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Writing Shiva

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W RITING SHIVA

Jessica Weissman

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I lost my mother 24 years ago, and my uterus eight months ago, at knife point. My mother was 41 years old when she died, and I was nearly sixteen, almost grown. My uterus was 39 years old, and had been enduring monthly disappointment, from its point of view, for 26 solid years. Never even a false start, as far as I know.

These days, my ovaries continue their job, releasing eggs monthly into the void. Eventually I suppose they will stutter and stop. Not one of those eggs will ever meet another cell. Evolution will have to go on without me.

When they told me my uterus had to go I thought about my mother, and how I would never do what she had done. I would not sit beside a husband, timing my own contractions in the dark as he took the identical wrong turn on the way to the hospital for me to have two babies in a row. I would not ever feed anyone out of myself. I would not ever have to dress someone who refused to bend her arms, no matter what. My sister Marion used to laugh when I stood my doll on her head to get her clothes on. Not an option with a real baby, I'm told.

When my baby sister Liz was born, it took ten days for the cord to fall off her belly button. My mother drove herself to the hospital that time, and didn't get lost.

Now I look at my belly button, and think that it is the last link I have with my mother.

She stopped smoking in May, her feet started swelling up in July, and in August the doctor told her she would die. They sent her to the hospital for blood transfusions, then home, and eventually back to the hospital, to the intensive care unit. It was the same hospital she had driven herself to for the third baby.

You had to be sixteen to visit the intensive care unit. When Liz was born, kids weren't allowed into maternity wards. My mother had waved out the window, to where Marion and I were trying to push each other into the ornamental pond. The intensive care had no windows. No phones, no nothing. No way to say goodbye.

I was asleep at home when my mother died. When my uterus left me I was snoring on the surgeon's table. They won't give you back anything removed from you at the hospital. God knows I tried. I know where my mother is buried, but my uterus disappeared into some countrywide longitudinal study of fibroids. I never got to say goodbye to either of them in person. All I can do is look at my belly button and the scar below it.

II

In another life, my mother would waste gradually and decoratively, and I would be there to take care of her.

She would lie in bed at home, and Marion, Liz and I would take turns coming home and doing things for her. She would be refined by death, not removed. We would be able to talk to her. She would listen to us, one by one, unroll our childhood sins and hurts. We would apologize to each other and laugh.

My father would be off in another part of the house, distraught but contained, not a factor. Maybe he would still be working, sinking his confusion into minor managerial tasks. My mother would relay our confessions and reconciliations to him, overruling his occasional weak veto attempts.

Finally she would go to the hospital, but this time we would get to see her there. She could control her own pain with magical medication, and she would smile at us for one last time. Maybe she would speak on her deathbed, maybe not. I have to leave her that discretion, even in my imagination.

III

This time, my mother's blood marrow stays quiet and goes along with the program. She returns to work, takes charge of an office and gradually figures out what to do.

She comes to visit me at college, and approves of how I decorate my dorm room. She goes to observe my classes, keeps quiet and smiles. All of my teachers fall in love with her.

Later she comes to visit me in Washington and in Delaware. She likes my friends and helps me pick out a new couch. She lures me into the dressing room at a department store by finding just one skirt I'm willing to try on. Once I'm safely in there she comes back with five more. She tries very hard not to tell me what to do. I try not to sit her down at a workstation and make her admire the purity of my screen design and the elegance of my code.

She wishes my room were cleaner. This wish is visible, mostly in her spine and shoulders, but not audible. I show off my cooking skills. She smiles at the unaccustomed spiciness, beyond what she ever dared.

In fact, she is like everybody's mother, an alternately benign and hard-to-appease distant presence. She visits me, I visit her, we do visitor things like go to museums, go shopping, sit outside, stare at nature. It's always a bit awkward until we have the one intimate conversation rationed per visit. Afterwards, caught up on our lives, we can entertain each other in peace.

Sometimes my sisters and I go home at the same time, and all of a sudden we are a family again—all that sororal tension reborn, no more adult-to-adult fantasy life alone with Mom. Dad is there too, but he hasn't changed much. Falls asleep in his chair every night just the way he used to.

Sometimes in this version she lives into her eighties and I stop imagining any more. Sometimes she and my father overcome his lust for long car trips and go on a cruise. The ship runs into a terrible storm and they drown. In a rarely-imagined version she goes to Synanon and breaks her neck while learning to do headstands.

Sometimes she keels over at her desk. She's head of a nonprofit or maybe a minor entrepreneur—Claire's Croissants? Claire's California Clairvoyance Hut? Claire's Perfectly Ordinary Accounting Service? She's saying Rosebud as she keels over.

Other times everything happens just at it really did—except it's a year or two later, after Kubler-Ross made death conversationally acceptable, and she remembers to say goodbye to us. This one may be my favorite.