

A World of Two

I picture my mother lying on her hospital bed, the same one she has occupied for the last twelve days. The space is in shadow, the only light coming from the hallway. The room smells empty. No flowers or scented candles—she wouldn't have wanted those. The sound of retreating footfalls in the corridor or a muffled voice from another part of the hospital occasionally interrupts the silence. Her breathing is shallow, until the moment it stops altogether. It happens so quietly, no one notices at first.

When my mother died in Concord, I was an ocean away, in a Paris hotel. Another day had already started. That remove feels familiar—geography and time following an established pattern.

In the morning's early hours, I lay next to my husband, Tom, on a king-sized bed in a room of marble-inlaid tables and still-life paintings in gilded frames, the walls covered in red-and-gold-striped paper. I heard only the sounds of the night, a faint breeze moving through the magnolia trees in the courtyard and an occasional car gliding along the boulevard. While Tom slept, I lay awake, thinking about my mother. I had started to understand that we wouldn't make it back in time. My mother would either be dead or so unresponsive that there could be no last words between us.

Tom read my brother Billy's email while I was taking a shower. I knew from the way he walked into the bathroom, but he still had to say the words: "Your mother is dead." Years from now, I thought, I will be able to replay this moment in my mind. He stood there, naked, looking both vulnerable and strong, his hand on the shower wall ready to reach for me.

My brothers and sister wanted to touch our mother after she died because she had not welcomed that while living. She would allow a hug or a kiss in greeting or farewell but shrugged you off if you lingered in the embrace.

Henry would have stroked her sparse hair, cut short after she could no longer shape it into a twist. He might have teased her about finally being able to touch her hair, something she loathed. Lydia might have rubbed her feet, those odd feet, with such high arches her toes curled to reach the ground. Her feet shaped by childhood polio and old age, missing the little toe on one foot, removed because of frostbite suffered during the Second World War. She could never find comfortable shoes, so she wore Birkenstock sandals year-round, donning socks with them in winter.

Billy would have rested his hand on her shoulder, let his fingers travel the length of her arm. He might have held her hand, bent at strange angles by arthritis and with the bones loose under the skin. Had I been there, I would also have been drawn to her hands, so small that they reminded me of a child's. She kept her nails short and immaculate, a habit she'd adopted in medical school, and one I try to emulate. I might have traced the line of her aquiline nose and the contour of her jaw, fondled her cheek and pressed my fingers to her high cheekbones, a sign of her Slavic heritage, she once told me.

Her sandals and the pair of socks she last wore with them are mine now, safeguarded in a box in the back of my closet. Those Birkenstocks, the insoles shaped over time by the pressure of her feet, her navy-blue socks. I wanted the last of her clothing, something that had touched her. I run my hands over the smooth cork, hold the socks to my cheek, the much-washed cotton soft. I thought the socks might retain the cool, dry scent of her.

Our plane to Massachusetts departed in the afternoon, so Tom and I filled the morning with small errands—the purchase of a journal of good paper with a red ribbon to mark my place—and one last view of Notre-Dame. Each gesture, every step I made, accompanied by a voice in my head repeating, Your mother is dead.

The air smelled of diesel fuel and wet earth. My left arm entwined with Tom's right, I rested my hand

on his steady forearm, eavesdropped on the conversations around me, catching only phrases. I thought how these strangers knew nothing of my grief and I nothing of theirs. A rare winter's morning, fresh with rain-washed skies, and sunlight bathing the bone-colored stone of centuries-old buildings. I noticed the quality of the light, its unusual clarity. Tom and I had introduced my mother to Paris on a trip years before. She will never see it again, I thought, trying to absorb its beauty on her behalf.

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