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NO ROSES IN ROSEVILLE

We hold my mother's wake in a Chinese restaurant in Roseville, California. Had she been Chinese, this might be less strange.

She died in a prefab home reeking of plastic and cigarettes. Decades earlier, she and my father had proudly shown me around their new double wide in a manicured senior's park outside Sacramento. I'd wondered if they would ever get rid of that factory smell. Every surface made to look like something it was not, in a town called Roseville where there were no roses.

My sister calls with her official bad-news voice. "Lung cancer, stage four. She's refused intervention. When can you get here?" I immediately hear a chorus of small children from my childhood singing the same plaintive refrain. *Does she smoke in the shower? Your mother, who we've never seen without a cigarette, does she smoke in the shower?*

The diagnosis is sudden but trails years of fighting another cancer. When I call, my mother's voice is strained and raspy, all vitality dissipated. "I hope you aren't disappointed in me, but I can't go on." I assure her the decision rests in no one's hands but her own, and promise I'll catch a flight down from Vancouver.

How many times have I called my sister offering help, only to be rebuffed? She didn't want another person to look after, but that was not the real reason she pushed me away. There is so much more to our history than that. Grime-filled corners of our lives where bits of resentment have settled. Attics full of squelched emotion, chimneys choked with the soot of burned-out connec-

tion. This is the place we all live in now.

A year earlier, I'd been traveling on business and was standing on a sky-bridge in the Denver airport. My plane was delayed so I called to see how my mother was doing. Could I be of help? Could I come for a few days and let my sister and father have a rest from their caregiving tasks? "No," my mother said, "I just want to be with family right now. I hope you'll understand."

Strangers filed past, oblivious to the boot at my chest. Her words delivered with an unsettling lack of rancor knocked the wind out of me. I wanted to grind my phone under my heel and make those words fly backwards. Leaning against the railing, I looked out over the white sails of the terminal and witnessed two tears fall. Tiny puddles of DNA on the floor far, far below, testifying to my existence. I stood like that for a long time before raising my head to the expansiveness of the space. Over the cacophony of the terminal I heard my flight called. With practiced determination, I walked towards the boarding gate, grateful for the gentle anonymity and dreamlike quality of travel.

Now I'm boarding another plane, the last flight I'll take while she's still alive. It's been six months since I've seen her and as usual, that visit left me weak with depression. A malady I contract every time I spend time with my family. Whether they want to admit it or not, I am still part of them. My only sin is being even more a part of myself.

Of all the things that make me different, my silence and solitude provoke the loudest response. When we enter my sister's house, she immediately turns on music. She leaves me alone to read. I turn off the background din. She walks back into the room, picks up the remote and turns the music back on. When I say I'd prefer the quiet, she says it's unnatural. At my parent's, my father wakes from his nap, startled to find me in the living room work-

ing on my computer. “Geez, why don’t you turn on the TV so I’d know you’re here?”

This seems like such a small difference but it speaks to a larger issue. Without silence for our thoughts, we live a life of distraction and illusion. Listening to and making peace with our minds allows us to make peace with ourselves. Without that truce, we can slip into unhappy dependencies or the blunting power of substance abuse.

My sister blames me for my father’s drinking. Am I also responsible for her inheriting this family tradition? But we can’t talk about that.

“He’s been an alcoholic since before I was born.”

“Yeah, but you make it worse. He feels judged by you.”

“He has a disease he won’t seek help for. If he had hepatitis and I showed concern, would that also be judgement?”

There is no winner in a discussion where both people are right. The drinking covers his anger and shame, while creating more. My mother, the only one with any real influence, refuses to get involved. She’s found a level of stasis with the situation and will not be thrust into unsafe territory.

I’d pulled myself out of this sadness and dysfunction decades earlier in order to save myself. I’d chosen my health over the security of family and paid for that decision with each subsequent interaction. A harsh decision for an ugly predicament but one I’d never regretted. My needing and wanting more from life provoked a deep divide.

I take my seat on the plane leaving Vancouver and think about the conversation I had with my mother after that phone call in the Denver airport. She apologized and said she hadn’t understood how hurt I might be. I’d accepted her apology, but the truth behind the words lingered like the stale cabin air that now enveloped me.

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Eighty and exhausted, my mother has taken to her bed to await the inevitable. I arrive three days before she dies and when I see her, my heart plummets. In my absence, she's turned into a tiny, emaciated birdlike creature. All hollows and sharp places where bones thrust themselves forward. The last words she speaks are, "I'm glad you're here." Words of hers I also believe. Wound tightly in the paradox of our lives, I tell her I love her and have missed her. Another expression of honesty.

The screened-in patio, with its desk of half-finished duck decoy carvings is never used. My father and sister drink scotch out of jelly jars and tell stories in the garage, away from the prying eyes of neighbors. California, with near-perfect weather and they choose to sit in a windowless space, smoke cigarettes and get loud and drunk listening to country music on a cheap radio. I sit with them and try to join in the increasingly disjointed conversation. Try to be part of something I am not.

I know my mother will be gone by tomorrow. When I say I'd like to be with her tonight, my father looks at me with his habitual distrust. To ease the tension, I drink a beer but when they offer me another and I put up my hand in refusal, their eyes narrow.

They've been with my mother through the hard times—the times of sickness and reprieve. The years she fought off another malicious, soul-starving cancer. Remission and recurrence. Phone voices pulsing with dashed hopes and trampled emotions. Mistakenly declared free of another illness she'd fought for years, she went to the doctor complaining of shortness of breath.

My news arrived long distance, exactly a week ago. But tonight I'm here and I know.

The early morning's stillness is broken by my soft chanting. My family is so stubbornly lacking in beliefs of any kind that when the time comes, I can't fill the gaps with even a common Christian prayer. Not that one comes to mind exactly, but I might be

able to summon one up, if I felt it would be appreciated. Instead, I say Buddhism's 100 syllable mantra of purification. "Om vajra sattva samaya, manu palaya..." The rhythm of repetition, though barely audible, saturates the space with relaxed acceptance.

When I return from the kitchen with my cup of hot tea I know she's gone. Death can be like this. People talk about how lonely it would be to die alone but more than once, I've sat by a deathbed for hours, only to have the person escape the minute I leave the room. It's as if the act of pulling away, of making the final rush to freedom is too intimate to share. As if death is so special, so precious, that those still alive should bear no witness. Intensely private with secrets she wrapped her life in, I'm not surprised this is how my mother chooses to leave.

Holding her cool parched hand, I know that what existed between us is done. Whatever karmic imprint brought us together is singed. The connection, like the string to a kite, is two black, burnt ends. Not to be connected ever again. Whatever we needed to do or be to one another is over for all time. She could have been a better mother and I could have been a more devoted daughter. But that's not the way it was. That's not the truth of what happened, but showing up with the intention to bring comfort brings forgiveness. My simple act of being here, of witnessing her passing from this life is enough.

I sit in silence, offering prayers for a safe transition, hands folded at my chest and head bowed. Fingernails dig into my chin.

With a deep exhale, I rise to wake my father from his sloppy, medicated sleep. As I leave her room, I have a jarring premonition that I won't be attending his death but have no idea why.

"She died at 4:05." My father looks at the clock and notices the ten-minute lapse and then looks back at me. Is he wondering what he can blame me for? How he can hold me accountable for this calamity? Why was I the one to be with her at the end—the one who always received her news long distance? How did I

know when she'd go? He says nothing.

My sister stumbles to the bathroom and washes last night's makeup from her face. Her twelve-year-old daughter wakes up and looks scared. There is a dead body in the house. Will she have to see it? Touch it?

My father goes in first. He leaves her room with shoulders deflated and head hung low, walks to the kitchen and pulls the gallon jug of whiskey from beneath the cupboard. In the hush of the morning, I hear a loud glug as he fills his coffee cup.

Quietly sobbing, my sister enters my mother's room as my niece looks in from the doorway. Afterwards, we all sit together in the living room, stunned by the slap of death's finality. Within the hour, my sister makes a phone call and two men clothed all in white arrive, eyes towards the ground, hands clasped professionally in front. "No one needs to stay in the room with us," one of them says. "It's usually too hard on the family." I don't want to leave her with strangers, so I stand just inside the door until one of them points to her hand. I remove the wedding ring my mother's worn for fifty years and slip it on my finger for safekeeping. I check her ears and carefully remove the diamond earrings, secreting them in the pocket of my jeans until I can give them to my sister.

When they pick her up with gloved hands, she is no longer my mother. She's become just another wrinkled, decimated old person who has decayed and died. Another corpse. They zip her into the dark regions of the body bag. Body and soul surrounded by plastic in death, as in life.

They take her out the front door before dawn comes and the neighbors wake up to see the telltale white van parked in the driveway. I close the door and we sit in the living room and cry. It is the last time we ever cry together.

On Sunday we are quiet, cocooned in the solitude of grief.

On Monday, my father belts down several strong drinks and

makes phone calls to their friends—many whom they’ve known their entire married lives. His hand trembles as he flips the pages of their worn address book. He tentatively pushes the buttons on the phone. With a steady voice, he tells them he has bad news. He sits quietly and finishes his whiskey. Getting up to leave the room, he turns to me and says, “Making those calls was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” Swaying with grief, he walks slowly to the end of the hall, gently closing the bedroom door behind him.

On Tuesday, I take everything of my mother’s and put it in bags for garbage or charity. Her bedroom, a place of sickness and suffering, is scraped clean of memories. Every undergarment, every hair pin—gone. As if she’d never been there, as if her existence couldn’t be linked to even a tear. This is what my father asked me to do. She’s been dead less than three days and he wants no visual reminder of her? I struggle with this until I realize she was sick for ten years. For the last decade, his life has revolved around her care, her appointments and her distress. Prying open my heart, I realize it’s not my mother he is getting rid of, but the decrepitude he can no longer live with.

Later that day, I take down the Hummel figurines from over the tall windows at the front of the living room. I sit them on the counter, wipe them with a wet cloth and begin packing them into shoe boxes. When my niece says she wants to keep them, we are all surprised. No one in the family ever understood the charming, soulless, innocence my mother cherished.

To honor her wishes, there will be no funeral, no service of any kind. She is cremated and put in a beige ceramic urn large enough for my father to join her when his time comes. I take a faded photo of her fishing in Alaska, when she was still young and newly married, to the newspaper with a short obituary. We fax it to the town in Alaska where they met, where I was born. No neighbors come by. No one calls.

That night we drive to the Chinese restaurant and drink jas-

mine tea and eat cashew chicken. It's located in a faceless strip mall, between the hardware store and a hair salon. Brass bells announce our arrival. We sit at one of the corner tables on uncomfortable chairs. The tubular metal frame meets my back in all the wrong places. After our order has been taken, I talk about how much my mother had liked Chinese food and say that it is therefore appropriate we are having her wake in a Chinese restaurant. No one smiles or agrees. My sister nervously jiggles her chopsticks while my niece stares down at the tablecloth. My father glares at me. I have acknowledged the truth that she is dead and we are alone. We say little for the rest of the meal.

Because we cannot pay homage to her death, we cannot celebrate her life or the ones she left behind. The stark, denuded landscape of her passing, stripped as bare as her bedroom, is a world deprived of ritual and any sense of the sacred journey we each take.

What could have been leaves only a void, an empty hole that our familial connections soon dissolve into.

As we get up to leave, I glance towards the entrance and see two cut-glass vases on painted red pedestals. I hadn't noticed these when we came in. Roses. Plastic pink roses. The only roses I've seen in this town called Roseville.