

Prodigal Prayer

I kneel before my mother, trying to get her slipper socks over her swollen feet. Then she presses the remote control on her recliner to push her to an almost standing position. Once upright she is not steady enough to get to the walker alone. Our goal—to get her to the bathroom on time. Shame. Then tears. She soaks her Depends because of a water pill that's supposed to help her puffy legs. But nothing, it seems, is helping.

This is a week before her second fall, the bad one. Before the pneumonia and sippy cups. Before her right arm no longer works. Before the fingers on her right hand go numb. Even when I put a pen between them, she will not be able to sign her name. This is before the hospital and more sippy cups, one with the Nemo logo on loan from her great-grandson. This is before her stint in rehab where Doug will try to teach her to put on socks with a blue plastic device she slips over her calf, a rope she holds in her good left hand. She will keep cheese popcorn in the seat of her walker and offer some to Doug who looks like Matt Damon. She will be like a girl with a crush. She misses my dad—dead eleven years—but some days is angry he left her.

This is before I drive her twenty-year-old Toyota to see her in the Catholic nursing home where the priest reminds us “this too shall pass.” I will think about my mother passing water, about her ultimate passing, her eventual death. I question if her pain will indeed pass, if what is passing through her body will keep on passing, looping into her, the morphine drip not enough to dilute the pangs in her spine, her neck, sciatic nerves running down both of her legs. A chorus of nuns will sing while playing maracas and tambourines. One sister will drop her percussion as she falls asleep mid-song. It will be funny, then touching, then ultimately so profound I become my mother taking care of a two-year-old me.

I become my mother who puts a pillow under my stomach when I can't breathe. With cupped hands she pats my back just the way the doctor shows her, the doctor who says to pretend my back is a bongo drum. When the fever comes, she rubs my arms with alcohol and flips the pillow under my head to the cool side, puts a bucket near my bed as I am sure to vomit. When we go to La Salette Shrine to see the Christmas lights, I mistake the basin for donations near baby Jesus's cradle as a puke pail. All the kneeling people around us laugh, guessing perhaps what a sick child I am and how many nights my mother sits up with me with Vicks and antibiotics, inhalers and picture books to help calm the cats who live in my chest making strange wheezing sounds.

I'm allergic to cats and dogs and even stuffed animals, grass in the summer and leaves in the fall, lilacs which blossom in spring, and my lungs can't take the winter cold. No wonder my mother wraps the statue of the Virgin Mary she kept by her marital bed and puts it in the bottom drawer. The Virgin helped her get pregnant, but after me, she's had enough.

Soon my mother is again with child anyway. She tells me how I still wanted all the attention and as soon as my mother started nursing my sister, I'd put my hand in the diaper pail and stare at her, daring her to make me stop. When JFK was shot and my mother wept in front of the television, I blocked her view with my two year old body and peed on the carpet.

Now it is my mother peeing, mortified, drenching
her nightgown. She once changed my diapers and now
I change hers. Oh little mother, my helpless daughter,
please forgive me for I have sinned. It has been years
since my last confession, my last therapy session.
Hail Maryjane brownies, please help my mother's appetite,
please help her to sleep. Hail Mary, full of grace,
please heal my mother's bruised face.

Last Picnic

We bundled her up and took her to Iggy's in Narragansett.
It was still chilly, early May, as she perched in her hooded jacket
on the seat of her walker so she didn't have to slide onto the wooden bench.
Her great-grandsons ran to the playground spinner and slides.
My mother's chowder flipped in the wind and landed on her lap.
I wiped her up with a bunch of napkins.
My sister rescued the rolling bag of clam cakes.

She said it was all a blur—*I was busy
those days working and taking care of you.*

What My Mother Left Behind, What She Discarded

she'd given away the frying pans too heavy for her to lift
the wrapping paper rolls (too much for her arthritic hands
to mess with scissors and tape) all her shoes with heels
the TENS machine that never really helped
my dad's bicentennial quarters (he collected one from every state)
the bag of flour (too heavy) the lawnmower and chainsaw
(Tony took care of the lawn by then)
the toolbox except for one screwdriver (because you never know)
the lanyards with ID cards from Foxwoods and Twin River casinos
her Better Homes and Gardens cookbook set
the Encyclopedia Britannica
the 1965 dictionary with the marbled endpapers
the potting soil and tomato trellis and expired makeup
the record player and all her Johnny Mathis albums (CDs were easier)
the sewing machine the knitting needles

she was down to just a few bowls and cups

she had already emptied her house of all the grade school cards
my sister and I made for her
the pipe cleaner hearts our misspelled love