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I WILL NOT BEG, I AM AN OYSTER

Frances Brauneis

When I was little, so little the whole world existed only when I stood on my tip toes, my mother was sewing her mother a quilt. The fabric was crisp whites and pinks and each square was sewn--by hand--with a heart shape, as if with each stitch she was sealing in a desire to be loved. Each night, when I should have been sleeping, my mom would sit on the couch and begin her nightly hand stitching of the hearts she wanted to give to her mother. I would stand in the hall and watch her, the hardwood floor under my feet, the heat of an Oklahoma summer still sitting in the night air. I would watch her and could not keep myself from climbing onto the couch and asking my mother a thousand questions, "What are you doing? What's this? What's that? What's a quilt?"

It didn't matter how many nights I watched her and how many nights she explained to me all the answers she had explained the nights before. I still lingered the same way I lingered the night before. I wanted that quilt made of hearts, but I didn't know how to ask for it, so I just asked question after question hoping that the attention I paid to it and the curiosity I held would be enough to show my desire. Every night though, my mother would tell me it was for my grandma. When my mom said that it was with a longing like maybe if she handed her mother this quilt of hearts her mother would be a different person, a gentler person, a person who didn't need to be asked to love her. And then I would look to my mother with eyes that said, "I love you and you don't even need to ask me to say that or feel that," but my mother was so focused on the stitches that she did not see that look in my eyes. I looked at her but she looked down.

I'm at my grandmother's house for dinner now. The years have passed yet I still feel like I need to stand on my tip toes to see clearly. The white noise of water running and Fox News blaring are all but normal to me now. My parents are divorced and we are now living with my grandparents. My mother was sometimes there too,

but she would work, or go to school, or volunteer, all in an effort to avoid her own mother. So here we sat at dinner and my grandmother was on one of her usual rants. Something racist, reasons why she loves Bill O'Reilly, and all the ways she has been wronged again and again in her life. She sits at the head of the table with no one across from her and she has a cigarette in her hand. All the while she talks about how her sister stole their mother's Smurf collection after her death even though my grandmother was the one who bought them. She talks with an edge like everyday of her life has been an uphill battle that no one sees. She finishes her speech, stands up, and sets on the table a napkin now crumpled into a ball, still warm from the heat of her hand.

I stand now as a woman. Not in my own eyes, but when I go to restaurants, they tell me about their wines and I own a dog, two of the most adult things I can think of. I live with my boyfriend who has a beard so I have to remind myself every morning when we wake that yes, I'm an adult. I look at my phone and I look at the same text my mom sends me every morning, the one where she says she loves me and ends it with a thousand emojis. Some days I respond, other days I forget. Other times when I look at my phone I see a 406 number that I had missed the call to. The number isn't saved in my phone but I know it's my grandmother trying to talk to me. I haven't spoken to her in years now.

I get out of bed and fold up the now tattered quilt my mother had made for my grandmother. I had taken it the second my mother finished it and slept so soundly that night cocooned in her hand sewn hearts that my mother let me keep it. For years that was the blanket that I would sleep with closest to my body. Not the top sheet, but the quilt of hearts.

Sometimes when my grandmother tries to call me, part of me wants to answer. Part of me knows that my brother would shame me if he found out or that my mother would give me some long speech both incriminating and attempting to redeem my grandmother all at the same time. But as I stand as a woman I also stand with the ability to choose who I will and won't talk to. My grandmother would yell at me at the dinner table, saying I was lazy and selfish and not worthy of love from others. She would think that every decision I made was one deeply ingrained with a plot to destroy her. One year I cooked a goose for Christmas dinner because

I thought it would be traditional and fun. She took this as a declaration that I didn't want her at the dinner and she threw all of my Christmas presents in the snow. She would yell at waitstaff and complain about her cleaner. And when I would tell these things to my mom she would sometimes relate stories to how hard it was to be that woman's daughter, but she also had this longing in her eyes. That maybe it was her fault for being fat, or punk, or this or that which made her mother behave the way she did. And this longing in her eye remained in every field of vision. Always sitting in the corner of her eye.

I see that pain in her and I wish I could scoop her up and make it all better. That by wrapping myself up every night in her hand stitched hearts she might know that there was someone who didn't need to be asked. But her longing blurred that. And that longing pushed us away to a point my mother also began to long for me. Long for the person who would shout their affections rather than hold them close by. And as I grew older, my hips wider, the world becoming more mine than anyone else's I realized that I could not be who she wanted me to be. That I would not send her a thousand emojis and I would not look to her mother and beg for love I would never receive.

And that is when I remembered the thing about oysters. How they take a grain of sand that is itching and stabbing into their flesh and turn it into a pearl so that it can no longer hurt them. And that I had a science teacher who said that we all had the choice to be like that oyster, that we could take our hurt and turn it into something like a pearl. So as an adult with a choice that is what I can do. I cannot take my mother and wrap her in layer after layer of silk until she can no longer be hurt, but I can take that pin prick in my shoe. I can wrap it again and again and hope that one day it won't hurt anymore and with that pearl I won't hurt anyone else either.