

# PRESSED PALMS

Caitlin McNally Olsen

*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

—Romans 12:2

One spring weekend, with a six-month-old and a new career, I found myself dipping into depression, my body sore and restless and exhausted. Change the scenery, I told myself, then suggested to my husband that we take our baby to the Grand Canyon for the night. Drive a few hours, get a cheap hotel, see this beautiful chasm neither of us had ever seen, and come home grateful to sleep in our own bed. So we went. We pushed our baby in his stroller along quiet Arizona streets and ate pizza (or was it burgers?) and slept in a cheap, clean hotel. We woke the next morning and went to the Grand Canyon; we took photos at its edge and stood in awe, like good tourists, and began the drive home. We all wore green; it was Saint Patrick's Day. I still have those photos.

On that drive home, away from the canyon, we were in a head-on collision on a two-lane freeway. I was driving and swerved just enough for our car to be clipped near the back, sending us rolling off the road. I don't remember much, as I hit my head on the ground through the sunroof as the small SUV rolled, but I do have some vague impressions. I fuzzily remember, after we'd come to a stop and other cars had pulled over to help, sobbing out these words: "I can feel my fingers, I can feel my toes! I can move my fingers, I can move my toes!" Over and over and over. Answering a question someone had asked or answering a question I was asking myself, I'm not sure. I do not remember my husband leaving his passenger seat to rush to our baby who was screaming behind us. I don't remember my baby boy's screams. I do not remember

the kind stranger who gave me a blanket from her car, a blanket we still have and use, a blanket my daughter slept with last night.

In my work as a psychotherapist, there is a constant conversation between my clients and me. Each one of them wholly their own, existing and filling a life and breathing air that is so far from the air I breathe. Each of them is a part of the whole that makes up “my clients.” Each one of them contributing their disparate voice to create what my clients collectively say, think, want, and do, allowing me, in my limited individual reality, to say absurd things like “My clients prefer daytime sessions.” I know it’s not the whole truth, I can think of half a dozen clients who do *not* prefer daytime sessions even as the absurdity comes out of my mouth, and yet, most of them do and the majority rules and “my clients” have spoken.

Me, taking it all in and piecing it all together, all while representing to them the collective that is “therapist.” Me, making concrete for them the abstraction “mental health professional” while they, in turn, make concrete for me the abstraction “clientele.” We talk one on one, we talk one on two, we talk one on many. There are individual sessions and couples sessions and group sessions. And moving repeatedly between all of them and me is this:

My depression is worse, they say.

I’m so anxious, they say.

Our marriage is broken, they say.

What is your body doing right now as you say that to me? I ask in response.

I don’t know, they say, and then: Why are we talking about my body?

I do remember this: Sitting up in a hospital bed, confused as to why there was gravel in my hair. Asking my husband what happened, why are we here, where’s the baby. Distracted with concern about breastfeeding; does the hospital have a pump I can use? We hadn’t brought mine; I’d never planned to be separated from the baby. The small electric breast pump would have careened dangerously around the car had

it been brought; it would have likely been broken beyond repair, perhaps broken a body part, or an entire body, beyond repair. We had considered bringing our dog, a giant black lab. She almost certainly would have died, flung about as we rolled, had we not decided to leave her home with a dog-sitting neighbor.

I see my neighbors and their bodies, you see yours, mine see me. Our bodies have been seen by thousands of people, viewed, consumed visually, over and over and over. Likely by no one person more than ourselves; mirrored in glass or distorted by our eyes' perspective, we look at our own bodies. I look at my hands and fingers as I type these words. I imagine how I look as I sit at my desk. How do I look from the front? And the side? What about the back? From a higher perspective? From down low, where my children's blue eye lines beam?

Those kids. They look at me and watch me and try to catch my eye. They have learned to knock when the door is closed (though they, of course, don't always remember) and they have learned to say, "Excuse me, Mom," (though they, of course, sometimes forget) and they have even learned to take my hand when I am in conversation and squeeze it twice to silently get my attention. I taught them that. I also taught them that when I squeeze back, twice, it means I am aware of them, aware they would like my attention, and I am asking for their patience, knowing I know they are there, hoping that their knowing about my knowing is enough for now.

How do you know depression is here? I ask my clients. What does anxiety do to you? They often will tell me: I'm so tired, or, My heart is racing.

Hearts race in response to so many things. Anxiety, yes. And also excitement. And fear. Stress. Arousal. Love. I wonder about Mary's heartbeat when Gabriel came to her. I wonder about Joseph's when Mary came to him. I wonder about Mary Magdalene and her heartbeat. Jesus's, too. With His family, His apostles, His followers, His enemies. Perfect love was there, in that heart, and I wonder if it was beating fast

at times, like the rest of ours do, or if the perfection of that love meant for an ever-calm heart, a steady beat.

I tell the story of the car accident often, mostly to my son, who survived it with barely a scratch. He and I share the experience of knowing it happened, knowing the story by heart, loving the story, and feeling, deep down, as if it must have happened to someone else.

It transformed me, the car accident. Or maybe I conformed myself to it, or rather what it showed me, and what still eludes me about it now. How did we all survive? Seeing the car in the tow lot the next day, seeing how misshapen and tiny it looked, I wondered: How did we ever fit in that thing, let alone get out of it? I wonder still.

We hit our beats, my clients and me.

Tell me about your body, I say.

What do you mean? They ask.

I mean this: Tell me what you feel physically. What do you notice, *physically*, from the inside out?

This is hard, they say. I don't usually think this way.

I know, I tell them. We're trained by this world to think about how our bodies look and we're not trained to think about how our bodies feel. It can help to close your eyes; What do you notice?

I notice the conforming of our minds to the world, believing the lie that visual appeal is the guiding purpose of our bodies' existence. I notice it in myself, always there, playing at the edges. *What do I look like from the front?* I once believed my body's appearance held the key to transformation. I now believe my mind holds the keys, and always has.

We can't forget, I tell my clients, the human mind is housed in the human brain, and the brain is an organ in the body.

Why did it happen the way it did? Why did we go on the road trip? Because I felt depression creeping around the edges, stalking me in a way it hadn't before. I wanted to flee, to believe it couldn't find me in Arizona, to believe that if it did, I could lead it to the rim of the grandest

canyon I'd ever seen. Believe that it would lunge for me near the edge, and I'd smoothly sidestep, send it floating, flying, hurtling hard for the desert floor.

This conversation is repeated between my husband and me:

Why are we here? I say. Where's the baby?

We were in a car accident. James is with a family from the local ward. You met them last night, handed him to them yourself.

He's okay? I ask.

Yes, he's just fine.

Wait, what happened though? Did we get to the Grand Canyon? Another question.

Yes, and we were driving home when another driver fell asleep at the wheel.

Are they okay? Is everyone alright?

Yes. Everyone's okay. You got hurt the worst with that concussion.

Have I asked you this before? It feels like we've had this conversation before.

Yep. It's okay. The doctor says it's normal.

Later, when I started to regain myself, when my brain began healing hours after it had been concussed, I asked my husband: Did I drive well? When the other car started coming toward us, did I do a good job? Did I swerve as quickly as possible? He tells me yes, and I remember that he's told me yes several times already, and still I ask again: Did I drive well? In other words: Did I sidestep the tragedy that was hurtling toward us?

They come to me for change, my clients. Change my depression into joy. Change my anxiety into calm. Change my broken marriage into a happy one. And lately: Change my doubt back into faith. They come to me, having failed, as we all do, to transform their bodies, for a different kind of transformation; for a renewing of their minds, and, more and more, for a renewing of their souls. Their hearts race and their minds ache and their souls beg.

My child takes my hand; I feel soft fingers and a miniature palm wrap itself around my own. This little hand is warm and slight, and it squeezes twice. *Excuse me, Mom.* And I am called away from the ebb and flow of conversation, away from the wondering and the knowing, and I put my attention on the space between my own palm and the tiny palm, toward the warm air and hot energy moving between my skin and theirs. I close the space with my own squeeze, two times. *I know you need me; You know I know.*

My heart races at the car accident story (“memory” will never feel like the right word). How scared I must have been. How painfully light my body must have felt as gravity relocated once, twice, three times. How eerie and quiet it must have seemed once the car stopped its rolling. Quiet, except for the baby.

I want to know the way I once did, my clients tell me. I want to believe like I used to.

I know, I say.

It used to be so much easier, so simple, so straightforward, they say.

I know, I tell them.

The quiet is still there, a thick membrane between what I know I experienced and what I remember of the experience. It’s like looking through a fog, remembering a dream from the deepest sleep, peering through a lace veil with not one, not two, but three layers, the tiny patterned cutouts never quite lining up.

One client tells me about her grandfather. His voice reading scripture, his voice praying over meals, his voice when he answered the telephone. I thought God was just like my grandpa, she says. And then he died, and, without that voice, without him, I can’t hear God anymore.

I have one clear memory from between the moment of impact and the lifting of the fog, a memory accessible with ease and simplicity, as if the curtains parted for a second or two before closing again. I remember looking toward the backseat of the car as we rolled. Looking where my six-month-old was belted in his car seat, and seeing two

women, one on each side of him. They were sitting calmly, each looking out their own window. They weren't screaming. They weren't alarmed. They did not notice my gaze. They were still, neutral, almost bored. But they were there, wearing long dresses, with their hands clasped in their laps, on either side of my baby, as the world outside the car turned and turned and turned.

I didn't mean to bounce my brain off my skull when I left home that weekend, and yet it happened, and it helped. I transformed, and returned home with a deep gratitude for my life, my husband's life, my son's life. I went back to our cozy little house and a panting dog and parents who'd driven into town to take care of me, needing to check for themselves that my heart was still beating. Depression had rushed toward me at sixty miles per hour—and I had dodged it.

My clients, my children, my own slippery self, we all try dodging. We dodge questions and requests, insults and accusations, sleepy drivers and ghostly depression. We renew ourselves, iterating as we go. We sit on therapist's couches, we knock on closed doors, we squeeze little hands, we careen off roads. We see our own bodies and each other's bodies, we check for heartbeats within and without. We bounce our brains off our skulls, we hold our minds and wrap them around the imperfection of human love. And, occasionally, we sit calmly, hands in our laps, palms touching, watching the world turn upside down.

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