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## Mother, Mother, Ocean

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BRYCE EMLEY

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## MOTHER, MOTHER, OCEAN

“You are the kind of guy who always hopes for a miracle at the last minute.”

- Jay McNerney, *Bright Lights, Big City*

IT'S 11 A.M. You were driving until 4 a.m., but you're here now and awake. Reusable containers holding variously palatable foods are crowding the counters. The counters are usually clean, vacant, as you recall. None of the containers are your mother's.

You recognize what these things often signify.

You eat cake.

• • •

YOUR MOTHER'S HOSPITAL room seems alive. There is beeping and pulse and mechanical hum. There are tubes.

When you speak into her ear she nods, pants “Okay” with the abruptness of the breathless. This seems the only word she can say.

You tell her things you've never said to her, things you want to be sure she knows. Everyone is saying it's important that you do this, though

it seems like something people do in direr circumstances than you are convinced these are.

By afternoon, she doesn't nod or pant "Okay" when you speak to her.

• • •

YOUR FATHER TELLS you and your sisters that your mother never told him her cancer had come back. Brynne tells him that he went to chemo treatments with her, that this is the third time it has come back. He says he didn't know.

When you were four, blood flooded your father's brain, so you assume the two of them must be talking about different things. This happens sometimes, because of the flooding. It sounds like water when he speaks.

• • •

AFTER YOUR MOTHER'S first diagnosis in 2008, your sisters began researching holistics. Brooke tells you that grief and the lungs are connected. People with other internalized emotions—hatred and resentment, for example—tend to have issues with other organs—the pancreas, for example.

There has been much grief in your mother's life, but when Brooke talks about grief and your mother's lungs, she means your father.

• • •

FLUID ON THE lungs is a term you've heard them use—the doctors, your sisters. It isn't the cancer that concerns people, but this.

No one tells you what the fluid is. What you know is that there's a flood inside her chest, that when she takes a breath you can feel it bubble beneath her ribs, that every time she breathes it sounds like drowning.

• • •

WHEN PEOPLE VISIT, they want to know what happened. You recite a timeline you didn't participate in, pieced together from Brynne and your father: Monday she was fine; Tuesday she was sick; Wednesday she was too weak to text Brynne about being sick; Thursday the doctor sent her to the ICU; Friday she ate breakfast, her first meal in three days.

Saturday, you are here.

• • •

AUNT ESTHER CALLS your mother's phone. You hold it up to your mother's ear, check for silences on the other end. It sounds like prayer.

You blink and there's a dampness. It feels foreign, sudden, the way rain does when the sun is out. There aren't many occasions one must do things like this.

• • •

“SHE’S A FIGHTER. I mean if anyone can get through this...”

“I know.”

“Just, the things she’s been through. Beau and your dad and work, and this on top of it.”

“...”

“...She was such an inspiration to Kerri, back when—when we were going through some things. She would tell me how just being around your mom, she got so much strength from her.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, I want you to know your dad wasn’t—you were too young to know him before, but when I was starting out, I’d be up in front of the class, nervous as hell, and he’d check in and fire off jokes to the kids, ask if I needed anything. He was always joking. Always willing to help.”

“...”

“I just wanted you to know—”

• • •

HER ARMS THRASH wildly, as if she’s swimming. If you don’t hold them down she pulls at her oxygen mask and its tubes and makes noises that sound like pleas. You hold her arms down. The oxygen continues. The swimming stops. When you release, she starts thrashing again and continues until you

hold her down or until the nurse returns with Dilaudid.

You spend much of the day holding your mother.

• • •

“SHE IS GUH, she’s guh person, good people.” Your father says variations of these phrases over and over until you only know what he’s saying because you’ve just heard the words as words and not as the wash of sounds they become in his mouth.

• • •

YOU SPEND THE night in the room with your mother. You sleep in a faux-leather chair that doesn’t so much recline as tilt. You sleep through the nurses turning your mother hourly. You sleep through the loud young night shift nurse with the large body and wild beard talking at your mother. You sleep through sunrise and shift change. You can’t be sure all of these things happened, but it’s likely.

It exhausts you to simply exist here, even for a night, even with your full and empty lungs.

• • •

THE DOCTOR TELLS you and your sisters and father that recovery would be a miracle. You understand that this is euphemistic. Your father listens, in his way.

The doctor also tells you this seems like torture, her breathing. Breathing is a more subjective term than you had considered. The oxygen mask is doing what her body is not. This is something of a loophole to the DNR/DNI.

These are difficult conversations. You all agree to continue them tomorrow.

• • •

HELENA IS THE nurse you see most. She goes to church with your parents. She's a slight woman, and serious. When she asks questions you answer and she continues to look at you as if expecting more. This makes you uncomfortable, but she's kind.

When your mother starts thrashing again, Brooke goes looking for Helena and finds her crying in a utility closet.

• • •

IT'S AFTER MIDNIGHT, and you're home. You take a walk. When you lived here, you did this often.

For no conceivable reason, you imagine that when you walk past

your high school ex-girlfriend's house, her father will be outside, though you've never seen him out this late. He's a religious man. You think he might say, "Is that Bryce?" He's never said this to you.

As you walk by he's on his doorstep making brittle noises. He gets up, dumps a dish's contents into the yard.

"Is that Bryce?" He hugs you. He offers you shelled nuts. "They're almonds—a biblical nut."

Inside, you begin to tell him everything. He stops you.

"A miracle, the doctor said?"

You nod.

"The doctor." He laughs. "Miracles happen, man. I'm tellin' ya." He tells you some. They are inexplicable.

A bird starts singing in the corner of the room. You hadn't noticed it before. Even your high school ex-girlfriend's father seems to notice it for the first time.

"You know that bird only sings when I'm in tune with God, when I'm writing or praying and I hit on something that's aligned with His Word."

You aren't sure how to respond.

"There are no coincidences. Do you believe that?"

You say you do.

"I mean I can't sleep, so I'm outside eating almonds, a biblical nut, and you walk by. You can't make this stuff up."

You agree that you can't.



“You know Jeremiah?”

You say you do.

“Jeremiah one: The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the Lord unto me, You have seen well, for I will hasten my word to perform it.”

He gives you his card, tells you he wants to anoint your mother tomorrow.

You walk home and your skin feels like rain.

• • •

EVERYBODY HAS BEEN telling you she is the strongest woman they know. And you think it, too, and that there are different ways to be strong. Her body needs some of those ways, others less so.

• • •

IT'S MORNING.

Swinging his inept right leg, your father moves slowly. You try to be slow, which becomes a practice in frequent standing. You want to tell Brooke about your high school ex-girlfriend's father and the almonds and the bird, but you have to wait for your father. He wouldn't remember how to get to your mother's room on his own.

When you reach the ICU doors, your phone rings. You are close enough that if Brooke were to speak louder, you could hear her twice: as she speaks into her phone from your mother's room and again as those words come through your phone's speaker.

She tells you you should come in.

• • •

WHEN YOU LEAVE the hospital, everything looks remarkably the same as it did.

It's morning.

§§§

AS YOU DRIVE home from the hospital, your father tells you that other women in town "wanted" him. For the first time it sounds as if this statement isn't about him. Or, for the first time, it occurs to you to think that.

Your father also tells you that you and your sisters are all he has now. And that you will go back to school and Brynne will go back to her baby and Brooke will go and he will have nothing left. Beau will be in prison for, at minimum, another fourteen years. He doesn't mention him.

• • •

IT BEGINS TO feel like there is a dam inside your chest, bulging. When you are not talking to people you pretend to recognize, you need other things to do. You eat stale doughnuts, study your skin in a mirror, let out the dogs, watch college basketball, jerk off, take out the trash, read emails, etcetera. These feel like things you might otherwise be doing.

• • •

WHAT A STROKE is and what it means become different things. You are fairly certain you once heard that your father sustained frontal lobe damage. You know the frontal lobe is the small continent of the brain where reasoning dwells, where the things that make us human happen.

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YOUR FATHER SAYS again that she never told him anything, but she told you things. You explain that no one knew she was dying. It wasn't the cancer, it was the pneumonia, the fluid. He says he didn't know that.

This happens several times daily, and you feel the dam inside your chest, how it groans.

Your father says his mind is foggy, when he tries to speak it's just fog.

• • •

IT ISN'T UNTIL you're looking that you realize this house is saturated with clutter: half-finished to-do lists, newsletters, magazines, coupons, envelopes with phone numbers written on them. On the patio there's a stack of empty cardboard boxes; in a desk a Ziploc bag full of phone chargers. There's a bag of new clothes in your nephew's size, bags of old clothes. There are spare lids, spare washers, loose screws, potentially useful plastic pieces, reused tinfoil, empty film canisters.

All this has seeped slowly into your mother's home. Because she relegated these things to drawers, cabinets, spare rooms—places you rarely look—you never noticed its growth, its absurd excess, what that meant.

• • •

WHILE STAYING WITH your mother at the Mayo Clinic in 2009, you learned that your father had told your mother—lighter by four lymph nodes and half a lung—that she should lose fifteen pounds.

He says nothing like this about her now. Instead, he has stories about girls, about frantically dressing as a father pulled into a driveway, about a trailer park neighbor asking him if he had a “big dick,” about skirts pulled up, about “necking,” about receiving phone calls twenty years after graduation, etcetera. He tells many of these to Pastor Simpson when he visits.

Brooke tells you about the talk she gave your father about what is respectful and appropriate.

You think these stories may be his language, that they are single units of expression he uses to say what he otherwise has no words for because of the stroke and the frontal lobe. You tell this to Brooke. She's angry.

You think over your theory again and again. You must remind yourself that it could make sense, given the frontal lobe.

You hope that your father sustained frontal lobe damage.

• • •

“SHE NEV—SHE NE'ER...” YOUR father grunts. “I'm sorry. I'm just fah—it's fah-ye. I try to say something, and it's just fog.”

• • •

THE MEN IN the immediate family of the deceased are expected to wear suits to funeral services, and black shoes and black ties and not faded skinny chinos and tennis shoes and a dark brown tie that is so dark it is nearly black.

The mall in West Palm Beach has all of those black things, including the same pair of shoes you already own but chose to leave three states away, along with your black tie and black pants and suit jacket—

things you remember staring at in your closet while packing and deciding you didn't want to take because of what that would mean.

• • •

YOU KEEP THINKING about the to-do lists, how many there were, how none of them were complete.

• • •

“WHEN I WORKED here, they trained us on how to help people in— these situations.”

“...”

“You can, and should, let it out. It's okay. It's unhealthy not to. That's what this is for.”

“...”

“I know you want to be strong for everyone like she was. But no one expects it. It's okay.”

“I know.”

“Okay. Just making sure you know.”

• • •

THE MORNING OF the funeral, your father calls you into his room to write words in a notepad for him, including *superlatives*, *Louisiana*, *Notre Dame*, *dorm*, etcetera. You recognize these as keywords in some of his stories, the ones in which he is popular in high school, in which Catholic girls undress him, in which girls hiked their skirts up to get A's, in which he flunks out of Wake Forest, in which he crashes his first Austin Healey, in which Kathy Krause leaves him for a Notre Dame student who beats her, in which he scouts Oral Roberts freshmen for a date to a party, etcetera.

• • •

BEAU WASN'T GRANTED furlough, so Brynne recorded him speaking through the house phone into her cellphone. The church's sound lady plays it over the speakers during the service.

"After Dad's stroke, Mom continued to raise four kids and then even had to raise her husband. And she never stopped, never complained. That would be too ordinary, only humans do that."

There seems nothing else to say after your brother, the prisoner, says these things.

Suddenly your father rises, holding a notepad. Brynne asks if anyone knew he would do this. Brooke shifts in her seat. There's talk of stopping him. His voice is a puddle on his tongue. He's telling stories you'd hoped he wouldn't tell, the stories he has told you for over two decades, but

for the first time they are told together, consecutively, or for the first time you listen to them all as one story. Brooke keeps looking at you. Everyone is quiet. Everyone is listening. They laugh when he laughs. You are shifting. Brynne asks if you're going to stop him. Everyone is listening. You want him to stop, but you think this is important. Brooke is gesturing. You are listening and restless. There is the dam in your chest. Your father is talking, despite the puddle. Pastor Bruce puts an arm over his shoulder, thanks him. Your father sits and people are clapping.

• • •

IT RAINED THE day your mother died. Someone says the two events are related.

It has rained every day since, continues through the internment.

• • •

WHEN YOU ASK others about your father's funeral speech, they assure you it was hardly comprehensible, but they got the gist, though they weren't sure about the part about the short skirt.

• • •



THERE ARE MANY people in the house. This includes Uncle Don, a gospel artist who pastors and middle-aged church-goers lead you to believe is a minor celebrity. He performed a three-song medley on the church piano during the service, culminating in his hit song “God Will Make a Way.”

Uncle Don is holding his phone between his head and your father’s, playing Jimmy Buffet’s “A Pirate Looks at Forty,” your father’s favorite song. Uncle Don is singing the words; your father is slurring them into melody, a moist, throaty sound rippling beneath it, his eyes glossed into wet stones.

*Mother, mother, ocean,*

*I have heard you call.*

You recognize that it should be an affecting moment.

• • •

YOU’RE READING POETRY and have NFL draft predictions playing on the TV. It’s late, everyone is gone. Above the discussion of Jameis Winston’s NFL prospects, you hear your father speaking across the house, but not to the only other person in the house, which is you.

He’s not speaking the way people do to other people across a house, projecting.

You look back to the poem you’re reading. It closes: “Who would think / it was ever just us.”

• • •

YOU TURN THE knob to make the shower hotter. The stream is dozens of small fires on your skin, or perhaps hail. You turn the valve again, and you are still unsure. You keep turning until it stops turning and you are sure. You are surprised at the heat, how you can bear it, how the burn becomes the steam and you breathe it.

The towels in the bathroom are new. There is a task at hand, to get dry. This is something you can do. There is no ceremony, no speaking, no waiting, and no one.

There must be no softer towel in the world.

§ § §

GRIEVING IS REFERRED to as a process.

Precipitation is another process, which is similar, in its way.

• • •

“WHEN SHE WOULD wake up and move her arms, did you think it looked like she was swimming?”

“Yes.”

“And when she inhaled, that it sounded like she was drowning?”

“Yes.”

“There was fluid in her lungs, and she couldn’t breathe. It probably felt like she was drowning.”

“...”

“I wanted to say that, but I thought it would be hard for you.”

“...”

“Maybe she was dreaming about drowning.”

• • •

IT’S YOUR FATHER’S birthday.

You and your sisters give him a card and a bag of Twizzlers. He seems appreciative.

• • •

FROM AN OLIVER Sacks essay you learn that the actor Spalding Gray sustained frontal lobe damage in a car crash and was prone to being submerged in his memories and fantasies after. Often, he would stare into deep bodies of water, purposeful. He would later throw himself from a bridge.

• • •

BROOKE DOESN'T SAY it, but she hates your father. Instead, she tells you he was thinking of leaving your mother after you were born. Later he will tell you this was before you were born. You don't know who he is because of the frontal lobe, because you were four when it was flooded.

• • •

YOUR FATHER ASKS if you'd like to go with him on a drive. He takes you to the lake and parks. He tells you he comes out here often, that some days he sits for hours, "Just looking."

He gets out. You switch seats and drive home.

• • •

YOUR FATHER TELLS you that he knows it's not right, but he'd rather go ahead and be with your mother. He says Aunt Susan told him what heaven is like and it sounds like a neat place.

Instead, he goes up to Orlando with Brooke. This isn't ideal for anyone, particularly Brooke. But it will work, the way treading water does, for now.

• • •

SPALDING SAID THAT *his mind was filled with fantasies of his mother, and of water, always water.*

*“Why water, why drowning?” I asked.*

*“Returning to the sea, our mother,” he said.*

• • •

THERE'S A LEATHER-BOUND devotional on your desk. Aunt Susan gave you and your sisters each a copy. It's the same one your mother was reading with Beau and discussing over the phone every day. You open it to today. *I have promised to meet all your needs according to My glorious riches*, it opens. This seems a divine message, which helps.

April 3<sup>rd</sup> seems equally divine. As do April 4<sup>th</sup> and June 19<sup>th</sup> and August 7<sup>th</sup> and December 29<sup>th</sup>.

In Beau's recording, he'd said that the morning after they told him about your mother, he opened his devotional. It was March 24<sup>th</sup> and began, *This is a time in your life when you must learn to let go of loved ones*. He said he knew this wasn't a coincidence. He said there are no coincidences.

• • •

A WEEK PASSES before you call your father. He says he knows what he wants to say, but it's still *fah-ye*, *still fab*—it's just *fog*.

• • •

WHEN YOU WERE in the hospital Brooke told you she had remembered that your mother used to pray Psalm 23 with her. Brooke was a child then. You don't know if she still prays, but she told you she prayed the first verses over your mother, over and over. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," she recited for you. "He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul: He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside—"

• • •

YOU HAVE BEGUN to admire ocean, how it contains, is contained.

• • •

THE MONITOR DIDN'T flat-line that morning like you would have expected. It continued pulsing in waves, in-time with some other rhythm, indifferent.

You can recall this clearly.

Imagining her feels like holding water. It isn't pain. It has only become a lack in your own weight, as if you are sinking.