

Today is the anniversary of my mother's death. Every year, I go down to the river at 12:12 and toss a dozen lilies into the river to celebrate her memory, to let her know I will never forget her.

The day she died, I came home from work at around noon. It was rainy and gloomy that November 12<sup>th</sup> when my mother's light exited, continuing to unfold her soul's journey. My husband and I were in the kitchen, looking out the window at the black, barren trees, water clinging to limbs where once were leaves, the grass strands poking through the gold and orange carpet, the quiet waterfall in the back crescendoing, churning Heaven's tears into diamond rivulets. When he spotted the bear across the stream, Alan said "there's no way that bear's going to end up in our yard, right?" And seconds later, there she was, what I would guess to be at least six hundred pounds, my diminutive 95-pound mother showing she was so much larger than we could ever comprehend. When we took the first photo it was 12:12pm. It took me a while to realize that including the day (Nov. 12), the number represented was 12-12-12, the sign of God, a kindly reassurance that she was safe, and was experiencing more love and joy than our limited human existence could ever interpret. We followed her through the windows of the house, around the side where the pink rose bushes are, built on a hill that Alan hates to mow and I seem to either fall down or get stung by the bees that nest there. The bear moved to the front yard tree, a gnarly, ancient looking thing that sprouts berries in Autumn; she stood up on her hind legs and took a nibble. Then she proceeded to search for Kayla, our cat, who has two spots in our neighborhood she frequently occupies, one on the side of our neighbor's driveway, and one directly across the

street on the front stoop. Upon not finding her, she decided to walk up the street and explore the rest of the neighborhood, while residents furiously snapped pictures to post on facebook. We were lucky enough to get one of our neighbor's photos, the bear sauntering slowly in front of our driveway, our house her silent witness. I always thought there was an inextricable link between mom and my cat, Kayla: they both had terrible respiratory problems, and they were both absolutely stunning. Whenever I picture them now, I see Kayla running, her beautiful long grey hair stroking the wind, jumping into my mother's eager arms, the two of them bound in an eternal embrace.

It was hours later when I learned my mom had passed peacefully in her bed at around 11:30am. She left the world on her terms, denying my father the chance to take her to the hospital and extend her physical pain further, deciding for herself it was time. I was told my father slept on the floor with her till about 5AM, when she woke and requested he take her to her bed. I can almost hear the softly murmured argument, my father's tears forming while my mother firmly but gently whispered condolences on the loss to come, decades of marriage and adventure, childbirth, loss, love.

When I saw him at the funeral he looked dejected, his head hanging, and as many disagreements as we have had, my heart broke for him. I sent him a flowering amaryllis the next day with a card that read "when you have loved and lost, you are a great warrior. I bow to your sorrow." I had nothing else to give, as I couldn't wrap my own mind around this parting that I knew had to come, but pretended to myself it wouldn't, shut the door on that inevitability for my own protection. I read, I cried, I talked to friends. Most told me that when

their mother died she appeared to them in an alternate form: Helen's mom came as a cardinal outside her kitchen window that sang to her for too long for it to be coincidental; Lida was on the runway in a plane returning to Honduras when her mother appeared at the window as a butterfly. I spoke with women in bookstores, scouring the shelves, like me, for books on managing grief, pulling the disheveled pieces of yourself back into some sort of awkward, working form, while simultaneously trying to keep your brain from falling out of your head, a dissonant "multitasking for dummies." I left the bookstore slowly, on stilted legs moving sideways, like a displaced crab in the parking lot; I, of course, could not find the car.

Mom continues to grace me with her presence since her physical parting: my first birthday after her death she came on June 1<sup>st</sup> as what appeared to be a male, adolescent bear. I was watering plants in the corner of my yard and realized I should retrieve the hose for the task I wished to accomplish. I took the watering can and turned around, walked about twenty-five feet to the side of the sliding door where the hose resides. As I turned around, I saw a large shadow where I had just been gardening; I looked up and saw a young bear up the ridge ten feet further, and I swear he was smiling at me! I vacillated between multiple emotions: shock, joy, confusion, disbelief. And the words simply fell from my mouth without any thought whatsoever: "hi mom." I inched my way backwards to the door and ran inside to tell Alan. We followed the bear's movements through the side of our yard up into our neighbor's property, then descending back down to the street where he calmly walked up

the main thoroughfare as if this were all totally normal. Which is a reflection of what grief really is: the obtuse pretense at normality.

The following year on June 1<sup>st</sup> she came as a bobcat. We have a wonderful video from our outdoor camera; she popped her head up and stared right at it, then moved on. This year she came as a very large rabbit, who we subsequently named “Chestnut” after Joey Chestnut, the hot dog-eating champion who had once again won the Coney Island Nathan’s challenge, only to have advertisers revoke their support because he was wearing the logo of a meatless hot dog company on his shirt. I was a bit disappointed in Chestnut being my visitation, and complained bitterly to my husband on my mother’s lack of judgment. But I knew it was her because she simply would not leave. She had let me come right up and was not afraid of me at all, which as everyone knows is impossible since rabbits are either entirely lacking in courage or rapturously fornicating, guaranteeing their species little possibility of extinction.

Reflecting as I toss the lilies into the river today, I notice they cling to the side of the bank, right near a large rock that reminds me of the rock of Gibraltar we saw on a family trip to Spain. A symbol of my father’s heritage, her rock, the husband she let shine while she contentedly stayed on the sidelines and let him have the attention he so desperately craved.

Recently one day, praying to my mother with a complicated issue, a goose flew right over my head. As mom is known to visit in alternate forms, I curiously sought information on

geese as spirit animals. Geese are sacred to the goddess Juno, the Roman queen of the gods who kept special watch over all aspects of women's lives. She is portrayed as a matron of statuesque proportions and severe beauty, just like my mother. Juno occasionally exhibited military characteristics, which harkens back to a dream I had in the hospital, on life support this past January for a severe lung injury, where mom appeared in military form, an authority figure to the staff treating me. I can only surmise that like Juno, mom watches over her four daughters with strength and compassion, hopeful to inspire us into whom we are meant to be, whatever mission that might entail, and in my case, assist in keeping us alive to complete it.

My mother and I spent much of our lives at each other's throats: she made fun of my buxom form, forced me into clothes that did not fit me the way I wanted to be seen. I remember us screaming that we hated each other, her scraping my teeth with a bar of soap in the middle of our street one day, when I had cursed relentlessly and carved my anger into an Aerosmith album with a razor blade. I was troubled and so was she: instead of bringing us together, it tore us apart.

But the last years of her life she completely changed in a way I could have never foreseen. She looked beyond surfaces and achieved an astonishing level of grace, nimbly tiptoeing the fine line between her husband's approval and her own desires. He was controlling, forbidding her contact with her daughters in his presence, and would park down the road if he saw one of our cars in the driveway during a visit. One of the most singular things she did for me was to come to my wedding against my father's will: he dropped her at the New

London ferry and she crossed over the Long Island Sound alone, probably defying her husband for the first time in her life. I was in my fifties and had waited so long for the right person, a Jewish son that my Catholic mother adored. I felt so incredibly lucky to have both of them. I just wished I had more time to consolidate my relationship with her, to let her know that in the end, the love I had for her was perfectly equal to what she gave back. Right before she died she referred to me as “her free spirit;” I was elated that she cherished what was uniquely me, that she treasured that which is frequently disdained.

I built a “she shed” in honor of my mother, where Kayla’s ashes have been spread. In early spring daffodils and tulips adorn the Celtic cross I planted there, followed by Black Eyed Susans in the summer and mums in autumn. Her cenotaph faces the waterfall and stream she crossed as a bear the day she passed away. I imagine my body as the sympathy wind chimes hanging on the leafless beech tree, heavy metal tubes jerked by November’s turbulent wind, juxtaposed with the surprisingly light-hearted melody they emit, held fast with wood and wire, like the steady hand of my mother.

