpoint as the camera flashed.

When I asked Mom why I'd never met her family, she said, "I'm sure they all have enough on their plates," her eyes fixed on an illustration of Agamemnon, dead and bloodied in his own bathtub, the victim of mariticide.

My parents met in the Classics Department at Columbia, where Mom was fast approaching the zenith of her career as a professor of Ancient Greek literature and my father was a freshly minted lecturer in the same department.

While Dad spoke to mesmerized undergraduates of the heroic Greeks battling a Persian army three times larger and better equipped at the Battle of Marathon, Mom gave moving lectures on the Greek tragedian, Aeschylus, who, having lost his brother in that same battle, penned an empathic account of the Greco-Persian conflicts from the perspective of the defeated Persians.

"Your father glorified the Greeks in battle. I lamented the Persian suffering that came with their defeat. We argued for hours as to the meaning of *The Persians*: he, choosing to read the play as a celebration of victory; I, reading the play as an indictment of suffering. It only made sense that after such a passionate discussion, we would end up in bed together," she'd told me when I was twelve.

Dad reveled in a miraculous victory. Mom condemned the suffering of war. Who was correct?

Ms. Reedy, my high school Classics teacher, enlightened me:

"The intended message of the playwright is in the eye of the beholder," she insisted, "every audience member finds the message most compelling to her. This is what makes the play so satisfying."

Ms. Reedy's comments helped me see the play as just another example of the many literary versions of Newton's Third Law keeping my parents in stasis: Mom and Dad maintained a compelling balance of opposing opinions on dozens of texts. Which character in *Antigone* most closely represents a tragic hero: Antigone or Creon? Who created superior characters: Aeschylus

or Euripides? These matters were so hotly debated over Stouffers mac and cheese and Hungry Man tv dinners that I occasionally found myself ducking beneath the crossfire of discussion as Mom's dark blue eyes flashed and Dad tapped his butter knife on plate's edge in rhythm with his speech. They feasted on these battles of words, this tug and pull of a shared passion. After Mom's death, I watched Dad with anxiety. Now that the equilibrium had been lost, would he crumble in a fit of hysteria? Suffer delusions? Swallow large quantities of aspirin?

Mom was thirty-three when she met Dad. Ten years later, she was tenured, world-renowned as an expert on the tragedies of Aeschylus, entrusted with the study of newly discovered fragments of *Achilles*, and surprised by pregnancy.

With my birth, came her decline. No one had to tell me this: I had only to see the volumes, translations, awards that came before me, and the sidelined scholar with her pills, therapies, and preoccupations that came after. When I was a newborn, Mom found she could no longer concentrate on the fragments of *Achilles*. Dad accepted a post at a small, suburban university near his Pennsylvania hometown. Mom would be able to rest there, he reasoned, and concentrate on her health. She could also continue to work with psychiatrists and visit colleagues in New York as it was not a long commute by train.

Within days of her death, my dad and I resumed the schedule of high school interviews. My anxiety soared. I studied Dad for any sign of psychosis that might be ushered in by the offer of condolence I expected we'd encounter. Would his composed expression dissolve into a puddle of sobbing? It did not. At Crownwell, he accepted Ms. Erickson's kind words with a nod of his

head and a word of thanks. My hammering heart slowed to a steady beat and except for my sweating hands, I believe I was a picture of calm.

"Tell me why you think Crownwell is the right school for Joe, Dr. Healy," asked Ms. Erickson.

"Well, Ms. Erickson," Dad began, leaning toward her like an eager child, placing his laced fingers on her desk. When he leaned in, the cuffs of his trousers pulled up, revealing his fine-boned ankles. I didn't hear what he said next because that's when I recognized my mom's pantyhose, the electric blue ones, the ultra-sheer ones she'd described as "gorgeous but fragile—they run so easily."

On the way home from the Crownwell interview, I stared at Dad's ankles most of the way, groping for a way of mentioning the stockings. In the driveway, he pulled up the parking brake, clicked off the motor, and turned to me with his usual air-tight grin. (He's always been a little self-conscious about the wide gap that splits his smile in two.) I smiled back, but all I could think about were those blue ankles. He'd clearly broken down, untethered as he now was from that essential polarity he'd known with Mom.

"Hungry? I thought I'd pull together a little mock cassoulet for dinner. Picked up some very nice pork tenderloin at the market."

He tilted his head, maintaining the smile.

"Sure, Dad," I sighed, grabbing my backpack, climbing out of the car, "that sounds great."

“Well?”

My friend Annie called to hear about the interview. I told her about the pantyhose. She said nothing.

“Annie.”

“I think it’s okay as long as they didn’t clash with his pants.”

“Cut it out, Annie.”

“So, your dad misses your mom. So maybe wearing her pantyhose makes him feel close to her. Come on, Joe, relax. It’s probably just a passing thing. I mean, he’s always been a little quirky. Didn’t you tell me he once dressed up like an Athenian general for a freshman lecture? He’s not into your mom’s makeup or anything is he?”

It was just like Annie to make it seem perfectly normal that a conventional middle-aged professor would want to wear his dead wife’s stockings from time to time. What made her think it was a passing thing? What if he intended to go through the rest of his life donning Mom’s clothing?

The night after the Crownwell interview, I dreamed Dad and I were downtown walking under some scaffolding. He was wearing Mom’s black spandex cocktail dress, the one she wore to his faculty Christmas party each year. Some guys were catcalling Dad from above.

“Those guys only wish they had these legs,” he scoffed, tossing a cigarette to the ground, crushing it with a high heel.

“Joe, breakfast is ready!”

The day after the accident, he’d started making my breakfast each morning. What was funny about that is Mom had stopped making my breakfast when I turned six and could finally reach the cereal box myself. Waking up to the smell of bacon was confusing: for the first couple of seconds, I thought I was at Grandma’s, where my dad’s mom was always tiptoeing around, always whispering, “What can I getcha, hon?”

Downstairs, Dad was on his toes, stretching for the handle on the tall cabinet that held the coffee mugs. I take after Mom, who was close to six feet in height. Whenever the three of us went out somewhere, it felt like my dad was the kid. He made jokes about it, but you could tell he liked being the short guy in the middle, felt protected, safe there, where he alternately bumped into Mom’s arm and mine, all the way to wherever we were going, both of us hop-skipping to keep up with her quick stride.

“Why don’t we move those mugs?” I asked once again, just as I had asked practically every morning since the beginning of the breakfast thing.

“Not a chance,” he said, “you know I want to keep things as normal as possible around here.”

When he finally hooked the handle, the trousers went up and I saw his regular socks.

“So, when’s the next one?” He sliced a link sausage into six pieces.

“Next what?”

He surveyed the sausage, nodded to his plate, and began brushing whipped butter across a slice of toast.

“The next interview. I was tense there, with Ms. Erickson; she seemed a bit serious. Looking forward to the next one; I’m sure I’ll get better at this, with practice.”

He bit a tiny triangle from his toast. I almost asked him about the pantyhose then but changed my mind—a decision I came to regret the following Monday morning when I could have sworn he was wearing my mother’s favorite yellow blouse beneath his tweed jacket.

We were going to Smithfield Preparatory that morning. I ate the blueberry blintzes and bacon as quickly as possible and dashed into the den. I punched in Annie’s number.

“He’s definitely losing it,” I told her, describing the blouse.

“You worry too much. Is he wearing a tie?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“If he’s wearing a tie, nobody will notice that the blouse buttons on the wrong side—the chick’s side. If his cuffs aren’t showing, and he keeps his jacket on, he probably looks okay. How’s the collar?”

“It’s pointy, like on a guy’s shirt.”

“No problem then.”

It was a mild November morning. If they didn’t overheat their school, Dad would probably leave his jacket on. Still, I felt spring-loaded at Smithfield that day; I kept watching Ms. Ryan’s eyes, but they never seemed to focus on Dad’s shirt. The problem was, we had another interview to go at Top Ridge, a school I knew my mother had held in high regard. The pantyhose was one thing, but a blouse? What if he wore her pearls? Or those emerald cut diamond earrings we gave her last Mother’s Day?

“Joe?”

He called me from the doorway of my room, Mom’s favorite paisley scarf limp in his hand.

Was he going to ask me for fashion advice?

I closed my calculus book.

“What are you doing with Mom’s scarf?”

He looked even smaller than usual there, in his flannel boxers and white T-shirt. His hair was messed up, like a little kid’s: a pile of straw, only with random silver threads shooting out here and there. Only his eyes looked old, worn out.

“Oh,” he looked down at the clutch of silk, like he’d forgotten it was there. “I thought I’d send it to your Aunt June. I thought it would go nicely with her dark hair.”

My shoulders fell into place.

He came in and jumped up on the edge of my bed. I shoved the book out of the way.

“What’s up, Dad?”

He traced and retraced an invisible circle into my bedspread.

“Just wanted to tell you…” He sat up, looking around the room, as if searching for a misplaced cue card, stopped searching, shrugged his shoulders, “if you want to talk about your mom…”

I opened my book and slid it over in front of me, pretending to study differential equations.

“Okay, Dad. Thanks.”

He jumped off the bed.

What I really wanted to talk about was his recent choice of attire, but I could not begin to figure out how to bring it up.

Watching the back of him disappear through the doorway, I remembered the first time I knew things weren’t right. We were walking to the birthday party of a little girl in my nursery school class.

Mom was wearing a long skirt covered in wildflowers. As we walked, I scrambled to keep up so my cheek could brush her hip with every other step. When we arrived at the front gate

of the birthday girl's house, Mom checked the address against an invitation plucked from her pocket and said, "I'll be back when the party's over. That's at eleven o'clock."

She dropped my hand and walked away. I remember how all the other mothers and the kids, who were on the patio on the other side of the gate, stopped talking and stared. I remember finally one of the mothers came to the gate and opened it for me.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to talk with your mommy, Joe," she said. "Come with me. We're going to play some games." She took my hand and helped me climb some tall steps.

I worried that I wouldn't know when it was eleven o'clock, that Mom might come back and not see me and then she would leave again. I worried that I wouldn't know how to find my house. It must have worked out, but I only remember the worrying part that got into my skin that morning because the truth was, even when she was with me, she was never really there at all.

Once in a while, the mother of a new kid at my school would try to strike up a conversation with Mom as other moms and babysitters waited for dismissal outside the school doors. The others looked on with a kind of knowing amusement as Mom nodded and turned me toward the parking lot, leaving the poor newcomer alone mid-sentence.

She wasn't good at small talk, my mother, and the smaller the talk the less patience she had for it. I can only imagine her head was filled with the vivid imagery of her life's work: of the decimated Persian troops wading through the waters off the bay of Marathon, escaping to their ships after being soundly beaten by the Greeks, or of Antigone, her soft young throat noosed in

silk, stepping off the seat of a chair, as she chose to die with honor rather than succumb at the hands of Creon. Every day suburban life must hold few pleasures for a wayward scholar.

At Top Ridge, Dad seemed more relaxed than he had at the other schools. In Ms. Perkin's office, he sat back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other, letting the top leg swing back and forth a little. He smiled widely, baring his split teeth. Ms. Perkins had a split toothed grin too. I felt like I was sitting between two Jack-O-Lanterns. Those two really hit it off. It wasn't until the end of the interview that the two of them realized they were distant cousins—relations who had misplaced one another.

I don't know how I'd missed it earlier, but there he was, wearing what looked like Mom's coat—the long, camel one. I guess I'd overlooked the coat because something funny about Ms. Perkins' shoes distracted me; when she led us into her office, I'd noticed that they were exactly like the shoes my grandfather wore: laced oxfords with little pinpricks in the leather to make a design. Funny, though, that I could overlook something like Mom's coat. In the end, it didn't seem to matter. I'd made the cut. Clearly, Ms. Perkins was going to take me in. We all knew it. Top Ridge was my new home.

"Herman and I will have you two over to dinner soon!" Ms. Perkins sang out as she waved from behind the closing door of the Admissions Office.

"Joe and I will have you two over for my porcini pot roast, Delia! Give Herman my best in the meantime!"

Dad beamed all the way to the car.

"I'm in," I told Annie on the phone that night.

"Of course, you are, silly," she replied.

That was the last time I saw Dad wearing Mom's clothes. He resumed his life in the wake of our mutual loss with no outward sign of the loneliness that must have consumed him. I have never asked him why he wore Mom's clothes to those schools. Sometimes I was certain it was a risky measure taken to divert my anxious self-absorption, to dissolve my fear of rejection, of not being valued by these strangers with their applications and assessments. I mean, if I were obsessed with Dad's impression, how could I worry about my own?

At other times, I was sure it was Dad's offer of connection to Mom in those trembling moments of asking for a stranger's acceptance when, like all people orphaned at birth, I would never entirely accept myself.

Now I believe I may have only imagined I saw her clothes. Once when I was three, Mom recovered me from Macy's Lost and Found; she'd scooped me up and my nose grazed her lamb's wool collar holding a hint of powder in its plush pile, the powder with the Spanish Dancer on its lid. I'd held on to her, with closed eyes, wondering how I could get lost again.

There I was, so many years later, lost again, this time in those cold unfamiliar offices with those strangers and their questions, needing something familiar, something to anchor me to some remaining proof of her existence. I could not help but see Mom's clothes, whether they were there or not.