Mother of Beauty

meditations on love and loss

Margaret Olivia Wolfson

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This is a direct, lyrical, searingly honest, redemptive evocation of the primal mother-daughter connection, of the reality of loss and the private immortality that love brings. It is one of the most moving texts I have read about these themes.
—Jonathan Galassi, President and Publisher, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux

We live in a superficial, media-driven culture that often seems uncomfortable with true depths of feeling. Indeed, it seems as if our culture has become increasingly intolerant of that acute sorrow, that intense mental anguish and deep remorse which may be defined as grief. We want to medicate such sorrow away. We want to divide it into recognizable stages so that grief can be labeled, tamed, and put behind us. But poets have always celebrated grief as one of the deepest human emotions. To grieve is to lament, to mourn, to let sorrow inhabit one's very being… implicit in poetry is the notion that we are deepened by heartbreaks, that we are not so much diminished as enlarged by grief, by our refusal to vanish—to let others vanish—without leaving a verbal record. Poetry is a stubborn art. The poet is one who will not be reconciled, who is determined to leave a trace in words, to transform oceanic depths of feeling into the faithful nuances of art.
—Edward Hirsch

Dearest Mother,

Even as an adult, I could scarcely grasp the idea that one day you would die. While I intellectually accepted this fierce threat, it only became real when I learned you were in the hospital, receiving morphine for an unusually searing attack of pain. The word 'morphine' triggered the long-loaded gun; it exploded in my brain, shooting down my long-held belief that your death would happen at some ever-shifting point in an always distant future.

Having some hours before needing to leave for La Guardia, I stretched out on my bed and began reviewing possible causes for your pain's steep escalation. Just a few days ago, I'd spoken with your oncologist, Dr. A. He said your cancer scores (an awful game won only by lesser degrees of losing) had remained more or less the same. In fact, the numbers had not changed much since your initial diagnosis of bone marrow cancer three years

ago. Given this, I thought severe heartburn might be behind this great flame of pain and forced myself to imagine a positive outcome—the doctors would treat the problem and send you home. You would resume your routine: sleeping most of the day, nibbling bits of apple and cheese prepared by your caregiver. You would watch the British comedies and maybe an episode of *Seinfeld*. You would read a few pages of a mystery novel in the brief spans of attention you could still muster. I reassured myself: you would resume the circumscribed life you'd been leading before this episode of poisonous pain. Certainly, not a good life, but life nonetheless.

But in the end, I wasn't able to convince myself of this happier outcome. The unbearable words—your mother is going to die—ripped through my mind. Seeking escape, I dozed off. I dreamt I was Dorothy in the witch's castle, watching the sand in the hour glass streaming through the narrow waist, measuring out, grain by grain, how little time was left.

The flight from New York was uneventful; even the typically problematic connection from Chicago was running on schedule. I took this as a good sign and when I stood at your bedside, my hope broadened. In a dreamily torpid voice you said: 'Can you believe it? That crazy Dr. M. wants to send me home tomorrow.' The drugged tone of your voice was unsettling, but I was pleased

you were lucid enough to grasp the foolishness of such an early release. But next moment, you asked if it was okay to relieve yourself in bed.

There was nothing unusual about this. You were an unusually fastidious person: in a never-ending battle with germs and bacteria, you carefully scrubbed fruits and vegetables, religiously followed food expiration dates, scrubbed floors to gleaming, and sent the laundry through multiple cycles. Pushing back alarm, I soothed: 'Of course it's all right. Don't worry.'

After you disappeared into the fog of morphine, I approached the nurses' station. 'I'm confused. How can my mother be sent home when she is hooked up to oxygen and unable to move? She's shot up with so much morphine her eyes are rolling back in her head.'

'Your mother's internist, Dr. M., has ordered her release for tomorrow,' the nurse replied.

I wasn't going to be mollified. 'But this doesn't make any sense. Has she been up yet? Has the source of pain been diagnosed? Who is going to give the morphine shots when she gets home? How can we possibly set up a care plan in a day?'

She answered: 'I'm sorry, but we can't change the release date. If you'd like, you're welcome to speak with one of our social workers.'

I knew she was doing her best, but I needed a different answer. 'Get her internist on the phone. He needs to change the release date. We need to speak to someone about the morphine.

She's getting too much. She's completely drugged. Has she seen a pain specialist?' For maximum effect, I punched out each word.

You would never have approved of my egregious tone, but I felt little recourse. And it worked. A call was put through to Dr. M. who dispatched a pain specialist. After glancing at your chart, he asked me what I wanted to do. Mother, I was dumbstruck. Why was he asking me? Fortunately, the hours I'd spent researching pain medication on the internet paid off. I suggested we stop the morphine injections and put you on oral MSContin and a Duragesic patch.

Without enthusiasm, he said: 'This combination might work. I'll start her on MSContin 30 and a 25 mg Duragesic patch. If the 25 mg's don't cause a skin reaction, we can up the dosage if she needs greater pain relief.'

I couldn't fathom his indifference. Was it rooted in the fact that you were one of America's most inexcusable things—old? Was it because you were terminally ill? Or was it because this doctor failed at Maimonides' injunction to see the person in the sufferer?

When I returned to your room, the oxygen machine was burbling in peaceful, almost musical tones. I settled into the chair next to your bed and gazed at your sleeping form, admiring your smooth skin, the silky spill of dark hair against the pillow. Your breathing was steady. I dared hope.

As it turned out, my talk with the social worker was a success. She reassured me the hospital wasn't allowed to release you until we'd signed the necessary forms. In an effort to help, she agreed to withhold delivery of the papers for three days, despite Dr. M.'s orders.

Mollified, I returned to your room. While you slept, I watched the sky shift from bronze to glacier blue. Convinced you weren't in immediate danger, I arranged for a caregiver to spend the night. You didn't protest my departure but weakly urged: 'Go home and get a good night's sleep.'

Tears tightened around my throat. These words belonged to the mother I knew, the one who'd spent her life in a whirlwind of concern for her children. Regardless of our age she worried about whether we were getting enough calcium, sleeping enough, wearing warm enough coats in winter. This was the familiar mother—the one who counseled good walking shoes and regular dental checkups. This was the mother who had fretted about her grandson's head being damaged by too many encounters with a soccer ball and her granddaughter's feet being ruined by ballet.

I leaned over and kissed your head, floating like a dark swan on the pillow's white pond. You whispered: 'Be sure you eat something wholesome and make sure daddy eats too.' For one fleeting moment all was right with the world.

But all was not right with the world and all has not been

right with the world since you died. Your image haunts me. It's the last thing I see before sleeps and it's the first thing to color my consciousness in the morning. Sitting on the subway, your face floats in the aisle, and walking through Manhattan's crowds, it sketches itself on the air. You are everywhere, Mother, but in the end, nowhere at all.

When I met with the social worker the next day, I learned Medicare would cover the hospital bill for three days following the signing of your release form. After that, we'd be responsible for the bill. The only way to ensure ongoing coverage was to take you home with visiting nurses or else move you into a hospice or nursing facility.

Bringing you home in your machine-managed state seemed a daunting task, even with the assistance of visiting nurses and hired caregivers. I feared making mistakes with the mechanics of your 'comfort care'; I couldn't see myself administering pills you could barely swallow, adjusting the oxygen tank and catheter, and performing the hourly turnings without disturbing the translucent plastic tubes running in and out of fragile orifices. And since I wasn't sure how far you'd traveled on death's trajectory, I worried a hospice might scare you. In the end we chose a nursing home, euphemistically referred to as a 'rehabilitation center'.

As the up-to-date facilities in were filled, we had little choice but to take you to HW, an older home. In advance of your transfer, I went to see the facility. While clean enough, it was dreary. Even the birds in the lobby's aviary sat motionless on their plastic branches, their disheveled wings pressed tightly to their small, trembling bodies. I just couldn't imagine you in such a place. But the social worker promised me the care was good, in fact better than in some of the more aesthetically pleasing places. When I seemed unconvinced, she pointed out the obvious: you were too far gone into illness to pay much attention to your surroundings anyway. I hoped this was true because I knew the room's scuffed linoleum floor and its loud drapes, which when thrown open, revealed the salt-white glare of a street lamp, would depress you, utterly.

Mother, had I known you were so near death, I would never have moved you. But I erroneously believed you could linger for months and should this happen, we would run out of resources to cover both the daily hospital bill and supplemental nursing care, which I insisted on having as I never wanted you alone. Better to get the move over with now.

As I settled you in the new room, you suddenly lashed out: 'Why have you brought me here? This place is wrong, all wrong! Take me home!' In your delirium, brought on by the ambulance transfer, the gaudy draperies frightened you. In a surprising surge of strength you commanded: 'Those awful flowers…I can't stand them! Open the curtain now!'

Fortunately, this helpless rage and confusion subsided after an hour; taking advantage of the lull, I assured you we could go home in the morning. Exhausted, you whispered: 'No, let's just stay. There's more help for you.'

With these words, the now familiar ache pulsed in my throat. Even in your last desperate weeks, you remained a mother.

A fortnight or so before you died, you suddenly awoke and asked if the snow had started. At the time it seemed an odd question, though given your lifelong fascination with weather, maybe it wasn't atypical: you were the one who taught me mint-green skies often signaled tornados and I'm sure my love of snow comes from you—remember how we delighted in its creamy drifts, sweeping up against the sides of houses like flocks of wild swans?

But as it turned out, your question did prove to be an out-of-the-ordinary, maybe even prescient. Here's what happened.

After spending nearly three weeks with you, I had to briefly return to New York. Had I known your death was imminent, I would never have left your side. But I didn't know, and I did leave, and I almost didn't make it back in time.

When I landed at O'Hare, I discovered my connecting flight had been cancelled, due to snow—the first of the year. As I watched the flakes swirling beyond the airport's huge

windows, I suddenly recalled your question of a week or so ago, and farfetched as it seemed, wondered if perhaps you'd had some sort of a premonition.

As no rental cars were available I threw caution aside and caught a ride with a stranger. The man was kind, but the ride miserable. The car heater turned the interior bone dry and the snow-light bleached the December scenery a harsh and bitter white. For much of the ride, I closed my eyes, willing the man to drive faster, though the roads were slippery and visibility was poor.

When I finally reached you, you were lying on your back, your eyes closed. Your face had taken on a pale, ethereal, beauty. I leaned in closer and took up your hand. 'Mother, I'm here.' Your eyes fluttered open. 'Wonderful!' you whispered, then slipped back to sleep.

But sleep proved elusive.

Over the next twenty hours—the worst of our lives—you awoke every half hour or so, desperate to slake a raging thirst. The rest of the time you hovered in some netherworld, whimpering like some small animal caught in a trap.

As you'd been unable to swallow for the last week, I'd begun giving you ice chips. But the chips were now too slippery for your stiffening fingers, so I crushed them and packed the pieces inside a white wash cloth twisted at the end. I dubbed this rag the 'ice ghost' though 'ice angel' would have been a better name given the comfort it provided. As you sucked and crunched on

the cold cloth, trying to quench your relentless thirst, I sat in the rocker-recliner near the bed—my island of repose in the roily sea of your dying. As I listened, vignette memories floated up.

I saw you festooning the living room with pink and yellow birthday streamers; I saw you pushing a shopping cart, searching for the freshest fruits; I saw you handing me a frosted aluminum tumbler of ice-water meant to slake my thirst on a June-bugs-battering-against-the-screens kind of summer night; I saw you leaning over, ironing a little cotton dress, the sound of the iron's percolating water and steamy hiss comforting; I heard your voice reading *Charlotte's Web*—hoping to lead me and Alice to sleep (though I very much tried to stay awake, desperate to know if Charlotte's plan of weaving the words 'some pig' into her web succeeded in saving Wilbur from the axe).

Around twilight you slipped into sleep, and exhausted from the day's ministrations, I drifted off as well.

When I awoke, I went to your bedside and heard a strange buzzing sound. The words 'death rattle' shivered in my mind. To stop the plummet into primal fears, I reached for the solid ledge of medical knowledge, telling myself that the buzzing was only the sound of breath passing over secretions pooled in your throat. Scientific explanation did little to ameliorate death's reality. An image of a tightly coiled snake, its fangs slick with poison, continued to menace my mind.

I knew the grim statistics. The rattle is found in 1 of 4 dying patients and is highly predictive of death. The median time from

onset is 16 hours. If you followed statistics, you would be gone in less than a day. How is this possible? Mothers aren't born. Mothers don't die.

You tossed and moaned, semi-conscious, balanced on the thin border between life and death. George and I began counting backwards—100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 94, 93, 92—hoping the monotony of the countdown and the sound of our familiar voices might calm you. Each time we reached 'one', we'd start the countdown again, but your restiveness continued. We then tried Mozart and Chopin adagios. When these failed, I decided to sing.

But what to sing? Though we were a musical family, we weren't the sort with a ready repertoire of consoling songs. As secular Jews, we had no heritage of Hebrew prayers. We were obliterators, not upholders of tradition; and though you took pride in your Jewish heritage, anything religious embarrassed us both. The arias we loved—*O caro mio babbino*, *Vissi d'arte*, *Addio fiorito asil*, *Nessun dorma* were out of the question—too powerful for the intimacy of the dying room. I settled on a well-known, slave lullaby whose lyrics promised the replacement of broken, damaged things. To personalize the song, I invoked the names of your family:

Hush little mother don't say a word
Georgie's going to buy you a mocking bird
And if that mocking bird won't sing
Margaret's going to buy you a diamond ring
And if that diamond ring won't shine
Alice is going to buy you a fishing line
And if that fishing line won't fish
Daddy's going to give you another wish…

The song calmed you, but soon enough your physical restlessness returned. Out of ideas, we fell silent. Dad drifted in and out, like a cipher in some vast, statistical operation he simply couldn't grasp. At dusk he seemed so weary, we urged him to return home, not wanting him driving in the dark. I know you would have approved.

An hour or so later, the gurgling in your throat grew louder—it could even be heard in the hallway beyond your room. Unable to witness what I feared was prolonged drowning, I left your bedside every twenty minutes or so.

Reflecting back on this, I'm struck by my own selfishness. You were the one hovering on the cusp of the wild while I remained at safe remove; you were the one about to be lobbed, like some outcast star, into the emptiness of intergalactic space. My only excuse is this: people often say parents live on through their children. But the corollary is also true. When a beloved parent is wrenched from the socket of life, death's darkness electrifies their children as well. Along with you, I too was receiving death's shock. But unlike you, I could escape, and so

I did.

Since you died, not a day has passed when I don't chastise myself for such cowardly behavior. Not a day passes when I'm not haunted by guilt—but the knowledge that I failed you. If I could do it again, I would never have left your side, even if it meant sitting with fear's phosphorescent green skulls, glowing and floating like unwelcome visitors in every corner of the room.

As death neared, the gurgling was joined by a rapid panting. The nurses explained this was Cheynne-Stokes breathing and violent as it sounded, you weren't in pain. They said you'd fall into a deep coma and eventually slip away. These reassuring words proved false.

After almost twenty hours of agitation, you suddenly awoke from the clouded, non-peaceful state that is morphine sleep. At first, I thought your dilated pupils signaled brain death. But then you began repeatedly calling out for help. The trapped secretions in your throat, created by your inability to cough up phlegm, wimpled your voice, making it sound robotic, like words spoken into a whirring fan. For a moment I stood, unable to move, overwhelmed by the sight of one so precious being sucked into the sinkhole of terror. Leaving George bedside, I hurried to the nurse's stand.

To my chagrin, none of my favorite nurses—the ones who worked so tirelessly and competently—were on duty. Nurse K. sat at the desk, charting. Of the group, she was the most aloof, the most perfunctory.

I pleaded: 'Please, my mother woke up. Everyone said she'd slip into a coma. But now she's awake. She's terrified. She's calling for help. Call Dr. M. Please. We need more morphine. We need something to help her sleep.'

She glanced up from her note taking. 'I'm not going to call Dr. M. We're already giving your mother the maximum amount of morphine allowed by law. Haven't you ever seen anyone die before?'

I stared, dumbfounded, at the pink and yellow flowers on her scrubs which suddenly seemed too cheerful for the solemnity of the unit with its burbling oxygen units and beeping heart monitors. While not normally a violent person, I felt a powerful urge to shake out until her bones rattled. But knowing such action would only harm your case, I drew up dulcet tones instead. 'Look, I know you're doing your best. And you've been great so far—just great. My god, I don't know how you do it. All these patients! Please, could you just come and take a look?'

The flattery worked. Nurse K pushed herself up, and followed me down the hall, past the eighteen rooms, their blanketed occupants floating on their beds like slender, white canoes on moonless seas of Ambien dreams.

She flipped on the overhead light in your room. Encroaching

death had leached away the color in your face; your eyes were involuntarily opening, wide and then wider, as if pulled by some invisible puppeteer. Still, I hoped. Maybe Nurse K. could do something. But Nurse K. couldn't do anything, and in the ensuing ten hours, your heavy panting and gurgling and terrified crying continued.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but in the last hour of your life, I found myself impatient with the drawn out drama of your dying. Exhausted, I closed my eyes, and in what turned out to be the last minutes of your life, I mentally spoke to you. In a voice devoid of all emotion, I said: 'Mother, you really must go. Your son will have a heart attack if this keeps up. Your daughter is exhausted. It's time for you to go.'

It seemed these silently voiced words reached you because your breathing suddenly slowed and quieted and you let loose a long, deflating sigh. I waited for the long pause between inhalation and exhalation to end, as it had in the past, and for your ragged breathing to resume. But the room remained eerily silent. It seemed you'd finally broken through the veil separating life from death.

I called out to George, slumped in a chair next to your bed. His eyes snapped open and he put his hand in front of your mouth. He stood up. 'I think Mom's gone.' His words were like matches thrown into a powder keg, blowing the numbness of the last hour to bits.

After the nurses prepared you, we returned to your room.

You were lying under the blanket, your arms stretched out at your sides. In need of some ritual, we placed a few objects near your still body—your lavender hairbrush and the family photographs we'd tacked to the walls of your dying room. As I was afraid to touch you, George gently commanded: 'This is mom! Kiss her!' But with the exception of your hair, the chilled, ivory body didn't seem like you at all. The best I could manage was a brush of lips against the top of your head.

After George left to get dad, I sat with you, knowing something holy, something remarkable had happened in this plain little room on December 7th at 3:30 in the morning. And yet I could not summon up reverent feelings. I then tried talking to you, but it felt very awkward—I could not relate to the slowly hardening, glass-eyed figure lying on the hospital bed. Finally, after a few feeble attempts to say something of importance, I fell silent.

Mother, I want you to know that though I didn't cry at the time of your death, I've wept every single day since and I don't think it will ever stop.

After the mortuary attendants zipped you into the black plastic bag—its wide, steel zipper running like a tiny train track over the miniscule mound that had once been you—we returned to the house.

I stretched out on your bed, though I'd never slept there before. Even during your frequent hospital stays, I preferred the guest room, even though it was smaller, less comfortable; your bedroom seemed shrouded in loneliness, your mattress saturated with pain. I often imagined you lying awake in the middle of the night, staring out in the darkness as your mind filled with anxious thoughts about the road ahead—a road paved with the ever-increasing depredations of illness and age. But after you died, I found comfort in the sheets and blankets that not too long ago had touched your living body.

I fell into a dreamless sleep. I awoke around noon to a wintry sunlight washing over the sheets. I remembered how a year ago, in an effort to prepare me for the terrible grief of mother-loss, you promised to return as sunlight. And so my first thought was this: is this a sign from you? But then it hit me with stunning force. There was no 'you' anymore. To convince myself, I repeated over and over, like a child singing a jump rope song: *my mother is dead, my mother is dead, my mother, my mother, my mother is dead.*

My eyes swept the room, taking in your clothes—a cotton shirt, a pair of khaki pants, and an old white sweater casually draped on the wicker chair. My glance lingered on a bottle of Chanel Number Five and a strand of pearls coiled in an elegant heap on the dresser. I thought: Esther will no longer wear the clothes draped on the chair. Esther will no longer finger the smooth pearls. Esther will no longer dab a drop of cologne on

each wrist.

I buried my face in your pillow and wept as the awful truth looped in my mind: my mother is dead.

While Dad busied himself with funeral arrangements, I began emptying the house of your things, grateful for something to do. I started with the bathroom, throwing out the detritus of illness—amber pill vials, lotions, hot water bottles. I then turned to your closet. Always an orderly person, your clothes hung in neat rows. But in a rush to complete this onerous task, I began stuffing everything into oversized plastic bags, readying them for charity. Into that bag went your Jackie Kennedy style pill box hats, the tweed skirts and sweaters you'd worn as a third grade teacher, the lime green suit, gold buttoned jackets, and silk shirts worn to the parties you'd attended first as a college professor's wife, and later, as the wife of a university president. Though you owned nothing of real or even sentimental value, I did keep a few things, among them the gold watch you gave me a few days before you died (you'd grown so thin it kept slipping up your arm) and the bathrobe you wore on your final trip to the hospital.

A bathrobe. A watch. And while these objects don't say anything at all about the passions that informed your life, I've held them every night since you died, trying to ease the pain of

your absence. Unless my own death is sudden, I'm quite certain I'll be holding them when my own heart stutters, slows, and finally stops.

I wish your funeral had taken place on a bird-singing, bee-humming, bud-breaking, kind of day, but it didn't. Beneath a raw and resigned December sky, patches of dirty snow clung to the ground and the clods of mud, thrown up from the wound-red, root-riddled hole dug for your casket, along with a back hoe rumbling a little ways in the distance, made the whole scene seem more like some sort of weird construction site than a holy place.

The rabbi chanted Hebrew psalms and the *Eyl malei rahamim*, which I think very few understood. But even without comprehension, the words—imbued with three thousand years of history—brought something profound and altogether necessary to the ritual. Following the prayers and eulogies, George delivered a moving eulogy and we played *O caro mio babbino*, in honor of a request you'd made two weeks before your death.

As part of the service, I'd wanted to toss white roses into your grave—symbol of your mother, Rose. But the rabbi forbade the gesture: as you know flowers aren't allowed at Jewish funerals. As a matter of fact, we got into quite a quarrel, right at

the cemetery. At last he compromised, saying the flower tossing ritual could take place, but only after the formal service had ended; during the burial the roses were to be stored off premise, in the hearse.

If you'd been able to return with me after the funeral, I know exactly what would have happened. We'd slip into cozy robes and sit at your kitchen table. Over tea and buttered toast we'd launch into a lively conversation, weighing in on the rabbi's flower ruling. After much spirited debate, you would look at me with your pensive brown eyes and announce: 'I've come to a conclusion. The rabbi was wrong. He should have allowed you to throw the flowers during the ceremony.'

I know that's exactly what you would say. I just know it.

Everyday my mind runs back to your last few hours on earth. You cannot imagine how I wish I'd done more to shield you against the terror of dying; you cannot imagine how blameworthy I feel, how haunted I am by the thought that I did not enter into battle with the forces arrayed against you.

And relentlessly I mull over what might have prompted your agonizing cries for help in those last hours of your life. Were they caused by the ferocious streams of morphine coursing in your blood, or were they a response to hallucinations conjured up by an incompatible mix of medicine? Or when death finally began

extinguishing you, cell by cell, did you suddenly have a change of heart? Did you no longer want to die? Were you calling out for us to bring in the life-saving measures you'd earlier forbade?

Whenever I recall the terror in your eyes, my heart feels as if it's being ripped from a frozen windowpane. Now, reflecting on your last terrible hours, I don't understand why I didn't enfold you in my arms. Nor do I understand the numbness that overtook me.

I offer excuses: since you injured your back at age fifty-five, even a carefully administered hug could make you wince. And I've read that long, difficult deaths can anesthetize all but the most tenacious of witnesses. Watching a loved one sink into a place we cannot go, is often more than we can bear and so we shut down.

But on closer inspection, I'm not sure either of these explains my reaction. I think I might simply have been a coward, fearing too much physical or emotional proximity to death might cause me to be sucked into its bottomless, black hole—right along with you.

There is something else I find profoundly disturbing. That is this: why, as you struggled with the last phase of dying did I try to speed up the process by telling you, albeit silently, that the drawn-out drama of your death was exhausting your children? And while George has repeatedly assured that even if this had hastened your death, it was a good thing, I'm still immensely saddened by the fact that as your life waned, my own needs

waxed strong. The words I spoke were not intended to help you die. They were purely selfish. I was tired. I wanted it to end.

In the aftermath of your death, many people have told me you are within me. I don't understand the sentiment of these well-wishers. What is meant by you? What is meant by within? I can hardly imagine you as some sort of mental cinema—a kind of electromagnetic pulse playing out on the screen of my mind. The phantom in my brain isn't you. And though you are visible in the contours of my body and can be heard in my diction and vocal inflection, these things are no more you than the shadow on the ground is the tree. The Esther I want, the one who feels and thinks and dreams is forever lost—-poured out like water on the ground.

Because you'd hate being the cause of such suffering, I've been trying to make a truce with grief. One of the things I've tried to change is the words I use when speaking of your death. I try to replace the words 'my mother died' with the softer sounding 'my mother passed away', an expression that seems less harsh, more suggestive of continued life. But it doesn't work. Every time I use these words, they strike my ear as counterfeit. And while I'd like to believe you are enrobed in light, floating in some empyrean of souls, I just can't make that leap.

Right now the only thing I derive comfort from is death's

democracy. This makes the whole ugly business feel less of a personal attack on you, my poor, beleaguered mother. Still, when I think of how death pinned you like a starched butterfly to its vast expanse of nothingness, I feel nothing but rage against the injustice of it all.

Remember the weekend reunion we had with your family about six months before you died? You made it through most of the events, but on the morning of the final breakfast, you awoke feeling unusually ill. But you wanted to dress anyway, in case you felt better. As I helped you slip into your clothes you wept in frustration: 'This isn't me. This sickness isn't me.'

No, Mother, the sickness wasn't you, though it was the despotic ruler of far too many of your years and since you've died, it's ruled my memory as well. I know this would sadden you. As counterpoint, I've begun filling the pages of a blank book with better recollections, hoping these more cheerful memories might subdue the pictures of your sickness and dying and death hanging like great, gashed canvases in my mind and heart.

Here is an entry from this morning:

I'm ten years old, huddling behind a bush with girlfriends, waiting for you to appear. After a series of nervous car beeps, the screen door swings open and you emerge, your sheer, ivory dress ballooning around your slender figure. A string of pearls circles your throat, your hair gleams like black glass. From behind the bush, I proudly I whisper to my friends: 'You see, I told you…my mother looks like a movie star.'

We watch as you walk by, a cloud of Channel Number 5 adding to the delicious aroma of cut grass and sprinkler water and sun warmed soil and green, growing things. The car drives away, and we begin chalking hopscotch squares on sidewalk. Soon we are skipping on one leg, braids thumping against our backs. But before a winner is declared, the baby sitter appears at the door. She calls out: 'Your mother wants you to come in and drink something before you get dehydrated.'

As we drink the lemonade (not too sweet, for you were ever mindful of the insidious power of sugar to ruin perfectly good teeth) I feel flush with satisfaction. Now all my friends know the truth. My mother looks like a movie star.

But as soon as I finished composing this memory, I recalled another one, far rougher. I see myself standing at the door of a log cabin, anxiously peering out, hoping you wouldn't come to the Mother-Daughter lunch. I was worried you'd show up in your fearsome walking shoes—a pair of square-toed Oxfords

with stout heels. From past experience, I knew all the other mothers would be wearing thin-strapped sandals with kitten heels. Unlike you, they had cars—their husbands were not poorly paid English professors. None of them had to walk to the little cabin in the woods where the scout meetings were held. I was so ashamed of your Oxfords I put distance between us, not wanting anyone to associate me with the woman in the ugly shoes.

Some forty years later, another pair of your Oxfords is in my life—the ones we carried home from the hospital in a blue plastic bag. Unable to throw them away, I keep them in my closet. You hated these Oxfords as much as I did, but your back pain prevented prettier shoes. I want the world to know this: the Oxfords are a lie. The woman who wore those shoes had slender feet with arches like a dancer.

Mother, if you did survive the gamma ray burst that is death, I hope you've shed those heavy, tight-laced shoes, along with everything else that inhibits, encloses, and confines. I hope you are leaping and spinning and twirling through blue and cloudless skies.

While you and I were always close, I think we were closest in the period of my young and middle girlhood. This might be why so many things associated with that time evoke you—poodle

skirts and Red Ball Jets, transistor radios and Hula Hoops, Nifty Notebooks and creamed chipped beef on toast, Kool-Aid pitchers with finger-drawn frosty smiles, and the Indian Head Test Card, that symmetrical graphic used to align the picture tube's electronic beams.

On particularly sultry nights, you often sometimes let us stay up late, watching television. In those pre-cable days, programming ended at midnight. The national anthem would start playing while the American flag rippled in the sky. A voiceover announced the end of the broadcasting day and then the whole screen filled with the Indian Head Test Card.

This image always seemed a little scary, evoking as it did in those Cold War years, a shooting target or swastika. But the mild fear induced by the Indian Head Test Card didn't really diminish my fascination with its unique design. I stared at it, transfixed, until you came and led me off to bed. Without fail, your presence melted away the discomfort brought on by the test card image and I felt safe again.

Even when you were depleted by the illnesses and medicines that, year after unforgiving year, corroded your capability, I believed in your omnipotent power to protect. When you were alive, the world's Armageddons—meteors colliding with the earth, nuclear attacks, Hot Zone pandemics, world wide massacres—remained a distant reality. But since your death, the hands on the Doomsday Clock have edged much closer to midnight and petrifying calamities routinely explode in my

dreams, causing me to wake in the middle of the night. Without you in the world, I cannot imagine ever feeling safe again.

In the last week of your life you said: 'Honey, you will feel a great void.' I think you intended to follow these words with something more comforting, but before you could do so, the ever-present undertow of morphine swept you away.

You were right. Since December 7th, I have felt a void vast as the Sahara. Day after day, my mind marches around a single theme: how can I live the rest of my life without you? I rocked inside your body, then in your arms, and later, whenever my life foundered, in the cradle of your smile and comforting words.

Whenever bottomless sorrow threatens to hollow me out completely, I seek 'perspective', my balm in Gilead. I remind myself I'm not in Auschwitz. But such comparisons do little to blunt grief's sharp edges. Could this be because I've never stood before a death camp oven? Or is it because separation from you is a kind of Auschwitz? I suppose some would find such a comparison hyperbolic, even morally repugnant. But this is exactly what your death feels like—a great, unnatural catastrophe of the most odious kind.

Will it ever feel better? Right now, I don't think so. Whenever I think of your death, whenever I think of you gone forever, I feel a terrible sinking feeling—like a stone falling through a chute.

I wait for falling stone to hit bottom; I wait for catharsis. But there is no catharsis, no bottom, only this heavy stone endlessly plunging, farther and father down the ever-lengthening chute of grief.

I'm don't know why, but the terrible images of your last weeks, are so much easier to remember than better memories; it doesn't seem fair that your most enduring qualities-your girlish laughter on hearing a funny anecdote, your capacity for intellectual growth (how you loved exploring ideas!), your loyalty to family, and your absolute determination to rebuild yourself after being reduced to rubble by the giant wrecker balls of your life—are so easily blotted out by the recurring images of your illness, death, and dying. Like unwelcome guests they intrude on my days and wake me at night. While I'd like to believe death is not a slab of concrete, but a geode—its stone-grey sheath concealing an unimaginably beautiful interior of translucent cathedrals—I can't make that leap.

Today, for example, I was sitting on the subway and as it roared through Manhattan's underbelly, I was suddenly assaulted with a memory of you dressed in your velour bathrobe, a pair of freshly laundered socks on your high-arched feet. But you were not alive. You were lying in a satin-lined box, your flesh hanging like tiny, white flags on liquefying bones. This mental picture

was so incompatible with the quotidian life surrounding me that it seemed wholly unreal.

Another thing I wish I could banish from memory's vast store are the recollections of you as a young woman, performing the domestic chores of a 1950's housewife. I see you washing dishes or sorting and folding huge stacks of laundry, pushing a shopping cart up and down the aisles of National Food, cooking and ironing and cleaning up. You never had time for yourself. Even when you sought sanctuary from the incessant demands of young motherhood in music, I would often stand at the keyboard's highest register, plunking out a series of notes. But you never scolded or ordered me away. You kept right on, melding my repetitive plunking into whatever pieces you were playing.

A year before you died you confessed something I'd never known before. You told me the dull domesticity of your life—combined with the feeling that dad neither liked nor loved you—birthed a persistent fantasy. You imagined yourself packing up a suitcase and heading out of the grey shingled house where we lived, George in a stroller, Alice and me walking alongside. We would head down the block and turn the corner. We would walk down this block and reaching its end, would turn another corner. And we would keep going—block after block, corner after corner—like three refugees, until 27 North Guyer Street was far behind us. But fearing this action would jeopardize custodial rights to your children, you swallowed your

humiliation and frustration, adjusted your sights, and went on with your life.

I sometimes wonder if the trapped feelings you experienced during those years unconsciously seeped into me, creating a fear of getting caught in the wrong life. In my twenties, thirties, and forties, I did everything possible to keep my world fluid. I inhabited 11 dwellings in the span of 23 years. I earned a living by freelancing and traveled non-stop. And while I had long-term relationships, I never married. I could not even stand to wear constricting clothes. While I loved children, I bore none of my own.

It is ironic that despite all my efforts, I think I ended up in the wrong life anyway. Maybe in an attempt to avoid your fate, I went too far in the other direction. Maybe I pushed freedom and fluidity to an unsustainable point. Whatever the cause, I owe it to you to find the right life.

The problem is this: I'm not sure how to find that path, much less travel it. While in life I didn't often seek your counsel, I am seeking it now. Mother, can you hear me? Can you help me? Can you tell me which way to go?

Today, as I was tucking the excess leather of my gloves between my fingers, I began thinking about how you performed this same gesture on the white cotton gloves I wore as a little

girl. The memory was so startling, so unexpected, that I hurried to my computer and began writing it out. Before long, other images of your hands flickered into mind. I saw them twisting a Santa Barbara avocado from its stem and creating little hollows in the soil for marigold and radish seeds.

I would love to shrink back into my girl body again, if just for a day. Wouldn't it be fun to pick avocados, plant rows of radish and marigold seeds, or walk, white gloved hand in white gloved hand, to the South Shore train? Wouldn't it be lovely if we could be transported backwards in time and visit the Chicago Institute of Art's Thorne Room and gaze again at the doll house-sized recreations of European and American interiors? I can just see us, delighting once again, in the miniature tables laid out with their tiny teacups, glasses, and plates, the finger-length velvet sofas, the illuminated windows with velvet drapes and the tiny chandeliers in the foyers of the grand houses, their dangling pendants no bigger than a fairy's tears.

My mind then segued to the many skills you taught me. And if modern conveniences and a busy professional life have rendered most of them useless, it doesn't matter. What matters is this: you wholly invested yourself in trying to teach me things. Here are a few:

how to pull clothes from the dryer while they were still slightly damp so wrinkles could be easily smoothed

how to make a bed with nurse's corners

how to starch a shirt

how to push one sock into the other, so pairs would stay together

how to vacuum a carpet and plump pillows

how to ride a bicycle (you would run alongside, holding the seat, only letting go when you were certain I could safely wobble along on my own)

how to play the piano

how to bake a fruit pie

how to clean a fish bowl (though I knew scooping up fish fecal matter was very unpleasant for you)

But if most of these domestic skills are useless, one of the most important things you instilled in me—a love of books and reading—remains the centerpiece of my life's table. Remember walking to the brown brick library and sitting together on the low stools in front of the shelves, the rich, pleasurable aroma of paper and bindings, leather and glue permeating the air? We would peruse the stacks and select age-appropriate titles: *Raggedy Ann and Andy*, *The Blue Fairy Book*, *Elsie Piddock Skips in Her Sleep*, *The Little Princess*, *Heidi: A Girl of the Mountains*, *Pollyanna*, *Honestly, Katie John! Black Beauty*, *Lad, a Dog*, *Big Red*, *Homer Price and the Doughnut Factory*, *Clara Barton*, *On Your Toes, Susie! The Blue Willow Plate*, *Black Beauty*, *Hans Christian*

Andersen, the *Bobbsey Twins*. And more, so many more. When I finished reading through one stack (I always started at the top and read my way to the bottom—just like you) we would return to the library for more.

In my head, I hear your self-deprecating voice saying: 'I don't think I did enough for you.'

Mother, you did more than you can ever know.

Though ours was a reciprocally loving relationship, memories of the unkind moments between us still batter my heart like hurricanes. And while unmerciful insensitivity is expected in children, I can't stop thinking how wonderful it would be if right from the start children understood that their parents' lives are not forever. Such knowledge might prevent the needless resentments, angers, and recriminations that, in the face of irrevocable loss, burn away like so many dry leaves. But the price of such wisdom would be far too high. How could any child thrive knowing his parents are going to die?

This evening, as I was washing up after dinner, I thought about the fights we had over the dishwasher. Ever fearful the plates and glasses would not get properly cleaned if the tip and tilt wasn't just right, you would constantly instruct me how to re-do an already competently loaded machine.

In an attempt at humor so sorely needed in the last

week of your dying, I assured you there was an upside to your death: 'Mother, I will be free to load the dishwasher without interference!' Your wry sense of humor was still very much intact. You said: 'And what makes you think I'm not going to interfere?'

Please Mother, I'm waiting. Interfere.

This morning, when I boarded the M104 bus at 96th Street, I saw a baby with luminous brown, almost black eyes just like yours. Now and then, I looked away—testing the baby, seeing if she would lose interest in me if I didn't respond. But each time I returned my gaze, she greeted me with her tender, toothless smile. I wondered: is this baby you? Has the essential stuff that made up Esther changed into unseen energy that has seeped into the blood of millions of different life forms? The baby would have been about the right age—born just as you were dying. Typically, in such occurrences, I try to coax out some indication of your continued existence by issuing a specific challenge. 'All right, little baby,' I said silently, 'if you really are Esther, reach out your arms.' The baby didn't reach out her arms.

Aware of the all too human tendency to choreograph accidental gestures into a grand dance of meaning, I still hold out hope that one day, one of my challenges will be irrefutably met and I will have absolute proof that you haven't decomposed

into a galaxy of exploding stars, but instead linger close by, as near as the baby aboard the M104.

Having scant details about your early life, I have begun trying to reconstruct a more complete picture by studying photographs taken of you as a young woman during the brief period when you performed in operettas. One of my favorites shows you sitting backstage, dressed in a frothy blouse and floor length skirt, half smiling. I keep this photo pressed between the pages of your Treasury of Gilbert and Sullivan songs, the album we found in a box while clearing out the basement in the weeks following your death. On the front page of the anthology, in your elegant penmanship you'd written: Esther Evans, 333 Paris, S.E, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Almost six decades later, my fifty year old hand turns the pages of this collection, and as I do I imagine your youthful hands doing the same thing; when my eyes linger on the quaint illustrations, I try to imagine you looking at the same pictures. And as I stare at the notes on the page, I listen for your voice singing 'We Sail the Ocean Blue' from *H.M. S Pinafore*, or 'Ah, Leave Me Not to Pine,' from *The Pirates of Penzance.*

You once told me a friend of your father had reprimanded him for not sending you to Juilliard music school along with your talented pianist brother, Phillip. But you were a girl in

an immigrant, patriarchal family and this, combined with the attitude of the times which relegated women to the role of teacher, nurse, or social worker, if they worked at all, conspired against your unusual musical gifts.

I wonder how you felt about this. Were you angry? Sad? Did you just accept it? If you were still around I'd ask a million questions about your life before me. But you're gone, and with your death, the whole library of Esther is gone too.

Since we buried you, much of what I experience passes through the filter of that unalterable fact. For example, I read an article in the *New York Times*. It was about a large whale known as the 52 Hertz, so named because its sonic signature measures in at this frequency, a pitch just slightly above a tuba's lowest note.

It seems the whale roams alone through the ocean, year after year alone, sending out its signal. No other creature answers its unique call. Experts have proffered theories, but so far none have been able to explain the animal's isolation. Whatever accounts for this unique creation, it seems to be the only one of its kind in the cetacean world.

As soon as I read this I began wondering if you were like the whale—swimming through some vast, starry sea, calling out to me, but because I'm another bandwidth, I simply can't hear

you. Then I felt like I was the whale—roaming the liquid world of grief, calling out to you, but you can't hear me.

At this thought, I feel the all too familiar surge of grief, so I decide to take a walk. You would have liked this as you were a great believer in the curative power of walks. I remember whenever I was restless or edgy you would say, 'Honey, take a walk.'

So I took a walk.

I headed down Broadway. Near Zabars, I saw a mother and daughter. I trailed after them, eavesdropping. The mother, who must have been nearly eighty, was stylishly turned out in a way you would have admired: an elegant cashmere coat and a smooth, silver pageboy framing a lightly made-up face. It seemed a party was in the making as lively chatter about glazed potatoes and other festive topics flowed between them. As I listened, the familiar ache of tears pulsed in my throat.

Because the back injury suffered in your mid-fifties imposed restrictions on your movement, you were never physically integrated into my adult world. With two exceptions—a dinner party at my Soho loft twenty three years ago and a long ago weekend at a summer cottage I'd rented in Woodstock—you never visited any of the places I called home. You never stepped inside the stone Rehavia house where I lived while studying at Hebrew University and the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem. You never entered the Brownstone in Brooklyn with its long, golden windows or the tiny duplex

with the barrel vaulted ceiling in Greenwich Village. You never looked out the window of my Riverdale apartment to watch the tugs and ferries and barges gliding up and down the Hudson. You never saw the Frank Lloyd Wright I briefly inhabited in Santa Cruz or walked through the garden-brocaded grounds of my Spanish-style domicile in Los Angeles.

When I moved to the neo-classical limestone on 113th and Broadway, my favorite residence of all, I used to imagine you, healthy and strong, curled up on my plum-velvet sofa, sipping tea and relaxing after our day of picture-viewing at the Met. I think you would've liked this airy apartment with its high, wedding cake ceilings and French doors; I think you would have enjoyed looking through its huge windows with their commanding view of buildings and rooftops, flowerboxes and black water towers standing like fairytale giants against the Manhattan sky. I'm almost certain you would have drawn deep architectural satisfaction from the comeliness of the stone church visible through my study window.

But you never saw any of this. Almost every one of our adult visits took place in your world.

On the day of the house closing, I stood for a long time in your kitchen, envisioning you at your kitchen table, remembering the delicate scratch of your knife, as it smoothed butter and jelly to the corners of an extra-thin slice of Pepperidge Farm toast, the clink of your spoon as it circled your tea cup. I saw the thick library books propped up before you. You had always been an

omnivorous reader and during your last year, books transported you beyond the tedium of housebound hours.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why, as life's greatest mystery encroached, you spent your time engrossed in the fictional mysteries of Mary Higgins Clark, Dick Frances, and Sue Grafton. *A is for Alibi, B is for Burglar, C is for Corpse, P is for Peril, Q is for Quarry*. As your own life was drawing to a close, you worked your way through the alphabet of murder and mayhem. I suppose there are several answers to this question. Your keen mind always took joy in figuring out puzzles and motives. Just because you were on the downward slope of life, didn't mean your interests had ceased.

Or maybe mystery stories were your way of evading what no one, except for a handful of spiritual adventurers, can face with equanimity. Death may be the most natural thing in the world, but at the same time, it's the most unnatural. Though we start dying at birth, we also start fighting its inevitability. Our whole life is dedicated to making it, getting comfortable, getting settled, getting somewhere. Our whole organism is designed to stave off possible life-destroyers. Don't play with matches. Look both ways before you cross the street. Button your coat. And suddenly, just like that, we are required to flick a mental switch and become calm in the face of our own extinction.

As I was standing there, thinking on these things and trying to root the room's details in my mind, a Cardinal suddenly whistled into view. The sight of this bird reminded me of how

you used to look up from your reading to watch the birds perching in the tree beyond the glass door. Do you remember when the Cockatoo alighted on the tree? You were fascinated by this extraordinary creature (most likely an escaped pet) and excitedly commented on his beak, snow-white plumage, and startling comb.

I went out to the yard and thanked the tree for providing you with a blush of pink in spring, a cool lake of leaves in summer, a blaze of vermilion in autumn, a delicate tracery of charcoal limbs in winter.

When I stepped back inside my eyes swept the room, taking in its details, the small incarnations of your life. I told myself I would never sit with you again at the oak table; I would never scramble you an egg or bring you a cup of morning tea; I would never again journey to the red brick house where you'd lived for the last fifteen years of your life.

I then stared at your chair. I always hated this chair: to me it was a symbol of your housebound life. I used to fantasize about chopping it to pieces after your death. But in this sudden sweep of nostalgia, the chair suddenly becomes a holy relic. I touched its wooden arms, thanking it for cradling your aching body without complaint for all those years. After all, it too was once a living thing—its padding a plant; its wooden arms, a tree.

Though I don't have any recollection of you holding me, I can easily picture you cradling George in your arms, balancing him on your lap. I see you touching his head, careful not to pressure the soft spots, the jigsaw pieces of bone not yet knitted together. I see you brushing back a wisp of baby hair, trailing a finger over his brow.

50 years later, I trail my finger over a picture of you, taken when you were sixty-five or so. As I stare at this picture, there is one thing I know for sure—I will feel bereft every day, for the rest of my life.

Maybe this is how you felt on my first day of college. Once my things were unpacked and my room set up, there was nothing left for you to do. It was time for you to go. Many years later you told me how this separation pained you. However, for my sake, you concealed your feelings. But I'm certain that even if I'd been aware of your sadness, it wouldn't have made much difference. As a self-obsessed eighteen year old in bell bottoms, hoop earrings, trendy thong sandals, and a wild waterfall of hair, my need for liberation would have trumped your sorrow any day.

Mother, I know what I want for my next birthday—my first without you. Send me a clear sign, letting me know that though my heart is tethered to sorrow, yours is flying free.

After you died, I began obsessively reading books about death and dying. In one, I came across a piece about a sect of Buddhist monks who daily walked down a path winding through a flower garden. At the end of each flower-flanked path stood a glass structure and in each structure hung a human skeleton. This ritual walk is called the Death Prayer. I suppose it serves the same purpose as the skulls placed on the desks of medieval philosophers, a reminder that we all live *in umbra mortis*. In light of all this, I should consider your death part of my essential education.

But if this is the case, I haven't assimilated its meaning.

I've paid my tuition, but feel no closer to any kind of liberating wisdom. Your absence from my life, your absence from your life, seems, even almost one year later, to be a fruitless activity, devoid of all sense, except perhaps, the often heard 'she's out of her misery now.'

If this were really true, it would be enough. But I can't even draw comfort from this often expressed sentiment. I don't know if death is a reprieve from earthly misery or not; why should we presume shedding a body puts a person out of misery? One irrefutable sign from you—a sign letting me know you exist in some form and are safe and flourishing—would be so welcome. Why can't that happen? What's keeping you from me?

Sometimes, on the rare occasion when I can trick my generally solipsistic mind into believing that there is a reality beyond the sensory world, I wonder if the impossibility of

communication between the living and the dead might have been an oversight on the part of the force that created the universe. Next moment, I'm assailed with the ludicrousness of such an idea. How could a force with the power to flow rivers to seas without error, color code animals for mating ease, bloom babies from wombs, and redden apples to bracing sweetness, and on and on and on—a boundless catalogue of wonders—be guilty of an oversight?

If not an oversight, than suffering must have some meaning. Maybe, as the world's many wisdom traditions teach, it is a pre-requisite for spiritual growth—riddling the heart with pain might be the only way to disengage spirit from its fierce attachment to matter. This analogy seems to hold up in the biological world: unless the seed breaks its shell, no plant emerges. But I can't quite accept this. The idea of suffering as midwife to spiritual luminosity is compelling as metaphor, but it seldom makes sense when applied to actual life. What pearl can possibly come to a mother of Niger, forced to watch her child slowly starve, his head bobbing on the end of his frail neck like a giant cherry at the end of a stem?

As the number of months from your death grows, the finality of of it is sinking in; I'm struck by the realization that you are not just gone, but gone forever. You don't know how many times

I wish I could call 574-272-4323 and tell you about my day. You don't know how many times I wish the phone would ring and I'd hear you say, as you always did: 'Darling it's me—Mother. Is this a good time to talk? Am I interrupting you?'

It would be untruthful to say I always welcomed these calls. You would obsess about the difficulties in your life and as your health faltered and then failed, your hurt, anger, and anxiety intensified. Knowing women of your generation found it hard to share personal problems beyond their own families, I tried to listen, but more often than not, I exasperatedly suggested solutions. But you never acted on my advice. Influenced by the callow psychologies of the times, I believed you preferred the role of victim. Looking back, I wonder what I was thinking.

Almost without exception, every woman I know in her fifties is trying to change her life. Lose weight. Exercise more. Make more money. Get out of debt. Get out of a bad marriage. Find a partner. Get into better work situation. Have more professional success. Be happier. Live a more balanced life. Most of us, despite excellent health and relative youth, are not succeeding. And yet I expected you—a woman in her mid-seventies and in frail health to accomplish far more daunting goals. Through the always bright glass of hindsight, I now understand you weren't looking for solutions because for most of your issues, there simply weren't any. Like most of us, you just needed someone to listen to you.

I pick up your photo from my desk, and I heard you speaking

in my head, encouraging yourself when pain made life's routine tasks almost impossible: 'Come on Esther, you can do this. You can do this'. And whenever familial firestorms threatened to melt your heart, you would encourage yourself, saying: 'Keep going, keep going. I have to keep going.'

I would give anything to have you with me in the room so I could tell you how wrong I was in expecting you to change your life; I would give anything for you to come back so I could tell you how brave you were, and how brave you've always been.

Today, my first Mother's Day without you, I felt so bereft and strange and unsettled that I couldn't concentrate on the work piled up on my desk. Seeking distraction, I began wandering up and down Broadway, moving like a ghost through the throngs of people enjoying the May weather. Each time I passed a festively dressed mother and daughter, a sickening swell of grief seized me. When I returned home, I listened to *O mio babbino caro*, an aria you loved, an aria you sang, the aria we played before your casket was lowered into December's frozen ground.

As I listened, scenes from our life play across my mind…

you are raking leaves from an old stone fountain in Santa Barbara, trying to clean it up so your hot children have a place to swim (but in the end, a long crack in the fountain thwarted your aquatic intentions)

you are reassuring me as I impatiently stand, a tearful tempest in a puffy slip, that you're almost finished combing the knots from my hair

you are drying baby George, toweling between his tiny toes and shielding his eyes from clouds of talcum

you are assembling a slew of toys—a Barbie Doll Dream House and Fashion Shop, a Visible Man, Woman, and Horse, tabbed metal barns, and the steel tracks of Lionel trains and showing us how to notch together Lincoln Logs, fit together a Balsa wood plane, create a kite tail from twisted rags, paint matchbox cars, work an Etch-A-Sketch, scoop up jacks and shoot marbles with a quick slide of index finger against thumb

you are rushing into my Santa Barbara bedroom during an earthquake, scooping up Alice while calling out for me to follow; with a chubby five year old hand I fiercely clutch your robe, my talisman against the rattling windowpanes

you are lighting the tips of Fourth of July sparklers, showing us how to wave the wands far enough from our bodies so the waterfall of sputtering embers doesn't singe our skin

you are pouring over your books at the dining room table, wading through piles of physics and math homework (spread out near a heap of unfolded laundry) trying to finish a master's degree so you can get a teaching job to help pay

for your children's tuition (you always got the highest marks, though as far as I can remember, nobody ever congratulated you or made a special celebration in your honor)

you are sitting behind the wheel of the car, driving your children to endless music and dance lessons

you are pouring coffee at university functions, handing people delicate china cups, smiling and making small talk, though you'd taught all day and your back pains you

you are waving goodbye from the driveway as I set out for a year abroad

you are helping your grandchildren turn crayon scrawls into letters

you are greeting your visiting brothers in the vestibule, your face lit up with delight

you are

you are

you are…not.

I woke this morning, thinking I should really stop writing these letters very soon. You were too good of a mother to want death and loss to rule my life. You would prefer me aboard a

sailboat, tacking in the wind or diving, head first, into life's glittering breakers. You would not want me sitting on the beach, sifting sand between my fingers, consumed by the thought that these dry grains were once billions of beings—men and women and children—now all gone.

There are other reasons to stop writing as well.

If you did survive in some way, there is a chance these letters might be harming you. While it seems improbable, I remember reading somewhere that prolonged dwelling on the dead can keep their spirits from melting into eternal rest. If that's true, I would hate to be blocking you from such peace.

Let me share a secret with you. Since I've begun writing to you, I've been hoping the thoughts and feelings in these letters might meld together into a mantra with the power to shatter the barrier between us. Hearing me, your voice would resound across eons, letting me know you exist in a never-ending avalanche of joy.

The irony is this: I think you might have already appeared to me, though my natural distrust of the supernatural (a trait I inherited from you) has kept me from fully embracing this event. Let me explain.

A few nights ago, in a sort of dream-state, I found myself standing before a white marble bust of you. As I looked on, the statue suddenly changed into your living body. You appeared much younger and seemed relaxed. Your voice sounded in my head: 'Is it okay if I move? I don't want to scare you.' I was very

much aware that you were dead and from inside the dream I urged: 'Move, Mother! Move!' Your body then dissolved into intersecting planes, each whirring like a dragonfly's wing. 'Mother, how are you?' I asked as I tried to grasp the hardly perceptible, fast-moving planes. Your disembodied voice answered: 'Darling, I'm fine…just fine!' Next thing I knew, I was lying in my bed, sunlight stippling the sheets, a mourning dove warbling on the sill.

If this was simply an eruption from the subconscious mind, it was unlike any dream I'd ever dreamt before—there was no background, no foreground, and the only characters were you and me. It seemed the barrier between us had finally been breached.

In the following days, I returned to my ever ambivalent self. I *might* have met up with your spirit, but the whole thing might just as easily been an image manufactured by a brain and heart feverish for proof that everything about your remarkable and unremarkable life had not been pulverized like brittle leaves underfoot.

But if the figure had been a real presence, I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been for you to find the crack in the wall separating life and death. But you did it. And may I add how characteristic of you, despite your long journey, to worry about me.

It's been awhile since I've written to you, and now, as I review these letters written in the seven months following your death, I'm trying to understand their purpose. Maybe they've been a way of grappling with grief; a 'defense against total collapse' as C.S. Lewis wrote. Maybe pearling pain into words is the best way through it all, though part of me feels there is something terribly childish, even narcissistic, about projecting all this private sorrow out into the world. Or else, I am hoping to grant you in death something you'd been denied in life—recognition of your uncommon intellectual capacity, talent, and courage. Overshadowed by three brilliant brothers, and later by a brilliant husband, I don't think you were ever really able to realize your potential, to come into your own. Adding to this, your long history of poor health turned you into a more limited person than you really were; too often you were sold short, not only by others, but yourself as well. Chronic illness, like a house of mirrors, always distorts the real person. You were no exception.

But if memorial is the reason prompting these letters to you, I don't think I've completely succeeded. There's just too little of you here. You were more than a forgiving wife, more than a patient, protective, and loving mother. You were a flesh and blood person, rich and gritty with contradictions and complexity, and I know I haven't properly portrayed this side of you. In some ways, I can even be faulted for the worst sort of filial piety. But after your death, microscopic examination of

your flaws and failures holds little interest for me, either as a writer or as your child; I suppose this is one of the boons death bestows on people whose natures are basically good.

Or maybe this outpouring has been prompted by a need to continue your presence in the world as I sometimes think my childlessness deprived you of—a stake in the future. As you know, it's not that I didn't want children; it's just no man appeared at the time in my life when I was finally ready. And while I've adjusted to this, I feel I've cheated you in some way.

But on closer examination, I wonder if legacy is really best achieved through physical reproduction? Cells and memories flow into future generations, but these dissemble over time and like paintings on water, finally dissolve altogether.

For example, what do I know of your namesake, my maternal great-grandmother? She ran a small bakery. She had a cucumber garden. She was married to a man named Jacob who, based on an old photo, looks like he would be as comfortable tending sheep on the steppes of Mongolia as sitting at a desk in Russia, studying Torah.

But that's it. I don't know what she felt as she watched her daughter and grandson, Rochel and Jozef, sail away for America. Was she glad they were escaping the pogroms of Russia? Did she know she would never see them again? Was she alone or with someone as she stood on the dock, watching as the steamer pulled out to sea, carrying her infinitely precious cargo to the New World? Was she even standing on the dock? I simply don't

know. All I know is this: she wasn't alive when you were born because you were given her name.

And of your great grandmothers, I know nothing at all—not even their names. Unless these perishable pages persist in time—and there is little to suggest they will—your descendants won't know your name either, much less anything about the unique passions that informed your life.

In the end, I don't think the flow of cells and memory into future generations is the most reliable way of securing legacy. Maybe a better way is to live my life in accordance with what you most loved and admired and constantly showed by example. When my actions reflect your integrity, compassion, and dignity, your belief in the importance of bringing beauty and substance and fairness and grace into a world so achingly and sorely in need of these things, I make it possible for you to ripple out into time in ever-expanding rings. Maybe this is the best way of assuring your legacy, your place in larger history.

I can hear your modest voice protesting: 'Oh no, Honey, there is nothing to assure to history. I'm not that great.'

My dear mother, wherever you are, and whatever you are, hear me—*you are.*

Your loving daughter,

Margaret