

## You and Me Against the World

My mother had been dead for two hours, over 140 miles away, when I answered my office telephone and a young woman, her voice filled with the reluctance and anxiety of someone under cross-examination, identified herself and told me what I had not expected to hear. At first, the slight exasperation in the woman's tone made me think my mother had been causing more trouble than the staff of the rehabilitation facility were prepared to tolerate—that she was (again) refusing to cooperate, or that she had made such enemies of her caretakers that I was needed to come and intervene. My mother had been truculent about the quality of medical care and, especially, about the individuals who appeared at her bedside each day.

Walking home after that call, driving up to Pennsylvania and burying her, and emptying her apartment, alone, I was moving in response to a final action of my mother's, a thousand times more grievous but of the same classification as when she sent me out for groceries, or, standing a little below me, spray cleaner in hand, she waited as I dismantled a high curtain rod. Her last semi-metaphorical words to me, after there was no chance of her returning to her apartment, had been "Maybe you can come and take me home."

From 19 months of age until I left for college, I lived in a household—a series of apartments—comprised of just my mother and me. Our life together was not characterized by closeness or understanding, but it was colorful and, especially when I was a boy, full of shared laughter. I speculated I might feel sadness and relief when my

mother died. Months after I had seen to the last practical matter, I settled into a permanent sensation of loss, ugly and real, the raw material for nothing.

Since then, my imagination, what another man might call his “heart,” has been conscripted by powerful memories that, like strong liquor, sting as well as warm my body.

1.

Our first trip to the hospital was in early February of 2002, when my mother asked me to come up to Pennsylvania and take her for a series of tests. She lay on a flat metal table with a panel of diagnostic equipment inches from her middle, dressed in her yellow cotton jacket, soft as a cat, and her ankle socks and Keds, as if she were ready for a morning of light gardening. My mother's true physical decline had begun abruptly about 10 years earlier, but being together in the hospital that particular morning placed us in the positions we would occupy later, an unwitting dress rehearsal. I would return to this hospital, biking distance from our first home together, in late May to find my mother permanently, finally removed from her apartment.

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Apartments defined our life together, and the furnishing and decoration of my mother's apartments were, after her personal fashion sense, her expression of creativity and her gift to the world. Her final apartment was not an exception, although it reflected her age. My partner and I had moved my mother into this last apartment about 15 years before. Into it she had brought the barware and psychedelic ashtrays of her stylish forties. She left it in a rented wheelchair. Made physically unmanageable by the accumulation of fluid, she was

bunched into the seat and pulled through the narrow foyer by her frightened granddaughter, who had received three emergency calls to her office that week. The following day I let myself into my mother's apartment before going to the hospital to see her. Only a rectangular area rug, ordinarily centered on the length of the hallway, had curled up out of place during the struggle. Everything else was perfect.

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Somewhere I have read that Joan Crawford's legendary housekeeping was a sort of ritual of penitence after a night of debauchery. I believe my mother's lifelong standard of cleanliness and organization was more than personal habit or discipline: in her fervor (and skill), it was the closest my mom came to a sort of faith. A sunny Saturday morning of vacuuming and dusting, laundry, and shopping, was usually followed by a long, late night of sin.

My mother wasn't an alcoholic. And despite a relaxed, animal confidence in her own attractiveness, I doubt my mom preferred sex to affectionate intimacy. Nevertheless, there was something too serious about her partying. Alcohol's nature, to mellow or enrage, was always at its worst the weekends of my childhood. When I was very young, a babysitter was found, usually an older woman ("Annie Rooney" was the name of the longest-lasting one) who could take me into her home Friday afternoon until Sunday.

But, sometimes, I got caught in the middle of the night and day with my mother. And these memories are the most unpleasant. They are vague and incomplete, an aquarelle of fear. There were many late-night trips in the car with my mother at the wheel, thick-tongued and toxic from vodka Stingers. I was silent and frozen, with my eyes locked on the two center lines in the road caught in a halo by our advancing lights,

or on the white line at the shoulder, as if my concentration could correct her scary weaving.

There were many nights I was lodged in a stranger's bed. I didn't know where my mother was. Then she was shaking me awake. We had to leave in the middle of night, quickly. After an evening of drinking, there had been a fight.

But as I got older, after stocking the refrigerator with frozen pizza and ginger ale my mother just went out. There was something about her preparations, the hiss of hairspray and the clatter of her bracelets on the dressing table, that depressed me.

This was one of several areas of my mother's life in which I had no place. Truly, my earliest memories of my mother are of being so frequently *separated* from her.

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I had forgotten that every weekday morning before I was of school age my mother would have to leave me with a babysitter. I wouldn't remember it until, literally, I was there again.

After my mom died, later in the summer, I had to be in Pennsylvania on business having to do with her estate. On the way to the courthouse, I was aware only that I was driving in an area I probably hadn't seen since I was a toddler. As I slowed down for a traffic light, I saw an older brick and glass auto showroom that I recognized in the same way that wakefulness comes in the midst of dreaming—not cleanly or swiftly, but surely. The building, and then the street scene itself, came into mental focus with a sad familiarity. I was looking at something that conformed, tongue-in-groove, to my earliest memories. As perfunctorily as an old snapshot, the physical environment was reciting back to me the circumstances—and the emotions—that prevailed 38 years ago.

It was very early in the morning, and it was cold. My mother was taking me to a babysitter's house before she went to work. I was sad and afraid of separating from her, with the singularity, the awful focus, of emotion that small kids have. There were no ameliorating experiences, no helpful ideas, nothing to water down the panic in my gut. It was a trauma subdued only because of its being repeated. The successive porches of the houses passing outside the sedan windows became implicit in the powerful emotion of that moment, like James Ramsay's picture of a refrigerator in the first pages of *To the Lighthouse*. With each traffic light, we got closer to where my mother would drop me off (one of the ugly porches—I was too young to know which one), then get back into the car alone and drive off to work. Resourceful sitters tried distracting me with pets, other kids, and food. I never saw my mother go.

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The morning after I received the call telling me my mother had died, my partner and I drove north to Pennsylvania. After arrangements for a cremation and a funeral service had been made, I asked whether I could see her.

I remember three things: first, that my mother's bangs had been combed up and back rather than down over her forehead; second, that I could see beneath the blanket a small patch of the paper-thin, dotted, light-blue hospital garment she had worn habitually since coming under care, causing me to realize she had been simply transported here, without the formality of a set of clothing; and third, that her face seemed pinched and drawn and still, not as in sleep, a mask of defeated suffering. She had gone.

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Having abandoned her final state, my mother returns to me, in idle moments or not, as everything she was the 42 years I knew her. All out of order, vivid images flip up in my memory like the thick, brightly-colored pieces of an old-fashioned jigsaw puzzle when the box is shaken. More than anything else, I've had to remind myself it was not the tall insurance secretary with a bureau drawer full of button-wrist dress gloves I had last spoken to. The sound of Dinah Washington hadn't crept under my bedroom door in a long time.

It took me most of my life to understand that all relationships have phases, like the swell and decay of music or the pleasure one takes in a meal. To those of us who have no children, the comprehension that what comes between a parent and child can change, can cool and stiffen like days-old bread, comes more slowly.

Too many years of brief, overnight visits had inured my mother and me to a familiar unfamiliarity. Each time her apartment door opened, and my mother's cold hands cupped my face in cloying gratitude, I withdrew a little further from the smell of powder and the sight of her exploded capillaries. I advanced through my thirties to the background of my mother's frustrated, intensely lonely, occasionally heroic last decade.

Death is droll and unkind to those who continue in life. When my mother slipped away—somewhere between a Wednesday 5:00 p.m. phone call and Friday noon—I took over some kind of work I didn't know I had, as if we had occupied a life boat together. Along with her bank statements and china, somewhere in all the boxes, came the stewardship of our difficult past. My mother had sold or thrown away many things, but here and there objects from our earliest living rooms appeared, washed up on a strange beach, that reproached and comforted me. Albums and boxfuls of vacation snapshots,

school portraits, and holiday photos in groupings long dispersed by death or divorce—by time—filled my chest with bile. I was alone at the stern.

Sometimes my mother's phone number—the area code sheltered in parentheses—runs graphically across my mind, and the pain of its nullification suffocates me. When the sockets of my eyes seem almost crushed in weeping, when devastation blows up swiftly and strongly, for a brief moment the honesty of my emotion seems its own comfort.

Those are the only times, measured in seconds, I feel what could be called the presence of my mother.

How much can I be expected to pay for accepting my mother's unhappiness as status quo?

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My mother struggled with emptiness after I left for college. Five years later, one of my half-brothers, my mother's much-loved, flamboyant second son, succumbed to AIDS at 36 (in 1983, it was an early case). And she had lost another son years before, his wife's resentment toward my mother all that was needed for him to erect a wall of irrevocable silence. Finally, 20 months before she died, my mother lost her first-born son to cancer. By the time she was 60, my mother had begun the midnight trips to hospital emergency rooms, for cardiac and pulmonary conditions, that would accompany her senior years more steadfastly than her grandchildren. Always organized, my mother maintained an overnight bag packed with a robe and slippers, cosmetics, lip balm and hand lotion, and a pocket-sized notebook with medication information and important phone numbers, that she would clutch as the ambulance took her away.

But my mother's unhappiness was endemic, as permanent as the warm ovals of her handwriting. Her recalcitrance, a peculiar part of her beauty, was present for as long as I can remember. Though she was fun-loving and attractive as a leopard, my mother wasn't happy until there was a little agitation in the air, often of her own creation. And the worst outbursts, the most churlish remarks, came not in hurried weeknight shopping or even during a household crisis, but at the least logical times: Pocono vacations, after expensive evenings out, and invariably at holidays. Whatever the source of her pain, she had an irascibility that was deeply rooted and took the guises of (on the lighter side) snappishness and deprecatory remarks, and (at its worst) a battle agenda that often resulted—perhaps from her first marriage at 16 until she was 47—in physical violence with her partners.

Much of my childhood was spent leaning hard aport to my mother's malevolent starboard, a pacifying position I occupied in her presence the rest of our lives together. There was for me a terrible familiarity about my mother's weightier moods, in a particular facial expression or tone of voice, that I was never able to successfully endure. In my relationship with my mother, I had never really grown up. I never interacted with my mom as an adult, and she never recognized me as one. There were two or three ugly attempts—challenges such as dogs initiate within an otherwise smoothly functioning pack—but my mother stayed on top.

Until I was in my early thirties, when I was visiting, my mother would remind me to brush my teeth. She never stopped reminding me to tuck my shirt in, not to take too long if I went out for a walk, to scrub the bathtub after I got out of it, to turn the light off next to the sofa bed if I was reading too late, to refill the water jug when I had taken some

water, to hang my coat in the closet, to close the screen door if I wandered out onto the porch, not to put my beverage down on the furniture without a coaster, not to let the refrigerator door shut too quickly, and—I remember most—to "*Please* do something with your hair!" On the phone before a visit, she would remind me not to bring my sketchbooks (my time was to be hers without distractions), not to be late (we bartered hours—10:00?—1:00—11:00?—12:00), and to bring my set of keys to her apartment building.

A more constrained version of this behavior was characteristic of my mother with anyone. It was partly a sort of nervous dread (of mildew, high electric bills, water rings), partly her New England heritage, partly a power game, but, mainly, it was the only way she had to assert herself. Often after saying something particularly directing or bossy, suddenly she would give an impish, fleeting smile and a silent chuckle, almost like a baby. She was saying, "Have I gone too far? Aren't I ridiculous?! Are you still with me?" It was precious and comic. I know of only one photograph (of hundreds) that has captured that expression, and it is the one I keep on my desk at work. Seventy times a day I glance at it.

Others had their way of speaking to and being with my mother. But none of them lived at our address. I was her youngest child, and—skinny but never tall, fatherless and girly, a pug nose dominating my narrow face like a brutal rudder, and my eyes giggling, in every snapshot, through my glasses with an emotion always stronger, more speeded up and unmanageable, than the slack grins in the holiday group—in a subjective way, her only child. I never, as they used to say, *spoke back* to my mother. I never truly argued with her. Toward the end, our conversation developed the habit of being perfectly free of

difficulty, like a pre-recorded bus tour. I consider the most significant error in judgment of my life that I never came to know the woman who was my mother.

2.

My mother was a woman that women refer to defensively as *very attractive*. Except perhaps when she was a young girl, my mother was never pretty like a set of Priscilla curtains or a nasturtium. She was tall and long-waisted, slim but never thin, extroverted but not chatty, confident rather than vain, she smiled more often than she laughed—Marion was rather *cool*.

My mother brought to being female a masculine simplicity. She loved being a woman, but her interpretation was spare and easy on the eye: solid-color jerseys, handsome sports coats, Hepburn scarves, and simple accessories. A modern palette of black and white, teal and tan, and always blue—forever blue. My mother hated red and made a point of telling me this, as if lecturing for posterity. She knew herself and her choices and, like an intuitive, naturally-talented artist, she never wasted energy in doubt or experimentation.

I grew up in rooms that were warm yet sleek as an ascending ribbon of cigarette smoke, wrought all of a single, seamless piece, like the critic Cleanth Brooks said of Keats' poems. My mother assimilated the style of each passing decade (how? I often wonder) on a secretary's wage. Pieces reappear in the snapshots, but always transformed in an exciting new blocking, with the resourcefulness of a happy but budget-minded set designer. The dust just never accumulated.

My mother always had a job and a smart apartment, we always went on vacations, and my mother always drove a stylish car. There were different makes and models through the years, but when I see the sleek lines of a 1960s Ford Mustang on the road I remember my mom at her most independent, at the most maturely attractive time in her life. Her first Mustang was a pale yellow '67 with a ragtop. I was thrilled with my mom's selection, but she returned it a few weeks later because the roof leaked. Still shopping for a Mustang, she took home a white hardtop, used, with navy blue bucket seats and heavy chrome seatbelt buckles. She kept it for eight years. She took pictures of it posed in the driveway, and she bought accessories—blue vinyl cigarette cases, soft kid-leather driving gloves, and monogrammed handbags—that matched the interior. My mother ran it, and it took her. They both went strong.

Vacations were important, and equipment was set aside, sanctified like symbolic objects in religious ritual, for a trip to the beach or the Pocono mountains. My mother's brown wool beach blanket, her Zenith portable radio, the colorful terrycloth towels, and her red-and-white cooler filled with Pepsi cans and bologna sandwiches, were the body and blood of summer. As my mother went from two-piece to one-, scores of Kodak prints document her cheerful determination to relax.

There is a photograph of my mother, taken in the evening, seated with her cat draped easily across her lap like a black scarf. It could have been a Saturday night, she might have been ready for a night out. Probably a boyfriend took the picture. But, for me, it is the picture of an artist relaxed and posing, amidst the lamps, ornamental cattails, and sofa, with its square throw pillows set on end, in the fulfillment of her own hard work. All is perfection: the brown mock turtleneck that hugs her slender trunk, her careful hair,

and—more than anything else in the shot—her perfect legs, crossed over one another on a footstool out of the camera's range.

This was the apartment of my childhood and the mother (of the two or three versions of her the decades offered) I remember most. She was 42, and I was 11. What I did not understand was that this was my mother's second life. There had been a life before, a family with a dad (our arrangement did not include one), three sons (I was an only child), and even a dog.

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The fact that she walked away, around the age of 28, from a house and family, without having obtained custody of her children and without, as far as I know, even a table lamp, tells me that I began life with a mother whose scars were unhealed.

Throughout my childhood, a gold metal picture frame—a linked, felt-backed triptych—of the school photos of three boys was carefully displayed on one of my mother's two sofa end tables. The boys' names were Jimmy, Bruce, and Jerry. Also, two older black-and-white pictures of Bruce and Jerry, each one a full-length shot, had been enlarged and mounted on wood that was cut to the shape of the picture—the outline of the body. The odd statue was inserted into a slotted wooden base, and the effect was, of course, that two flat, black-and-white little boys stood on the table, arranged around the base of a ceramic lamp like a motionless playground.

There was never any discussion, as such, about the boys on the table. I knew somehow that they were my mother's "old" children, as if they had gone out of fashion, but I never wondered why they did not live in the apartment with us. I knew them by name, the way I knew the names of my mother's beaux ("Bill Hoey," "Tommy McCabe")

and her best friends ("Doreen," "Mrs. Dougher"). They were characters in our lives and, on rare occasions, guests, but they were never part of the household that was my mother and I.

As I got older and began to explore my mother's cabinets and shelves, I discovered only two old photo albums, unwieldy books filled with brittle, black pages that bowed under the weight of snapshots. The first, maroon with an engraving of a western-style covered wagon, contained pictures from my mother's girlhood in Maine in the 1930s and early 1940s. The second, a more recent one the color of a new leather saddle, was begun when I was born in 1959, with pages of Olan Mills quality portraits of me as a baby annotated in thick white illustration pen by my father ("I am Willie Pee. Ain't I the one?!"). By the time the last Kodak color prints were glued onto the back panel, I was wearing trousers with little suspenders, and my father had been dead for more than two years.

There were no pictures of the family that came between the two albums and that accounted for about 13 years of my mother's life. Her weekends were free for skiing trips and dates—there were no furtive calls from the boys, or regularly-scheduled visits, that I can recall. A few memories of the boys survive: Jerry's favorite color (maroon), Bruce rescuing me when I was left alone in my mother's Plymouth and it had begun to drift down an embankment, and—my mother apparently fresh out of babysitters—Jimmy taking me with him to his job at a hardware store (I sat in the back, all day, coloring in Cinderella). But not until they were young adults would the lives of my older, handsome half-brothers begin to intersect with mine. I cannot guess with what sort of emotion they

returned, in later years, to my mother's Christmas table, accompanied by fiancées and pregnant wives. I lived with their mother every day.

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I went to school, either walking or by taxi, and my mom went to work. I came home about two hours before her, ate bowls of ice cream, watched “I Love Lucy” on a high, snowy VHF channel, and called my mom, at her office, on the white Princess telephone on her bedroom nightstand.

The after-school telephone calls began because, late one afternoon, alone in the apartment, I suddenly started to cry. More concerned than I had ever seen her, that evening my mother wrote her office telephone number down on a small tablet and placed it near the phone, and we agreed I would call every day as soon as I got home from school. We never stopped until I left home.

These became opportunities for my mother to tell me what to remove from the freezer, and to remind me about the trash and to set the table. But there was a tiny thrill when I dialed the number and heard my mother's voice come on—without knowing she was speaking to me—and recite the lengthy company name, “Good afternoon, Higham, Nelson, Whitridge, and Reid” in her dressiest tone. My mother was at the elongated and complicated front switchboard I saw when I visited her office. She was a star, a professional. She had come a long way from her first job, after my father's death, selling Avon door-to-door. Decades later, I would answer my office phone (“Bill Fogle”) and hear the identical excitement and pride in her voice (“Well hello there Mr. Fogle!”).

At 5:30, I was never disappointed to see her walk down the grass embankment from the parking lot, always with her handbag and sunglasses. Sometimes she was tired

and her face was dark, and on those nights it was never long before I could hear ice cracking under the stainless steel mallet as she started mixing Old Fashioned's. But at other times, if we had grocery shopping to do, there would be chicken croquettes at the diner or hot dogs served in little folded paper baskets at the J.C. Penny restaurant. We tried new places with excitement. My mother appreciated the changing images restaurants projected, and the names of certain restaurants—The Seven Stars, The Hawaiian Cottage, The Kimberton Inn—evoked an exclusive glamour. We never just stopped for a meal; there was always a happy deliberation, my mother's hand slapping down on the armrest of her chair then coming up again as she thought. She could scarcely afford it.

My mother's cooking was good, but inexpert. Laughing, she herself could see that her Swedish meatballs doubled in size as she kept rolling them. Her pancakes were too thick and unevenly browned. Her beef stew was delicious, but the cubes of beef were treacherous and marbled with fat. In two things did my mother truly excel. She peeled, boiled, and then mashed rutabagas, adding butter, salt, and pepper. The result was nutty, tart, and wonderfully flavorful. But even her mother, a professional cook, spoke deferentially about my mother's mashed potatoes. They were peppery and light, a steaming silver cloud. The rattle of her potato masher against the walls of the large aluminum saucepan is a Proustian memory that anguishes me. I know the recipe, and once since her death I reproduced them (with her equipment), but I could hardly swallow.

These were the years of mother and son. A tall, attractive, single woman looking less for a fallacy of security than for fun and friendship, sharing life with a 12-year-old in coke-bottle lenses who preferred Glenn Miller to Jobriath (who, as it happened, was one

of the wooden boys on the table, grown up). In the ankle-length, abstract floral Anne Sexton–style dresses of that era, my mother was impressively hip. She had given up the gentler, busy smiles of the younger woman in my baby pictures and now stared directly into the camera. The pretensions were finished. There was no fear or hope in her dark eyes. Her mouth was a relaxed, sensual line of demarcation: the past was a battle that had ended here. We didn't have much, but what we had was not given or borrowed. It was safely, completely ours.

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We had a song, my mother and I. The only outlet for her sentimentality was a couple of popular ballads she claimed as her own (the theme song from the film "Alfie," and Gilbert O'Sullivan's "Alone Again, Naturally"). But, once, my mother awkwardly confided to me that we were just like the pair celebrated in a song by Helen Reddy, who was then enjoying a major popularity. "That's us," she said. In 1974, Reddy sang a sentimental parent-child ballad entitled "You and Me Against the World":

You and me against the world  
Sometimes it feels like you and me against the world  
When all the others turn their backs and walk away  
You can count on me to stay.

3.

At work, I have not yet walked past my old office, the little room in which I got the call telling me my mother had died.

It was Friday. I was planning to see my mother the next day. Earlier, on my lunch break, I had gone to a stationery store to buy a set of thank-you cards to take with me for my mother to use.

I was alone in a small room, and all my coworkers were away at a meeting. I don't remember the phone ringing, but I do remember the picture in my mind as the woman spoke (a baseball field), and I still have a small piece of paper on which I wrote "12:20," the time my mother was found. Most of all, I remember the funky quality of my voice when I asked the woman to repeat the time. The words came out breathy, choked, and quavering, such as I had only heard in the elderly.

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The sight of my mother walking down the hallway of her apartment building and resting each ten steps, or seeing her turn her face to the ceiling as she found her breaths, like a fish appearing at the surface of water, had become commonplace. But I missed the signals preceding her final illness, as my mother had missed red lights, so many years ago, wrapped in an amber blanket of whiskey. I failed to comprehend how close to death we were. She stared straight ahead in frightful concentration.

After our last Christmas, after the last photograph of my mother had been taken, the new year began with transient problems: bronchitis, unrelenting diarrhea, and rapidly worsening emphysema. Yet, as late as April, my mother was still making it to her part-time job at the mall, and we succeeded in going out to dinner for her birthday. She wore a black sports coat that looked smart on her, I thought. I would not—or could not—think ahead.

One Monday I got an e-mail from one of my mother's granddaughters suggesting we discuss placement for my mother in a long term care facility. The relief I found in the short note from this young woman, practically a stranger to me, had more to do with ending my mother's lonely, headstrong struggle of the last 15 years—getting to work, battling rent increases, affording prescriptions, finding pals for lunch or shopping, or pleading with me (and everyone) to visit—than with addressing her deteriorating health.

It was not until my mother quietly told me she was going to sell her car that my own part of the struggle—the despondency of diminishment and loss—began. That phone call was the only time I ever heard her casual style, perfected by years of delivering bad news or deliberately cooling her feelings, fail. Still trying to protect me, my mother let some of the confusion and depression get through. After I hung up, I felt an impatient, jittery anguish, like claustrophobia. The lights on the road ahead had finally flashed.

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The last time my mother and I were alone together in her apartment, mother and son, my final 60 minutes of *home*, I stood in the door of the bathroom trying to calculate how to lift her up off the toilet.

Throughout that last day, I had noticed that my mother, seated in her living room chair, seemed to want to rise—gathering herself at the edge of the cushion several times—but then would let the motivation pass, as if she were withholding a criticism, or blithely changing her mind about a snack. After a couple of hours of this, I petulantly asked her about it. She finally explained that she sat for over an hour each morning with her living room curtains shuttered against the morning light because she could not hike herself out of the chair to open them. Fluid had accumulated around her midriff, making

her disproportionately heavy. Her forearms were bruised and swollen from the strain of her attempts to lift herself.

My mother had gone into the bathroom, and after some time she called my name in a low, guarded tone of voice I recognized with dread. She was marooned on the toilet seat, snorkeling oxygen from a tube that had its origin in the dining room. My mother asked me with chilling pragmatism whether I thought I would be able to pick her up from the floor if she threw herself down. I was lost in reaction and speaking in circles of panic—that I hadn't known things were this bad, that we had to do something, that I wasn't sure what to do or where she could go. She said, "Bill, all I want you to do is figure out how to get me off this toilet."

We finally worked out a cooperative embrace that allowed me to lift her up to a standing position as she desperately fumbled to keep her pants from dropping to the floor. It was the beginning of a brief, ironic physical intimacy that my mother seemed to accept easily, like a trusting or sleepy pet.

Her cardiologist was making new appointments with a six-week advance.

She lived 26 more days.

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I saw my mother twice again, each time in a different bed, but always in a gown or smock that was draped around her chest with less precision than the paper around a bunch of flowers. I never again saw her dressed in clothes.

Stopping at the empty apartment, I picked up our old Scrabble board and brought it to the hospital. Pointing toward the hospital dresser, she indicated in exactly which drawer I was to place it until I could return it to the apartment.

The hours centered around food, and the arrival of the tray—its contents—had a great affect, for good or for bad. As she ate, I reached up to close the broad gap in her hospital gown that, dysfunctional as an umbrella in strong wind, only framed her exposed breasts. She had given up.

My mother's voice had become tiny and garbled from pulmonary failure. There are few complete remarks or full sentences that I have in memory. But once she told me that a patient had thrown herself out of one of the windows of the hospital where we were. "If I could do it, I'd throw myself out, too."

Frightened, obsequious in my mother's presence to the end, I had no reply.

I was required to leave her room often as she was lifted onto the toilet or her bedding was refreshed. On one occasion, towards evening, I stood in the hallway facing the door of my mother's room and that of the adjacent room. My eyes moved from the shadows on my mother's privacy curtain to the room beside. At the bed closest to the window, a woman—a visitor, like me—was standing, bent slightly forward and down toward the fully supine patient. She was a silhouette against the violent light of the setting sun, which was hardly weakened by the drawn curtains. With her right hand she supported herself on the restraining bar of the bed, and with her left she reached down to the bed, palm upturned, as if into a pool, and gently, repeatedly, caressed the forehead and face of the motionless woman on the mattress. No one else was present in the room.

In my life I have had four loves, female and male. We were youthful and firm, vain and kind, witty and perverse, spiritual and hungry together, but I have never known such desperate, beautiful tenderness.

I was in a terrain of farewells, as translucent and serene, as terrifying, as the final knots of C. S. Lewis' "Dawn Treader," or as the approach of dawn itself.

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On Saturday, with a rather attractive male nurse on the other side of the bed, I slid my left arm underneath my mother's left armpit and helped hike her further up the mattress to an erect position. Against my body I could feel her chest and heart, as fragile and rapid, as doomed, as a fallen bird's.

The staff had oriented her completely flat on her mattress in order to change her sheets, and her struggle for her breaths in that position (despite the oxygen tube) was evolving in desperate gestures. With what strength she had, and with a hint of her characteristic ire, she was trying to say that she could not breathe laid flat on her back. Their folding and tucking just kept on.

Later, my mother asked a nurse (this one female) a question. The woman could not understand my mother's words, and I tried to intervene. My mother turned her face to me, for a moment as belligerent and beautiful as her old photos, and said, pointing a bitchy finger at the nurse, "I'm talking to *her*." A joy burned so far down my body I felt it in my perineum.

I brought her a small Styrofoam cup of split pea soup, salty and contraband. After a lifetime of fantasizing my mother's approval and respect, I had finally made her happy. For the last time, she cupped my face in the palms of her hands and kissed me on the lips. Then she drained the cup, one wobbling, treacherous spoonful at a time.

On Sunday evening the tray came, and we shared her food, a depressing picnic.

At 6:40 I pulled on my linen sports coat and kissed her goodbye, distracted by the three-hour drive ahead. It was the last time I saw my mother alive.

4.

Freed from the structure and expectations of a traditional family, I grew up without restrictions on my imagination, like years of Saturday mornings. But without guidance and practical encouragement, my personal fantasies grew heavy to carry. After four years of college, I left with only a handful of credit hours needed for my degree, bored by *Ulysses*. Even into my thirties, my life seemed always about to begin, and the work of reconciling dreaming to proofreading was hard.

My mother tastefully framed some loose sheets of my watercolors and gave me occasional wisdom. But I was lost in my life, and the connection with my small family, their inevitable, depressing accommodations to time and age, felt peripheral and annoying. Christmases followed one another with nothing but toiletries and gift boxes of chocolates to reward the long drive. A true survivor, my mother's focus shifted, first to her granddaughters, then her great-grandchild.

My mother's death was a bitter coda to my lengthy self-actualization, poignantly timed. As if gently brushing against me as she disappeared, the profundity of our life together, punctured by selfishness and bad luck—and a peculiar, brave beauty—finally touched me.

With our idiosyncratic table talk reduced to one, in nearly every word I speak I hear my mother's voice, a startling, comforting echo. After a few glasses of wine, I catch

her guilty grin in the mirror, and I recognize in my puzzled argument with life my mother's refusal to compromise.

The weight is heavy, but now it is mine.

You and me against the world  
Sometimes it feels like you and me against the world  
And for all the times we've cried I always felt that  
The odds were on our side.

And when one of us is gone  
And one of us is left to carry on  
Then remembering will have to do  
Our memories alone will get us through  
Think about the days of me and you  
Of you and me against the world.