

Feathers

My mother always wore feathers. They were not really feathers, but it was the term I had adopted as a child, and it had always felt like a betrayal to call them anything else. In reality, they were wings: great, burly protuberances spanning maybe three feet on each side like the leaves of palm trees. Though they were not the strangest thing about my mother, they were certainly the most obvious. Yet it took me thirty-nine years and half a week of her dying in a hospital bed for me to learn the story behind them. It was not even my mother who finally cracked and told me. It was a man I had never seen before: tall, bald, and impeccably dressed with purple-tinted sunglasses like Elton John's. He strolled into the hospital room, plopped down on the stool at the head of my mother's bed, crossed his legs, stroked my mother's lank hair and said to me, after a beat during which I felt the room grow mightily small, "I bet you're wondering who I am."

"Yes," I said, too stunned by his performance to question whether he had a right to be there. I suddenly had the feeling that she was his mother and I the intruder.

"I know who you are," he said with the singsong of a child gloating about a hidden treat.

"Oh?" I said.

"You weren't this big the last time I saw you." He looked me up and down, seemingly assessing my figure.

"Well, I have been putting on some weight recently. These are trying times," I said, crossing my arms over my torso.

"Ha, ha, ha." He spoke his laughter. "No, silly. I have no idea what you looked like a year ago, let alone five or ten years ago. You don't remember me. We met when you were just a wee little thing in a bassinet, crying your eyes out for mommy's titty." He stroked her hair and pursed

his lips sympathetically. I could not guess at their relationship. The man was obviously gay, so it was unlikely--though not impossible--to have been a sexual thing. My mother consorted with all sorts of people but had a predilection, almost a hunger, for those on the burnt outskirts of society. I had learned very early on to let the drama unravel rather than to be a part of it, to linger like a splotch of ink on the page.

"Did you ever wonder about these?" said the man, swaying his eyes over to the feathers in a plastic biohazard bag at the foot of her bed.

I shook my head no. In fact, I had not wondered about them, and it was only the man's melodramatic amazement, how he slapped his knee in awe, that made me self-conscious of never wondering.

"Tisk tisk," he said. "So many secrets. How did you grow up to be so...incurious?" The word seemed to materialize out of his hand, which opened like a flower to reveal a seemingly oracular space hovering above it. I gazed into it, as though there I would find the answers to questions I was only now discovering.

"It's hard when you can't even compare to your mother's shadow." These were words I would have never said.

"Thank you," he said. His eyes pinned me sincerely.

"For what?" I said.

"For allowing me to be present for what is surely the realest thing you've said in your life."

That was when I knew with the certainty of divine revelation that I could not make it without her. I could not let my mother die. There was so much left to be done and to be shared. I ripped the wings out of the biohazard bag and wrapped my body around them. I did not care that there was still the the stench of blood or that the feathers were hard and sticky. I needed

them. More than my mother herself, these were who she was. "Tell me," I said. "Please tell me. I need to know."

"Alright," he said, still stroking her hair. "But first," and here my body seized up because I knew there was a bargain in the offing, "you tell me."

Clearly, here was a man who traded in stories, in lives lived and secrets revealed. When he first sauntered in I had assumed he was just some frivolous queen, stoking energies for mere joy. But it was now clear that there was depth to his act, dead seriousness under his facade. In fact, the facade was itself an act of seriousness, greater than anything I, in my whole feeble life, could ever express. In this way, he was very much like my mother, reflecting society's prejudices and accusations back on itself.

So I decided to relent. I raised my face to him like an abused boy crawling out of years of isolation in the woods. He did not offer me a tissue, though the box was right next to him. His face remained entirely expressionless.

"Alright then," was how I began.

My mother and I lived in a cramped, deteriorating apartment in Chelsea, an area that is now in vogue but for many years (the years when I lived there) was a basin for the grimy runoff from the posh Upper West Side and Midtown. Yet it was not beyond me to appreciate the rare fortuitousness of our circumstances in a neighborhood of bootstrapping renters. Though I never felt it, we were technically part of the landed and, as such, masters of our circumstances. The way it came about was simple and had nothing to do with my mother or me. In a rare stroke of luck and uncharacteristic insight, my grandfather had purchased the two-bedroom apartment in the 1940s, at the height of the war effort that relied in part on his small company's copper output. "It was the one smart and decent thing your father did in his whole life," my grandmother used to say to my mother.

Of course, I was not even a thought then, and my grandfather died before I was capable of forming memories, so all lore of his whoring, drunkenness, and heavy smoking was passed down to me in snippets from my mother, mainly whenever something exasperated her. “See the mess he left?” she would say of the plumber who came by for the 85th time to jigger the leaky sink. “Just like your grandfather.” And I would nod, unsure of what lesson she wanted me to take away.

All the while I had been accumulating these snippets and developing a portrait of the man that likely resembled the real man in every way except for the air of negativity with which my mother cloaked him. In my mind he was a louche, debonair and suave, not quite a superhero, but someone I’d like to have learned from (even more so when I became a teenager and realized that I would never grow out of my childhood awkwardness). This impression was only magnified when I learned that the only reason my grandfather had purchased the apartment was to have a place to stash his girlfriends while my grandmother and mother froze and suffered in a much smaller rental in the Bronx.

Still, he was the reason that we had a place to live because if my life was to depend solely on my mother’s wherewithal, I’d have been taken away by Child Protective Services. Even with the assurance of our own four walls, heat, and a full kitchen, my mother seemed determined to make the place uninhabitable. The floor had layers of dust so thick that it was impossible to tell what the original color had been (I suspect a puke green because of a thin strip of cleanliness bordering the threshold of the bathroom door, like the sun peeking above a thick layer of clouds), and walking barefoot turned one’s soles black as though shuffling through a mat of soot. Light bulbs went unreplaced so that there was a never ending circulation of mismatching lamps salvaged on rubbish night, discarded once the bulb extinguished. Pipes hissed angrily when you tried to do anything involving water, and it made showering and doing

the dishes--things I'd already despised--even more forbidding, as the threat of flooding the whole apartment always lingered.

All the while, as the decades enfolded one into another, the 60s and then the 70s and then the 80s, the neighborhood, once industrial grime, turned industrial chic. Everything seemed to grow up around us while our tiny apartment stayed the same. Yet it was my mother's nonchalance, her almost naive disregard of negating circumstances, that inured me to this depressing reality, as much as it was these very qualities that perpetuated it. At least that was what I'd believed. I am certain that her feathers played a sizable role in her indifference, much like an amulet sheltering one from worldly monstrosities.

Still, growing up, I almost never questioned my mother's feathers. If any doubt crept into my brain--as it occasionally did when she walked sideways through the narrow doorway between the living room and kitchen--it did so as an impossible riddle. My mother's feathers were as normal to me as other mothers' hair curlers or expensive jewelry. Of course, a grown woman strapped with feathers is bound to attract a great deal of attention (though I am certain she would have attracted it regardless, given her Nordic good looks: blonde and blue eyed with magnanimous lips), and I believe that how people responded to the sight of her told much more about them than it did my mother. Her wings seemed to have the power to strip people of their civility, distilling their animalism with all its ugliness.

There was no place where people's callousness was more on display than at bodegas--those neighborhood one-stop shops that were the grocery equivalent of dive bars. To me, the New York City bodega was a treacherous maze of hazards (though much later, when I ventured upstate and perused the mythical supermarket, I was astounded by the space, as though each aisle were a corridor in a luxurious hotel, and felt betrayed once again by the stingy society in which I grew up). Things were stacked to the ceiling with mind-boggling efficiency and

inscrutable logic that somehow dictated placing baby food next to window cleaner or scented candles at the edge of the top shelf. These hodgepodge places resembled a hoarder's garage, feral cats and dusty relics included.

Whenever I entered our local bodega with my mother, who, despite her peacock-sized spread was oblivious to the implications of her movement, I experienced heart-racing paralysis, made worse by the Pavlovian chime that accompanied the opened door. Everywhere I looked there were breakable objects, things placed precariously as if for the purpose of falling--for that tragic moment when the glass jar of olives old as Watergate would teeter and crash to the floor and the clerk would scream in broken English the outrageous price in a tone that assured there would be no negotiation.

While navigating my mother through the aisles like a ship's rudder, I learned to make myself a barrier between her feathers and the overpriced goods. As she strolled along by the whim of her fantasies of filling our basket to the brim, I raced from one side of her to the other, depending on how she turned to face the array of items (I liked to think that these were intentional lessons in childhood independence, but the remainder of my life with her gave me serious doubts). I also learned to modify my tastes depending on how items were arranged, sometimes on the fly if there was a recent restocking. Even though I was a glutton for cereal, I learned to settle for oatmeal, as it was cushioned by five-pound bags of flour.

Still, all of these relatively minor anxieties would have been manageable--New York and preadolescence being expert in cultivating neuroticism--were it not for the other shoppers. Bepearled middle-aged women rolled their eyes and pointed for their children to stare at the winged sideshow. The bolder children would dance down the aisle behind her in crude imitation. Once, a woman pulled me aside and said just loud enough for my mother to hear, "Would you

like me to call Child Protective Services?" It was then that I understood the true meanness of people.

In New York, meanness was everywhere. It did not have to lurk behind a prim housewife's smile. At some point we New Yorkers had agreed that any well functioning society is based on the principles of gratuitous cruelty. I recall one occasion when my mother's feathers were snatched from her, torn right off her back in broad daylight. A body barrelled between us on the sidewalk, knocking my mother into the wall and me almost into the street. When I picked myself up her face shocked me with its horror. I scanned my hands and legs for blood or some injury that hadn't yet registered. "Don't worry, I'm fine," I said, naive enough to believe her horror had any relation to me. Her mouth gaped. All she could do was point down the street, her arm extended like a helpless child's.

I knew the feathers were gone. The possibility had never struck me before, but once it did it was with the sickening certainty of a punch to the gut. In my mind I took off after the culprit, knocked him down, pried the feathers from him, and lectured him about kindness while waiting for the police, who would arrive and commend me for my bravery. But in reality I just stood there, my arms dangling. My mother was stuck to the wall in a type of catatonia. I tried to coax her back to the apartment, for hours it seemed, but she wouldn't move. It was beyond her, out of her control, as though with the feathers went her willpower.

At first I was embarrassed by our situation, beholden to the sea of anonymous faces that made no attempt to hide their carnival gawking. Eventually I told her I'd go get some water. My mother's naked helplessness was sending me into a panic, and, besides, this seemed like something an adult would say. I walked down the block in a daze and returned with a styrofoam cup of water. But when I arrived at the spot, she was gone. I looked around stupidly for many

minutes, fearing the worst (though the prospect of her suicide had never shocked me), before trudging home.

It was almost dawn when she finally returned, our heavy apartment door jostling me out of restless sleep on the couch. I jumped up and ran to her, but all she did was pat me on the head like I was some child she'd never met. Her eyes strayed past me to the darkened alcove where I often did schoolwork, and her body drifted after them. Dangling from her right hand, limp as a doll's, were the feathers, ripped and soiled as though they'd been fished out of a dumpster, which, of course, they had.

Something in my mother changed that night. Her suffering, previously buried beneath a facade of girlish innocence, migrated closer to the surface. She seemed to realize for the first time that any precious part of herself could no longer go unviolated.

She did not leave the alcove for the next two days, and our shower curtain now served as a barrier between it and the rest of the apartment (I spent much of my morning sopping up wet bathroom tiles). Heading off to school I waited for her to kiss me goodbye like always, but all that came was frantic rustling and preening from behind the opaque plastic. I imagined her hunched over the small table like an eagle furnishing its nest, rehabilitating the unseen feathers.

Once the preening ceased and silence overtook the apartment, I crept out of my room. What I saw made me lose my breath. It was my mother, curled on the couch asleep, featherless. It was the first time I had ever seen her without them, and the effect was like seeing her amputated arm on the kitchen counter. In the faint glow of the alcove were her feathers, pristine in a dry cleaner's bag. I reached out my hand to touch them, but as though by some animal sense, my mother's body stiffened. As a child, I had wondered whether her wings were in fact truly a part of her. Now, if they had not been before, she was determined to make them so.

The following weekend my mother had me stay with Nicole, a friend of hers who had also dropped out of fashion school but had still managed to pursue her youthful ambitions. As a child I had never liked this woman. She reeked of cigarettes and had tattoos and blue hair. Worst of all, her fridge was a culinary desert of salad and white wine. One of the greatest sadnesses of my childhood was opening her cabinets and finding only a single can of macadamia nuts. Whenever she and my mother were together, they talked and laughed like they were in their twenties, and I sat in the corner like a spare tire.

But now that I was becoming an adolescent with hormones and fantasies, I looked forward to seeing Nicole. She never wore a bra and traipsed around the apartment barefoot in tattered shorts that exposed the buoyant curve of her ass. When my mother told me that I would be staying the weekend with her, I could barely contain my excitement. I faced the sink, occupying myself with dirty dishes, which was something I almost never did, to hide my face that was surely flaring red.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she asked.

“No,” I choked out.

I was too trapped in my own dizzying spell of excitement to pay any attention to my mother’s unusual tone or probe for even a moment the oddity of her suggesting I spend the weekend elsewhere. Neither of us liked it very much when the other was gone. The apartment was a refuge known only to us. We were both much more content to laze on the couch and read or daydream than to spend time with other people. We didn’t necessarily engage each other in these activities; it was enough to know the other person was there, like the television’s staticky glow on lonely nights. Looking back on it, my mother most certainly anticipated my excitement at seeing Nicole, and I suspect that she leveraged it in making certain I would be away.

On the way to Nicole's apartment, a hip third-floor walkup in the West Village, I rehearsed everything I would say. I imagined how I'd stand at her kitchen counter, slouching my hip against the edge with my arms crossed and cheek muscles tensed, while she bounced around her apartment, giggling at my jokes in her tiny shorts. When I arrived she buzzed me in almost immediately, as though (I was naive enough to let myself believe) she had been waiting for me at her door, counting the minutes to my arrival. I took the steps up to her apartment one at a time and straightened my shirt before knocking.

The door swung open and she was already whizzing to the back of the apartment. A dense cloud of perfume trailed her. I knew then that this scent would forever signify for me immense arousal and pain. I lingered at the door while she rummaged through her bedroom. She came flying back out and when our eyes met I opened my mouth to say something but she was already in the bathroom, opening and closing cabinets. Then she came back to the main room and stood stock still in a pose of deep thought, her metal-studded trench coat settling around her. My eyes drifted the neon pink bra flashing out of a torn tank top. Her eyes moved back and forth to the chaotic rhythm of her thoughts. I thought of something to say.

"What are you--" I began.

"Shh!" she hissed, holding up a hand. I laughed, thinking this was a type of flirting. She snapped her fingers and swooped up a ring of keys from the side table next to me. Her hair wisped my neck.

"Here they are!" she said.

"There they are!" I said.

She gathered up more of her things scattered around the apartment, raced to the door (everything about her seem to sparkle and jangle), but then stopped suddenly, her hand gripping the door's edge. Her chipped, pink-painted fingernails stopped my heart. Her mouth

searched for words. Her eyes, an arresting blue with silvery shreds, scanned me with fierceness that could only mean one thing.

“I forgot,” she said, her husky voice floating on the viscid air to meet my lips. “Food,” she said.

“Food,” I repeated. The timeless aphrodisiac.

“What do you like? Chicken nuggets?”

I nodded, my heart breaking, sad to admit that I did actually love chicken nuggets.

“Here’s five dollars. Order a pizza or something.”

She pulled money out of her bra. Then she was gone.

The weekend with Nicole was depressingly uneventful and consummated in nothing except my own adolescent frustration. She spent most of it with a guy she was seeing, some rocker in a black leather jacket, I imagined. I didn’t have a key to the apartment so was stuck inside flipping across thirteen channels. Sunday night I went home. I had expected some memento from her, maybe a note on the table or tacked to the door with some bold declaration scrawled in pink marker and dotted with hearts and exclamation points. Instead, there was nothing.

When I arrived home, the apartment was dark and silent. There was no sign of my mother. It was impossible that she had left for good, but the thought lingered. Perhaps she now saw me as just another member of the malevolent cult of society scheming to take away her happiness.

When she returned a few days later, her hair was matted and oily like a bird’s nest. Her skin was bloodless and eyes without recognition. She shuffled across the floor as though her life had been extracted from her--perhaps returning from days of beating and starvation. I had never seen her so frail. Little did I know that this was the appearance of someone reborn.

There were her feathers, hovering behind her. They were different though. It took me a second to recognize how: they were no longer strapped to the outside of her clothes. No. Now they pierced *through* her shirt, jutting from the skin of her back. She drifted into her bedroom and shut the door. She only emerged to fill up her glass of water and swallow her bevy of pills from orange plastic bottles scattered on the kitchen counter.

Her medicated condition seemed to shepherd her through the rest of her waking life. She drifted along, anesthetized and vaguely happy in her awareness that what was hers could never be taken away from her. I, on the other hand, went off to college where I did little of consequence, attended a mediocre law school and fell in love with a girl who resented that she could find no one better--until she did--and spent another ten years being forced to justify my place as a low-level attorney. I then lived in a place that I struggled to afford in the Upper East Side, frustrated by knowing that I would have been better off living in the apartment where I grew up, falling asleep with my mother on the couch to a marathon of classic movies.

And that was where I left off. The stylish bald man stroking my mother's sagging face simply stared at me as unaffected, and maybe even bored, as though I'd recounted the story of a parking ticket.

"Well," he said, looking at his watch. "That was interesting."

He kissed my mother on the cheek, got up, flattened his pants with his palms, and started to leave.

"Wait," I said. "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

I thought I was hallucinating.

"You said you'd tell me about her feathers. Where they came from."

“Oh,” he laughed in a way that comforted me, like we were on the same journey, fighting for the same thing. “I have no idea. I think it happened one night when couldn’t get into a club or something. Some tranny gave them to her. They got her past the bouncer.” He chuckled at the recollection. “Your mother was a wild one, always doing things that surprised us. Which is saying a lot for students in a New York City fashion school.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder, gave it a good squeeze, and was gone.

I slid over to the chair where he sat, still warm, and stroked my mother’s stringy hair like he did. I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I wept all over myself.

She died, and that was all.

I took the biohazard bag with the feathers and carried myself back to our apartment. Her apartment, the one I’d grown up in, the only one I’d really known, was given to me. But when I stayed in it the first night, I couldn’t sleep, and in the morning, the light coming in through the dirty window showed it for what it was: a small, ugly place with crooked floors and mold in the ceiling. So I sold it and married a girl I knew. It was a relationship we both knew would never make either of us happy. I didn’t want to have children, and she was okay with that. We lived in my apartment on the Upper East Side and went on vacation with the money from selling the one in Chelsea. I occasionally looked at the feathers stored in my closet and wished my mother was there to wear them.