

She is my mother

As she drives, she explains to me why she married my father. I listen by closing my eyes to her words. I take in her scent. It is a subtle scent, not flowery or over powering. It reminds me of when I was a child, and she would tip-toe into my bedroom. I would pretend to be asleep as she kissed me good night after coming home from a party or dinner with my father. It was the perfume she wore for special occasions that she wears now, as she drives. I breathe her in. She is my mother. She is wonderful and beautiful, yet she causes me great anxiety.

Last night, as I sat on her bed, watching her rub face cream on to her freckled face, she complained that her skin is getting dry. She eyed me from the bedroom mirror as I picked at my finger nails. I pretended not to notice her staring at me. She wanted to talk to me about something last night, I knew. I sensed it, but I flopped down on the bed and started going on about how she always makes a production about everything. I complained. "Why did she always have to go over-board, kissing me in public, bragging about me, telling people my secrets?"

"You have secrets?" she asked, "You better not have any secrets from me. I am your mother," she laughs, "I know all."

"Oh please, you only know because you read my diary, and half the time I make up stuff because I know you are reading it."

I am angry with her. I am always angry with her these days. I feel so out of sorts with myself.

This will be our last trip together. My mood is sour. She calls me a sour-puss. How many trips have we taken together? England, France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, and that doesn't include the States. She was always about the trips. She loved planning adventures together. She'd come home from work and say, "Girls, we are going to Italy this summer, Start looking through the apartment for all the twenties I hide." We found hundreds of dollars, stuffed in books, hidden in her purses, folded under the carpet, tucked away in the china cabinet. Hidden away until my mother had the urge to flee from our Chicago apartment and find our summer adventure elsewhere. We piled all the loot on our parent's bed, and counted it out. "Girls, I think we have our plane tickets, and then some."

I did not want my college visit to be our last trip together. I wanted it to be the next stage of our trips. I wanted her to be well. I wanted her to not worry about me. When I met her green eyes in the bedroom mirror last night I saw her tears. I knew, despite the silence between us, that she did not want this to be our last trip either. Earlier in the year, she had spoken of wanting to go to China to walk the Great Wall. "They eat dogs there," I whined.

"You always have a complaint about something," she had said.

I take a deep breathe. To me, her scent does not smell of flowers, but an earthly manifestation. As I breathe it in, I feel as if I am touching the center of the universe. I am feeling my mother's core. My mother's essence bottled and stored. When I was a child, I would dab the perfume behind my earlobes and feel her presence, feel her strength, feel as if I could do anything in the world just by breathing in this scent that has become my mother. I felt strong when I would sneak a bit of her perfume on my wrists. "Are you wearing my perfume,"

she would yell. The scent lingered between us. It intermingled with my sweat, my own scent. And I would lie, and say she was crazy. That she was smelling herself.

It was my armor to wear when I felt a bit beside myself. She sent me away on my first trip to France alone, “to find myself.” She wanted me to know what a true adventure was when you are alone in a foreign country. “You complain now,” she said, “but later, when you are older, you will understand why I wanted you to travel.”

“I am not lost,” I said. “I know myself very well.”

“Really, at fourteen,” she retorted.

Angouleme, a town in southwestern France, was my first trip alone. I had made my way alone through Charles De Gaulle airport, then to the train station that would take me to Angouleme. I lugged two huge bags filled with presents for my house family. It was my mother’s idea. She believed that people always like presents, even if they don’t like you. I spent the summer trying to understand why my mother had sent me away, why she didn’t want me near her.

My mother has a thing about French stuff. She used to sell French wines for a living, but she hadn’t married a Frenchman; doesn’t know a word of French. She speaks Italian, like the rest of our family, as her second language because in her world, everyone should speak a second language. I can’t speak Italian. I can barely speak English correctly, I am told by my father, but I have attempted to bumble my way through four years of French, a language she

wanted me to learn. *Je suis American. Je suis fatigued. Je suis triste.* I can also count to 100 in French.

My father had spent two years in Paris after his stint in the Korean War. He taught English to wealthy French children. He rented a small apartment in St. Germaine de Pres, and sipped coffee and smoked cigarettes at the same café that Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre wrote their philosophical offerings. My father studied philosophy in college. He went to Paris because he wanted an adventure. He was not looking for love, but a sense of who he was. That's what he told me before I left for Paris this last time.

I wanted to go to college in France, Aix-en Provence, but my father had laughed and said my French was so horrible that I would be laughed out of the town. So, I chose a Liberal Arts college in Ohio where I had gotten a scholarship.

My mother continues to tell me her story. I tap my fingers on my lap, wanting to turn on the radio and tune her out. I close my eyes and let the hot air blow on my face from the open passengers' window. I am the little prince, flying from planet to planet. I am touching the sun with my fingertips. My mother's voice takes me to a place where nothing else matters, where my joy comes from knowing when I open my eyes, I will see her. She will tell me everything I ever wanted was in the palm of my hand.

"Roll up the window," she shouts, "I don't want my wig flying off."

"Now that would be funny," I joke. She laughs.

What lingers now in my dream state is the “bloody thing,” her words, that now grows in the womb that once housed my sister and me. If I could, I would lacerate the damn thing that has entrenched itself in my mother’s womb. I would kill it if I could. I’d tell it to fuck- off and never come back. The “bloody thing” has become, to me, like a misanthropic step sister. She gets all the attention now, with all of the late night trips to the hospital and discussions on the next step in treatment. She is an intrusive one, but very much a part of the intimate circle of our family of four.

She has become an omnipotent presence who invades my every sense of being. I cry myself to sleep, squeezing my eyes tight in my darkened room, a million points of light piercing through me. I am infinite in my own space. I am outer space. Darkness has invaded my home, my safety, my love for my mother. I picture “the bloody black thing” growing in my mother’s womb. I blast it with my mind. I want it gone. I want to know that my mother’s womb is still safe and beautiful, empty of all ugliness and odorous foreign bodies.

For my college visit, I am wearing a black skirt, black blouse with black boots and black leather jacket. I refrained from wearing my fishnet nylons, and opted for black tights.

“Are you in mourning?” my mother asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“You are so damned dramatic, you should be an actress.”

“I am. I am always acting.”

None of my clothes are from French designers; all of them had been bought at local thrift stores. My mother does not understand my look. She does not understand since she has made it her job to refine my tastes by instilling culture and beauty from our world travels together by influencing me with being proper and well-groomed, by sending me to France for the last three summers to educate me, and in her words “to instill a sense of class, as well as to get me away from the ordinary.” I tell her that I know how to use a bidet. She laughs, and shakes her head and says “a \$6,000 investment and that is all you got from three summers in France?”

“No,” I say, “I have impeccable table manners. I love the Provencal life-style, and when I am old and dying, I will escape to southern France and live in a chateau and wear only purple.” Again, she laughs.

We cross into Indiana. I turn up the radio. She turns it down. I start to sing to myself. She interrupts me and tells me to listen. I want to take a nap, to block out the mundane landscape of I-95, the brightness of everything and the unspokeness that lingers between us. I glance at her profile as she concentrates on the endless expressway. She continues to tell me about how she first met my father. It was at a party. First, she noticed the well-tailored suit he was wearing. At the time he was a social worker for the city of Chicago, and broke but he still dressed well. My mother was also a social worker at the time. My father had been back in the states for three years, leaving Paris in 1963.

Sometimes it is hard to piece together my mother’s stories. She often goes off on a tangent, like now, as she tells me that she didn’t want to go the party at first, but had nothing

better to do. She had gotten into a fight with her mother and wanted to get out of the apartment. My mother did not have her own apartment at this time. She lived with her parents, as was the custom of Italian-American families, until she married my father. I can picture the fight they had—things being shouted, maybe even thrown, my grandmother crying at the kitchen table that nobody loved her and my mother running for the door. My grandfather would be on the couch, his false teeth lying out in front of him, watching T.V, ignoring the fight, and, if it got too loud, he would turn up the volume on the T.V to block out the yelling that was going on between my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was once very beautiful, but my grandfather's womanizing made her old. She never felt loved. I think it was because her mother died of the same thing that is killing my mother. I share a special bond with my grandmother. We both feel unloved most of the time, even though we are both loved greatly by a woman who is dying.

I want to ask her what she was wearing, but instead I picture what she might have been wearing; a black dress with pearls, something smart and well cut. Maybe something green, to set off her red hair. Her hair was probably piled high on top of her head, and she was wearing a low heeled pump. Again, I glance at my mother. It bothers me that I didn't get her petite nose. I do not understand why she married my father, who has such a big nose. Did she not realize that most daughters inherit their father's looks? I say this to her as she drives, interrupting her story. At this point, she is telling me that she was there with a friend and at first she thought he liked her friend, but he asked her to step out on the porch to have a cigarette with him. My father has recently quit smoking for my mother, to help fight the damned thing that has taken over our family.

“Why you are telling me this?” she asks. “You have a beautiful nose.”

“To you,” I say, looking out the window. I press my forehead to the glass. All I see is a vastness of land. I feel overwhelmed and sick to my stomach. I want to roll down the window, but I can’t, for the hot air outside will do nothing but elevate the pain I feel inside. I unfasten my seat belt and crawl to the backseat. I lie down on the backseat, pressing my cheek to the vinyl. I close my eyes to my mother’s words. Somewhere around one of the turns is my college. It’s a place that I chose from a poster I saw in one of my high school hallways. I have this intense desire to be somewhere else. I cannot explain my pain to my mother. It overtakes me; it is physical, mental, and emotional. When I think of the thing taking over her womb, sometimes I gasp out in pain as if I am suffocating, as if I too am dying. I am dying. I feel it, I too feel her pain. I am like that. I try to move out of my own body. At night I pretend again that I am the Little Prince flying; flying away from the internal void I feel whenever I think of the black thing with no eyes and no mouth and no scent. But I picture it with ears; ears that are sucking my mother’s sound out of her, rendering her powerless.

“You are so goddamned dramatic,” my mother shouts. She pulls at my hair from the driver’s seat, not turning her body or taking her eyes off the road. It is just her arm, and extension of her body that I feel pulling at my hair. “Get back up here and keep me company.” I do what she says. I refasten my seatbelt and continue to listen to her story.

“I married your father,” she continues, “not for his nose, but for his brains, and his kind nature.”

My father is very smart; like my sister, academic challenges come easily for them. My father is a thinker, but he is also very removed with his emotions. I too am a thinker, but like

my mother, we tend to go off our gut feelings, intuition, she likes to say. When I was accepted to college she told me she had a good feeling about the school. I had made the right decision. There was no logic in my application. I saw the ad, liked where it was, and because it had an Equestrian program, I applied. I didn't even research the school. I ride horses. I have since I was six. Horses are my way of being, and my mother and father have invested thousands of dollars in me, not to be an Olympic rider, but because they both knew it made me happy.

My mother knows that horses are the only creatures that can truly calm my soul. When I touch them all my worries, all my insecurities, all my fears vanish. For a brief time I am invincible. I am infinite; my fingertips are only light and sensation. This I have confessed to my mother, and she is the only one that understands my love for the horse. She is the one that cried with me when my first horse died. She held me, and let me cry and she told me to love so hard is a good thing. To let a love take you over is a good thing, to feel the pain of love is a good thing. But now, I wish I was unable to love. I wish I could remove myself from all emotion. I wish that I could not feel the pain and anguish that I carry inside me every day. Despite my anxiety over my mother, she is my mother, and I am a reflection of her—I am her extension. I am part of her soul, as she is mine.

My mother is dying even if she will not admit it, even though she continues to move her legs and mouth, even though she continues to think the doctors will blast the bloody black thing from her womb, give birth to it, and everything will go back to normal. And yet, while her womb grows swollen and painful, I can only watch in silence. There is nothing I can do, but ride my horses, go to school, and pretend.

I glance at my mother again; her glasses are perched up on her hair. It is not her real hair. She lost all of her red hair six months ago. I heard her cry to my father through their closed bedroom door. I heard him say that he had not fallen in love with her hair. He had fallen in love with her brains. I hear them laugh amid muffled tears. My parents no longer have sex. She can't because it is too painful. I know this because my mother told me. She told my father to take on a lover. I know that behind that closed door, he is holding her in his arms—what he is thinking, I will never know.

I know he feels her pain every day. This is what we share, and this is what I know without knowing. My sister is a shadow in all of this—I don't even know she is around most of the time. I see her at the dining room table while we have dinner, but I have no words for her. Our sense of grief is too overwhelming to even communicate any love we might have for each other, which is lost for now as we watch our mother struggle with the step-sister that has invaded our home.

My mother confesses to me as we drive that she never felt complete. She always felt lost, and maybe that is why she traveled so much. She always felt she was running out of time, but when she became a mother she felt whole. She said to me that finally she understood what Plato meant in his writings on love—"that we all seek a union of one's soul in order to form a union that will make one whole again." She knew she had to travel, and that is why she worked and took my sister and me with her on her travels. I, too, feel as if I am running out of time. I, too, feel as if there is so much to explore that I would need five lifetimes to see and feel

and smell it all. This, I inherited from my mother, the affliction we share- never feeling complete, despite the love around us.

When I think about the soul, and God, love, and the meaning of this life, I scare myself. I scare myself into not thinking. I think of jet-black dots, taking over my soul. I think I'm drowning from my fear. I want time to stop. To take a breath, relax for a moment and regroup, and then, very slowly start again.

I have for months been keeping bits of my mother's hair that I find in the bathroom sink or on her bed pillow. I put them in plastic baggies, hiding them in my underwear drawer. It is as if I am a kleptomaniac. It is an impulse I do not really understand. I steal in to her room, and brush all of the hairs into little baggies. I do not know what my mother would think if she ever found my baggies full of her lost hair. She already thinks I am a bit weird, with my punk rock look and sulky personality. She hopes I will outgrow both. She tells me that once I get laid I might be less sulky. But then again, she feels no boy will look at me or want me because of my outrageous looks.

I don't want to talk about my father, but it appears important for my mother to tell me her story of falling in love. I am fine with it just as long as she does not tell me about their sex life. My mother is very open about sex with me. I was told on my last trip to France that under no terms was I to lose my virginity to a Frenchman. It is a running joke with my family, because there was no chance I was going to lose my virginity in France. The boy I had fallen for turned out to be gay. I think my mother in some way planned it, willed it; some "secret mother power" still protecting me, even while I was thousands of miles away. When I had complained to her

that I was unlucky in love and that is why out of all the boys I had met on that trip I had fallen for a gay boy, all she had to say was, “there is no logic to love, and love does not make sense, even to your father.”

“It is getting dark. Do you want me to drive,” I ask.

“No, I want you to listen to me,” she says.

“You know the kids hated me that first summer you sent me away. I spent most of the time riding their horse.”

“I didn’t send you away.”

“You know that Dad wanted me around, he wanted to know I was safe, not tramping around the French countryside on some strange horse. I wrote to him every week, explaining that he had no worries. I had fallen in love again with of course, a horse. He wrote back saying that was the best love to have.”

“Yes, I know, I read all your letters.” She says switching lanes, and putting on the headlights.

I learned that summer that memory is magic, and time can stop for a moment, or two. And now as I listen to my mother I think of that horse. I think how I galloped him through the hills. I breathe in his musky scent. I remember how he felt under my fingertips. How I cried when I left for home, knowing I would never see him again. He was a big chestnut with a flowing brown mane. He made my summer, and I spoke perfect French to him. “Je t’aime, Je

t'aime. You have my heart," I whispered as I felt his heart beat as we trotted through the wooded bridle path.

I continue to stare out the window, listening to my mother talk. I picture myself riding a horse across the openness of the land that parallels the expressway which we travel. I picture myself as a frontier woman, making my way into a new territory, staking my claim to a new land. I picture myself any other place than listening to my mother's words. Her loquaciousness is exhausting to me. I feel selfish for not wanting to hear about her love for my father. I am ashamed for not being more interested, but all I can think about is myself, and what I am going to do without her. How will I define my own being without my mother's guidance?

"I first noticed your father's hands," my mother continues. "You know, your father's hands are well defined, well - manicured, not stubby, and fat like some men's." I think on this, and have to agree with my mother. My father has very nice hands, strong, with nicely shaped finger nails that match.

"He was smoking a cigarette and going on about the labor movement, and how we all had to organize a union. And all I could do was look at his hands, and wonder how they would feel on my body."

"Really, Mom, please skip the details," I whine.

"Oh please, like you don't think such things when you see a handsome boy? Remember, I read your diary."

I close my eyes, and listen to the car wheels along the expressway. I like telling stories. I like making stuff up to get a reaction out of people to see if they will believe me. I like making up stories to tell my mother. I told my mother that I had gotten drunk on red wine with a boy from Angoulmeme. We had met on one of the bridle paths while I was riding. He had stopped me and asked my name. He took me to a clearing where sunflowers grew along the side of the road, and kissed me. We met every day until I left to go home. My mother at first believed me, asking me what his name was, and what he looked like. I explained to her that his name was Pierre, and he had brown hair, and hazel eyes, and he was tall, and spoke perfect English. My mother's eyes grew wider, and she took off her glasses, setting them on the kitchen table. I continued to tell her the story about finding true love in a field of Sunflowers—she interrupts me and says—“Lynn, that is a beautiful story, never ever forget it, but I don't believe a word of it.”

“Why?” I had asked.

“You would never have gotten off the horse.”

We had both laughed. She was right. I would have galloped past him, and laughed that his name was Pierre. I am told I have my mother's laugh.

I think of the story of the Little Prince when he first meets the fox. The fox says to him, “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” I think of my father. I think of how love is invisible, and how with one touch, one glance, one first kiss, everything changed for my father when he met my mother on that porch in Chicago. When they kissed for the first time, their fate was sealed. Never did he think he would watch her die, and be able to do nothing.

“I fell in love with your father that night, she said with a sigh. I fell in love with the cadence of his voice and the softness of his kind hands, and how he talked not at me, but to me, as if I were his equal. It took me off guard. I was, at the time, dating a man who did not want children, but I wanted to get married. I wanted children. I always knew I wanted to be a mother.”

Despite the darkness in the car, I know my mother is crying. Recently she has been crying more—she has always been a sappy crier, the type that cries over touching commercials, endearing movies, inconsequential stuff that I would never cry over, but lately, I find her crying more, especially over my father.

“How did you know it was love?” I ask her.

“He told me on the porch that he wanted to be a father. It was like our paths crossed, as if I knew that he was the one, as if I knew this was meant to be.”

I reach for my mother’s hand in the dark. I do not want her to feel alone at this moment. I feel alone for her. I feel as if her love for my father is what, at times, keeps her going. I wonder if fatherhood answered some of the questions that philosophy could not. My mother feels too much. I know she feels the black thing growing inside her.

“You will promise me Lynn, one thing,” she swallows hard as she makes the turn into my college driveway, “When I am gone, you will take care of him.”

My mother and I have had this conversation before. The first time was in the hospital. Now, as we sit in the car in the dark, she brings it up again. “Lynn, you have a stronger nature than most; you process your emotions differently than most. “

What does that mean? I want to shout at her. What does it mean to process emotions?

“Lynn, promise me,” she asks again.

I think of my father before we left on our trip.

“Make sure, if she gets too tired you do the driving.” I gave him a hug, told him that everything would be fine, everything would be great. Now, I picture myself riding my horse, jumping into fields of the unknown. I picture myself as the little Prince, blasting off into space—I hold tight to my mother’s hand. I breathe her in. She is huge and infinite. She is my mother. I will do what she asks. I will take care of my father.