

A Long Time Ago

IT'S DUSK BY THE TIME THE JET NEARS MY HOMETOWN. THE sun, hanging low to the west, casts long shadows over the crazy quilt of farmland that surrounds the city below. The fields are flat—as level as an ironing board—and dotted with clusters of farmhouses, barns, outbuildings, burr oaks. The plane catches an air hole and my suitcase in the overhead compartment jostles with the bounce. Inside my bag are black pants, black shirt, and black shoes, as I figured I might be attending a funeral.

Three weeks ago my mother broke her hip. Following an urgent open reduction and internal fixation, she spent several days in the cardiac intensive care unit and is now on a medical ward. Mother is 85 years old and not healthy. Her heart barely pumps, she has longstanding diabetes, has had a stroke, and is chronically anticoagulated. Her knees are badly arthritic and her bones badly osteoporotic. Since her fall she hasn't eaten more than a few bites of yogurt. At some point, one of the screws tore loose from her bone, and the femur is now, again, unstable. The plan is to place a partial artificial hip joint into her broken femur. I'm not sure she'll survive yet another operation and not sure an artificial hip won't also tear through her shadowy bone, so I'm on my way home to help sort out the medical mess.

I haven't lived here for almost 40 years, but some things are still the same. The Red River loops through the fields, leaving stagnant oxbows in the wake of winter freezes, spring thaws, summer floods. Out the right side of the plane I watch the sugar beet plant spew steam into the quiet evening sky, as it always has during the processing season. The plane makes its final descent and I see the buildings of the college I attended—the music school with its practice rooms, the lawn of the president's mansion where we held anti-Vietnam War rallies, the student union where we played bridge for hours and hid coffee cups in the philodendrons to get eternal free refills. There's the women's dorm of panty-raid fame and the biology building where I worked one summer counting copepod eggs. Mother hadn't gone to college—which embarrassed her—but she made sure her children did. The fall of my sophomore year, she stayed up all night sewing the gown I wore to the homecoming ball.

The wheels hit the runway and the jet streaks past the old dirt road where Dad used to park. On nice summer evenings, after dinner, Dad and Mom would put us kids in the back seat of the 1950 Plymouth and stop by the Dairy Queen for ice cream cones—the 5¢ size—and, then, we'd wait along the runway to watch the daily airplane—from Minneapolis—land. That gravel road is now paved.

Mother's hip replacement was scheduled for 7:15 this morning, but her INR was elevated, so the surgery was cancelled until tomorrow. To speed reversal of the anticoagulation, she received fresh-frozen plasma, which tipped her into heart failure. Shortly after a dose of Dilaudid for hip pain, her heart began to race, her blood pressure dropped, her lips turned blue, and her oxygen saturation fell to 53%. A dose of Narcan seemed to normalize everything.

I drive directly from the airport to the hospital. "Hi, Mom," I say, kissing her pale, waxy cheek. She seems to be sleeping. Her face wears the strain of pain; her hair is limp and crimped between her head and the damp, wrinkled pillow. She opens one eye. "Oh, hi, Janny. What's this thing?" She picks at the oxygen saturation monitor taped to her finger. "I'm cold." Then she dozes off again.

My mother and I haven't always agreed. While I was growing up she had plans for my future. In the end, I ignored her plans and went to medical school. She couldn't understand why I did what I did. I couldn't understand why she didn't know me better. She was a powerful force. Now, she's trapped in a hospital bed, telemetry wires taped to her chest, a PICC line snaking from her antecubital fossa, bruises like pansy blossoms on both arms, a nasogastric tube taped to her forehead, SCD wraps inflating and deflating around her calves. She isn't going to live a lot longer.

I comb her hair, straighten the sheets, let her suck on the damp oral hygiene sponge. Her body, which was my home for nine months, is shutting down.

My body, too, is wearing out. I seem to be her. Her heavy, cellulite-riddled legs are my legs. The wrinkled skin at the corners of her mouth, the witch-like long hairs on her chin—they are mine. Her tummy, stretched by four pregnancies, is my tummy, stretched by two pregnancies. I feel as if I'm the one who is dying.

While Mother naps, I drive to First Street North, to the tiny rental house where we lived during my grade school years. Inside were the attic steps we used as a refrigerator for one winter, the coal bin we converted into a play room, and the red ants that smelled like watermelon when we squashed them. There's the front yard where we built snowmen, the back yard where the rhubarb grew, the alley full of mysteries. I drive up the street, past the house where the man who looked like a turtle lived, past the Nice Harris' house, past the Johnsons' house, past the Mean Harris' house, past Renee's house on the corner.

A Piece of My Mind Section Editor: Roxanne K. Young, Associate Editor.

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Back at my parents' home, I slip into my nightgown, as I will sleep on the hide-a-bed in the sewing room. Two pairs of Mother's shoes are lined up against the closet door, their leather a cast of her bony feet. Will she ever wear them again? On the wall beside the door hangs my parents' wedding picture. A coy smile warms my mother's face as she glances at the handsome young soldier at her side; totally absorbed in each other, they are walking down the aisle of the Fort Snelling chapel, their backs to the altar. World War II rages but they are in love.

In the bathroom the essence of my mother lingers like a familiar scent. Her chenille robe hangs from the hook beside the shower, as does a pair of socks she washed apparently shortly before her fall. On the counter sit her perfume named Unforgettable, her lipstick, and her hairbrush with a nest of gray hairs entangled in the bristles. A framed, cross-stitched sampler is mounted beside the bathroom sink—"Getting old isn't for sissies," it reads.

The next morning, the partial hip replacement, scheduled for 7:15, is cancelled again; her INR is normal but her potassium is too low. She's becoming a worse surgical candidate with every day that passes. She's in a lot of pain.

"Why are we doing this?" she moans. "Ow, ow, ow, ow. Janet, when can we go home?"

The occupational therapist pulls Mother up in bed to test her ability to swallow. Mother screams.

"Her pain doesn't seem to be under good control," I tell the nurse.

"Actually, we have nothing ordered for pain," she says.

"That's not acceptable," I say. "My mother has a broken hip."

The nurse tries to explain why Mother can't get oral meds, can't get nonsteroidals, can't get narcotics.

"That's not acceptable," I say.

The nurse disappears.

"What's Dad doing all this time?" Mother asks. "Where is he?"

"He's at home, Mom." I rub lotion on my mother's hands. Her skin is dry. The gold of her wedding rings is worn to thin threads. These are the hands that played the piano at our Sunday School, that made caramels every

Christmas. They're the smooth, graceful hands in the pictures taken by my father when he was a young aspiring photographer.

The hospitalist ushers me into the consultation room. We discuss the long- and short-term goals.

"We need to look at the big picture here," I say. "My mother isn't going to the operating room anytime soon, if ever. The top priority needs to be pain control."

He suggests palliative care. I agree. Within two hours, she's transferred across town to the palliative care unit.

This evening I return again to my old neighborhood and drive the rental car around Horace Mann Elementary School. I look up at the windows of Miss Adams' first grade room where we huddled under our desks during air raid drills, at the windows of the gymnasium where we received our polio vaccinations, at the windows of Mrs Ellofson's room where we made butter by shaking cream in a jelly jar. The windows, once tall and majestic, have been covered with brown wooden panels, so only short panes of glass remain. I loved my school, wanted to live there as a child. Miss Brown's room would be my bedroom, the girls' lavatory would be my bathroom. I would have the library all to myself.

I return to the palliative care facility and step into my mother's room. The lights are dimmed. "Hi, Mom," I say.

"Janet, I don't understand what's going on. What're we doing here?"

I dab Vaseline on her lips; they're soft as velvet and make a writhing movement under my fingers.

She turns her head toward me. Her eyes are full of wondering. "Whatever happened to a long time ago?"

"Good question, Mom," I say. Outside the window, a V of wild geese—a gray silhouette against the sea blue sky—wings east. The V disintegrates as the flock makes a 90-degree turn, and then, back in formation, the geese head south.

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