

Grove of the Patriarchs

I am the first child my mother never wanted.

That I have two brothers and a sister is a testament to her docility, not her change of heart. My earliest memory is of her perfume, an exotic, spicy scent, and of her dark hair swinging down around her pale and pretty face when she rescued the hem of her dress from my grasp. I was always reaching out for her. This is not selective memory. In photos she is ever lovely, and I am ever longing—one chubby arm outstretched—to touch her. One day (I must have been five or six years old and whining for her attention) she told me, “I’m not your mother.” And, for a moment, I believed her. It’s when I noticed for the first time my mother’s

dreamy blindness and deafness, inhabiting what world I didn't know. All I knew was that she was unhappy when summoned back to mine.

For all his faults, my father was the one who took care of us when we were sick, staying with us until we fell asleep. “*Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques. Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*” he'd chant over and over but I'd resist, waiting once more for the ‘*Sonnez les matines. Sonnez les matines,*’ loving the sweet cadence of his voice, his hand on my forehead.

Since he walked out on her, it falls to me to be my mother's caretaker, not that she needs one yet. But if it comes down to that, it will be me. My brothers live on the east coast and my sister Sharon, who lives in Vancouver—Washington, not Canada—and close enough to drive down in a few hours, hasn't spoken to our mother in years. “You're a sap, Suzanne,” she tells me. “You can't change the past.”

I've taken today off from my job at the *Puget Sound Views* (it's a monthly magazine and we just put the January issue to bed) to drive my mother to a cardiologist in Seattle for a consult about a condition that causes her heart to slow and lurch disconcertingly. She and I live on opposite sides of the Narrows Bridge, I'm in Tacoma and she's in Gig Harbor. I leave early enough to first drive down to Point Defiance Park to walk the waterfront, a salve for the resentment I will inevitably feel when she fails to evidence any interest in those parts of my world that do not intersect with hers.

A mile long crescent of walkway snakes from the parking lot at the boat launch to the beach along Commencement Bay in the penumbra of the Cascades. Mount Rainier wears a corona of clouds, so I can't see its distinctive ram's head shape, even though the weather is unusually fine for December. That's where I planned to be today for my ritual respite after the jumpy rush of making the deadline—up in Mount Rainier National Park on a small island in the middle of the Ohanapecosh River, at the Grove of the Patriarchs, filling my lungs with oxygen from the ancient trees. That stand of Douglas fir, western hemlock, and red cedar has been growing undisturbed for nearly 1,000 years, the river protecting the Grove from fire, the gods protecting it from all else. I am fascinated by the elegant symbiosis of the nurse logs, which perpetuate that lush forest. The fallen trees decay by degrees into a carpet of mosses. Then lichens, mushrooms and fern transform them into nurseries for cedar and conifer seedlings. There are nurse logs here at Point Defiance as well, along Five Mile Drive, but I've run out of morning.

There's no bridge traffic at this hour so I can easily hazard glimpses down at the choppy swells and the blue-gray ropes of rip tides in the Narrows. On the other side of the bridge, I take the second exit and drive around the harbor where the marinas are filled with masts soldiering in the breeze, before looping onto the access road to my mother's house. I turn left at the crooked Madrona tree, drive down the unpaved lane and park on the gravel. Her house, rented since my parents' divorce three years ago, is shoebox plain, with dated appliances, and drab

carpeting but is situated on a sandy spit of beachfront amid grander homes. Inside it smells pleasantly of bracken from the stones and shells and driftwood she has placed on every windowsill, in every shallow bowl, her only contribution to this furnished house. Her decorative stamp is outdoors, in the whimsical sculptures, the tiles embedded in the pathways, a hot tub enclosed by a filmy forest of pampas grass.

My mother beams her hello from the open doorway. Nothing personal. It's the same smile she offers everyone. She used to be beautiful, with a hint of animal wildness peeking out in the otherwise buttoned-up old photos, her belt tied askew at her cinched waist, a bit of tooth bared between the dark lips, her hip cocked and knees aslant, as provocative as she dared, it seemed to me.

Even now at nearly seventy, she is prettier than I, with her thick hair—streaked and cropped spiky-short—and espresso eyes, lips that redden as if dipped in persimmons, even without lipstick. She wears an ivory silk blouse with a narrow black skirt and a light wool jacket the color of plums. Two-inch heels and tinted stockings show off her elegant ankles and calves. I am raggedy with lack of sleep and rumped for lack of clean laundry.

Both my daughters were home over Thanksgiving break—Elise from Boston, where she lives with her father during the school year, and Kit from Ann Arbor, where she lives with her lover, also named Kit, also a woman. When the girls are home, except for work, I put the rest of my life on hold. Not out of obligation or sacrifice but because I enjoy their company; Elise's mordant wit and

discerning intellect; Kit's dead-on mimicry, her hilarious political rants. I'd like them even if they weren't my daughters.

We cook together and scout thrift stores, ride the ferries and walk the waterfront. Sail in good weather. They catch up with their friends and each other when they're home. But they've stopped visiting their grandparents. My father berates my former husband to Elise, who adores him, and crudely mocks Kit's relationship. "You just haven't met the right guy, honey," he told her. "Believe me, he'd change your tune."

My mother, on the other hand, pretends that neither the girls' father nor Kit's lover exist.

"I had a bad night," my mother tells me, offering her cheek to be kissed.

"You look wonderful." I say this as if it were an accusation.

"Oh, well . . ." she waves her hand, dismissive. "I felt it though." She rests her fingertips in a cage over her heart.

"What? What did you feel?" I always have to shape her language to understand her, she's maddeningly vague.

"My heart," she says.

"Felt it what, Mom? Stop? Slow? Hesitate?"

"Just different, you know. Like it's been."

My mother has unwittingly chosen my profession. I untangle syntax, unmix metaphors; interrogate reporters until I know the story as well as they, so

their articles will read with clarity and grace. I sigh. It doesn't matter what she says, anyway. We will have empirical evidence soon. The exam, EKG, the labs.

My mother waits until I pull onto I-5 and am dodging traffic before she tells me she has been seeing my father. The way she says it, I know it isn't for coffee.

"He's married," I say, although that's not what worries me.

"Maybe it's better this way."

"Why? So he can beat her up and date you?"

"Don't be melodramatic, Suzanne." Her tone is mild. "Your father never struck me."

When I feel compassionate, I remind myself that she was constricted in every possible way: by poverty and gender, education and class. What she had in abundance was imagination. It was how, I understood later, she could pretend my father was exhausted or worried when he was overbearing or cruel. How she could reframe his badgering as concern, his insults as instructive. The dreamy quality that kept her at a remove from me, from us, was how she survived. The pity was she couldn't imagine herself free.

The cardiologist is bald except for a low-lying fringe of wooly grey hair, is extremely tall. Tall, and good-looking in a coarse, sensual way. His fingers are thick, his mouth wide. He swivels in his chair and rests one ankle on the opposite knee, his thigh a long and solid plank, his shoe like a small boat.

“I haven’t seen you before, Mrs. . . .” he glances down at her chart, “. . . Garner, have I?”

“It’s Ms.,” my mother says. “And yes, I had a consult in August.”

He puts down the chart and studies her. “I think I would have remembered you.” He manages to make this sound provocative.

He stands and extends his hand, “Come, let me listen before we do the EKG.”

He helps her onto the examination table, tells her to unbutton her blouse. She is, I see, wearing a lacy camisole. He slips the stethoscope under its frothy trim. Her breast disappears under his cupped hand.

“Fifty beats per minute,” the doctor says. “Any dizziness? Nausea?”

“Sometimes.”

“Which?” he asks her. “How often?”

Good luck, I think, trying to understand my mother.

He takes her hand and tries again. “How about now? Do you feel lightheaded now?”

It infuriates me that this man is flirting with my mother—and not in a patronizing way—some remnant of her glory days clings to her, some superannuated estrogen patch or pheromone. My boyfriends, my husband, all of them were taken with her. I don’t know how my father stood it. No, that’s a lie. My father is the sort of man who likes his women beautiful. Beautiful and frail. He does, of course, resent them for it later.

“Christ, Adele, must I do every little goddamned thing for you?” he would say after my mother handed him a light bulb or a recalcitrant pickle jar.

“Of course you must, Mitchell,” she’d say, and laugh as she rubbed up against him, the sensuous gesture revolting to my teenage self. Was it that or the way in which my father was captivated?

He always got the best parts of her. And when my father was away, at work or on a business trip, it was as though she went away as well. From the time I was twelve, I became the woman of the house in his absence, signing permission slips, helping with homework, defrosting the ground beef for dinner. My mother wore aprons fussily, like a wardrobe in a play. Pots got burned and dinners ruined amid chapters of a book.

I am fulminating about all this when my mother blinks three times then slumps to the floor.

The doctor kneels beside her, bends his ear to her mouth. When he places his hands between her breasts, it takes me a second to realize it’s CPR. “Get my nurse,” he tells me. “Now. Move!”

I intercept the nurse in the hallway. “My mother collapsed . . . he wants you . . .”

The placid-faced Filipina races past me into a room, then pops right back out, like in a cartoon, dragging a red metal cart behind her. She summons another nurse who rushes into the same room and wheels out a gurney.

It's only minutes before the doctor is running alongside the gurney, two nurses in attendance, the Filipina straddled across my mother's chest, her hands like pistons revving up my mother's heart. I run behind until they disappear into the service elevator at the end the corridor. I'm punching the elevator buttons when the receptionist tells me they've taken my mother to the Cardiac Care Unit.

"Fifth floor," she tells me. "Bear right."

I call Sharon from the family waiting room. "I'll come down," she says.

I know she means for me, not our mother. The kindness undoes me.

"Okay," I manage through the knot in my throat. "Good," I whisper.

"Suze?"

I can't speak.

"Suzanne. You've done your best, damn it."

"Her, too," I say, and hang up before Sharon can tell me that's bullshit.

While I wait, I close my eyes and conjure the hushed embrace of the Grove of the Patriarchs, immerse myself in its green glory until I am as tranquil and still as the trees themselves, and so I can't believe it when the handsome doctor comes out with that look on his face, the one that says everything isn't okay and never will be again.

The room has a ghoulis green glow, all fluorescence and scrubs and easily washed plastic chairs. Everything else is white, the crib-like hospital beds, the linens, the bathroom fixtures exposed to passers-by.

I edge past the patient in the bed closest to the door; my heart knocking in my chest, to look for her but the second bed is empty. I double-check the slip of paper in my hand. Room 3605-A. The first bed. I spin around. I didn't recognize her because this time she has gone so far away that she's never coming back.

I know this even before the doctor arrives and tells me it wasn't her heart, after all, but a burst aneurism that caused the stroke, which has spared her heart but ravaged her brain.

My breaths seem to enter my chest through a long narrow tube, one cold milliliter at a time. I back out of the room grateful for the obligation I have to call the others. I call my brothers first. They take it in stride. To them our mother has been as impartial and reliable as a nurse log, giving off nutrients but little else once they took off on their own.

"I'm sorry, Suze," they tell me, acknowledging the loss is mine alone.

I call Sharon but get her voice mail. I don't leave a message. I call my father last, reluctant to subject my mother to either his scrutiny or his lack of regard. Until I can make contact with Sharon, I walk the streets, wandering over to Pioneer Square, then into the lobby of the Alexis Hotel where I buy a pack of cigarettes in the gift shop. It's been a decade since I've smoked but I decide I've been prudent for too long, that I should have been bolder and said my piece when

I still had the chance. Three cigarettes later, I throw away the pack and dial Sharon again.

She cries when I tell her. Great gulping sobs which astonish me. I'd expected her to comfort me but it's the other way around and when I hang up, I realize that she must have harbored the same secret hope all the years she'd been ridiculing mine.

The hospital room is dark now, except for the frenetic flickering of the TV. The remote is pinned to the sheet near my mother's head, the stagy voices and static-y soundtrack leaking onto her pillow. I can't tell if she's listening but she's not watching the screen, her eyes are closed. *Wait*. If she turned on the TV, then perhaps she's trying to work her way back to speech, back to comprehension.

The nurse's voice startles me. "We turn it on for them. Sometimes it helps," he says as he fastens the blood pressure cuff onto my mother's arm.

"Is it helping now?" I ask, a tendril of hope taking root in my chest.

He shrugs. "Hard to tell."

As soon as he leaves, I stand close to the bed. "Mom," I say. "Mom. It's me."

She looks up at the sound of my voice. Her gaze slides down my face to my hand, which she seizes in a fierce grip.

"Mom," I try again and this time she doesn't even look up, but just tightens her hold on me until my hand aches and her nails inscribe their

hieroglyphics in my flesh. One by one, I pry her fingers loose and cradle them between my palms until they slacken.

“It’s okay, Mom, I’m right here.” I tuck her in and brush the damp hair away from her still lovely face.

I station the green plastic chair where she can see me and settle into its cool, unyielding embrace, prepared to stay until she falls asleep. She reaches for me through the bedrails. I take her hand and begin, “*Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques. Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*”

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