

Mothers and Daughters: Parting

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More than the gems
Locked away and treasured
In his comb-box
By the God of the Sea,
I prize you, my daughter.
But we are of this world
And such is its way!
Summoned by your man,
Obedient, you journeyed
To the far-off land of Koshi.

(Lady Ōtomo of Sakanoue)

NO HUSBAND SUMMONED ME TO KOSHI. BYU, Washington, D.C., and a mission president in Tokyo summoned me long before a husband. And even when it was a husband, he summoned me no farther than California. But I too was my mother's prize, her only daughter. And I suspect each time I left, my mother's feelings were no different than Lady Ōtomo's. For Mother expressed her longing and loneliness not in a poem or a letter, but in carefully selected personal stories shared over a sink of peach pits, skins, and sterile quart jars.

To me her stories seemed no different than all the other family tales of grandeur and humor — decking speeding rats in a humble missionary apartment in a small California farming community, dancing to Eddy Fisher's voice on Chicago's North Shore, shopping in Marshall Fields, teaching at the Orthogenic School in Chicago under the tutelage of the renowned Bruno Bettelheim, and romantically sacrificing it all for a newly discharged serviceman who had

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dated her two roommates for comparison. I had been reared on an oral family history. I had always enjoyed listening to my mother. Even the tales of her early marriage and daily life — of teaching seminary to support my father through medical school, walking several blocks to spend the month's last dime on ice cream cones at Snelgrove's, roaming through the nearby Catholic cemetery with her first toddler for lack of a nearby park, and squabbling endlessly with her mother over toilet-training my younger brother Mark — were exciting.

As peach halves plopped into syrup, she rehearsed the familiar story of her departure to the California mission. And as usual, the story she told and the story I heard were different. I framed her experiences with my own time and understanding. I always envisioned a black and white photograph of my mother bundled in her thick otter coat — which she wore in high school and surely would never have needed in San Francisco — with two suitcases in hand, standing next to my grandmother on the hill of their new house — which they moved into during my mother's mission. The edges of the picture always vanished at this point, and I saw my grandfather — who was actually attending conventions in the East at the time — and Mother hop into the sparkling green 1949 Cadillac — even though Mother left on her mission in the early forties. Then Grandfather would ease the Cadillac carefully down the hilly driveway and chug towards the train station. Grandmother never seemed to accompany them to the station but went back to the kitchen, stared vacantly out the bay window at the hill and driveway, donned her apron, and returned to her dishes. Mother always capped the story with her point: caught up in the excitement of leaving home, she never realized until years later how painful it was for her mother to see her only daughter and eldest child leaving home for the first time.

It did not occur to me to question why Mother repeated the same story not only the first year, but every year I left for college. The summer I nonchalantly hopped on a plane for a summer in Washington, D.C., and the month that I carefully packed and repacked my suitcase for maximum utilization before I left for eighteen months in Tokyo, she told the same story. I never realized that it was an "I didn't realize" story.

Only when I was the one left at the curb waving good-bye, wondering and worrying, did I begin to understand what Mother had felt. A week together crowded with Rodin sculptures, shopping sprees, chocolate milk shakes, and sunny beaches provided only temporary distraction from the harsh reality of my mother's malignant biopsy. Even the traditional anniversary red rose my father presented my mother could not erase its shadow. As my father posed us for a mother-daughter snapshot in front of my towering high-rise apartment before they left, reality returned. We exchanged warm hugs, car doors slammed, and then they pulled away from the curb. This time I was the one left behind with the sink full of waiting dishes.

I headed for the comfort of my grandmother's oak rocking chair with its torn and cracked leather. The dishes waited. Would I ever see my mother alive again? The chair rocked and creaked. I remembered how I used to hear my grandmother creaking in this chair. When my mother was gone, would I

be able to hear her voice? Would I remember her face? Her touch? I thought of the warmth of Mother's laugh one summer evening over Grandmother's kitchen table. The three of us, mothers and daughters, giggled together over my dilemma of two boyfriends. I thought of my first day in the temple (Ready to preach and proselyte, how glad I was that I had exclusive rights to the room and needn't be bothered by the chatter of soon-to-be brides.) I remember no embrace, only Mother's face — tears welling, but not spilling. For a moment there, we silently shared and savored this rite of passage. Then she zipped my temple dress, and I was finally ready for the endowment.

And I thought of a hot summer day shifting nervously in a mourner's pew. I remembered watching Mother's fingers as they passed over the white georgette and aging green satin draped and tied over Grandmother's frail body. So gently my mother tied the bow around Grandmother's neck, softly kissed her lips, veiled her face, and then stood back as they shut the casket.

How unfair it all seemed: A mother loses her daughter to life and excitement, a daughter her mother to death.

Since we parted,
Like a spreading vine,
Your eyebrows, pencil-arched,
Like waves about to break,
Have flitted before my eyes,
Bobbing like tiny boats.
Such is my yearning for you
That this body, time-riddled,
May well not bear the strain.

(Lady Ōtomo)

My body is not time-riddled, just hormonally imbalanced. When my pregnancy began, my mother's cancer recurred for the second time. Over the phone, I cried and she cried. We cried that she might never see my child. But my tears were for my mother, not my child.

As the weeks passed, I looked at my burgeoning abdomen and wondered how I could ever love Christiana (or Wakefield Scott if medical science proved to be wrong). I neatly pressed the tatted and embroidered dress and covered my childhood crib with the cross-stitched crib sheet, both rescued years before from my grandmother's basement. My own pink sweater, washed and folded, lay next to the baby afghan my mother knit after her first remission. Afraid she might never see any of my children, she had completed it two years before I had thought of having a child. But Christiana's namesake spoon, carried across the plains and passed through generations of hands, lies hidden securely in my jewelry box. It reminds me too much of time. Each week as my daughter's birth grows closer, my mother's death grows nearer.

I remember my blunt confession to Scott two weeks before our wedding. I told him I didn't love him — at least, I admitted, not like I loved my mother. He laughed. He didn't want me to love him like my mother. And he was

right. Love isn't exclusive. But I wonder if I can really love a daughter as much as I have loved my mother?

And now as my pregnancy comes to an end, Mother's cancer recurs once more. I want to turn back the clock, to be the daughter my mother cuddled night after night in the rocking chair. And yet, when my daughter kicks, I begin to yearn for her. I long to hold her in my arms, to cradle and to comfort her. I want to forget time. Alone in my rocking chair in California, I think of Mother alone in her bed in Utah. I yearn to be with her, to be the daughter I once was. But I yearn also to be the mother rocking.

During these rocking moments I recall my one summer of feminist freedom. For five weeks I spent my days among the feminist writers. I skimmed book after book on shelf after shelf. Sitting Indian-style one day on the carpet, I chanced across a feminist psychologist whose name I have now forgotten. A century's emphasis of psychoanalysis is wrong, she wrote. It is not the oedipal complex, but the severing of ties between mother and daughter that is the major psychological crisis of humankind. I think now that I agree.

Had I only known
My longing would be so great,
Like a clear mirror
I'd have looked on you —
Not missing a day,
Not even an hour.

(Lady Ōtomo)

As a child, I once threw a shoe at my mother in anger. I resolutely refused to clean my room and neatly carved the immortal words, "I hate Mom," into such strategically located areas as my dresser, window sills, and bedstead. But I was a child. Now I don't want to miss a day or an hour of the time she has left. But I don't want to leave my husband, and his graduate fellowship can hardly subsidize the deregulated airlines or the breakup of AT&T.

I want my mother next to me. I want her lifetime of advice. I cannot bear the pain of parting, nor can I face the years without her. I remember the first day I learned of the cancer. Mother was sedated following the surgical biopsy that had cut her chest open, Dad was barely conscious in intensive care following open heart surgery that could not be postponed, and my elder brothers could only offer support through phone calls from their homes in the East. As I stood in the hospital corridor between my parents' two rooms, for the first time, I was alone. There was no one to hold me. No one to make the pain go away.

But my mother lived. She even saw me married and will now see my child. My grandmother was ninety-one, my mother fifty-eight when Grandmother died. Grandmother had struggled through ten years of increasing blindness, deafness, feebleness, and senility. At the end, she wanted to die. Her death was a blessing. And yet my mother told me how alone she felt.

Just as I assured myself that I would learn to love my husband and my child, I assure myself that my mother will never really leave me. Just as

Grandma is always there. As I rock and wait for my daughter, I remember Grandma brushing the gray strands of hair into place before her mirrored closet doors as she rocked in her oak rocking chair. She is there in each stroke of her paintings hung in my home, in the penciled comments in her books on my shelves, and in each diamond of her ring, which I now wear.

And my mother is here too, set in the opals in her ring and stitched in the baby sweater and afghan in which I will adorn my daughter. She is bound in three volumes of neatly typed letters sent nine thousand miles. And she lives in a hundred pages of her personal history. She lives as I remember the jeers of kindergarten classmates after an "accident," the pain of adolescent acne, unpopularity, and well-intentioned parents, and the newlywed struggles of balancing a family budget. She will live again as I too learn the joy of my daughter's first cry, the frustration of her dirty room, and the longing as she leaves for college.

Feminist psychologists tell me my mother will never leave. So do well-meaning friends citing scriptures and Mormon philosophies and folklore. And my mother assures me as well. "When the time comes for you to tie the bow of my temple cap, I hope you will hear my silent words of peace and love." But that makes the parting no easier.

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