

My Mother's Daughter

My mother's life is so clearly divided by my birth that sometimes I think the version of herself before me would not recognize the one that exists now. In the wake of our fights, after the air had settled and the heated words had cooled into faint, distant objects, she would utter, "I wasn't always like this." For years I heard those same words spoken in the distinct flatness of defeat. I never knew what they meant.

After my mother had me, she moved back to her hometown, alone. She traded in the bright streets of Philly for the stale, stagnant town she grew up in: Tyrone, which is a town made of one main road, twenty churches, confederate flags, and neighbors who are always watching; you either bolt after high school and never return or you die there. It was in Tyrone that my mother became smaller. Not through any specific event or moment, but through the slow, silent way that small town life grinds people down. She took on a new shape, one that failed to fill the room up as much.

For the first seven years of my life, I was the only child of a single mother. When my mother held me to her chest in that giant queen-sized mattress in our small apartment, listening to the sounds of crickets and birds fading in and out through the window instead of the familiar sirens of the city, I suspect I was the only thing keeping her from feeling completely, utterly, alone. Being the center of that new stage in my mother's life added a gravity to our relationship. The world often tunneled down to just her and I.

As we grew together within my mother's new life, our relationship would sometimes take on a horizontal aspect; motherhood would mimic sisterhood. Our shared role of being a lifeline in each other's life allowed a closeness that prevented my mother from having any real authority over me; how do you punish a part of yourself? This closeness prevented my mother from building the walls that parents use to collect and compose themselves; without this merciful distance her flaws had nowhere to hide, and as she remained the center of my universe, my eyes remained fixed on her, always watching.

My fascination with spaces and how people fill them was formed through the study of my mother; as I got older I watched as she shrunk to accommodate the situation of her life. In those first years, my mother seemed impossibly big. In her button downs, dress pants, and tall shoes, she carried a sense of authority--- one that was necessary as she took on the role of both breadwinner and nurturer. But as the years bled into the next, it seemed that reality started to press in on my mother, to suffocate her. She spent days in bed, bogged down by some unmentioned weight. During the many school meetings

of my youth, my mother could be found at each one, head permanently bent down with eyes averted, as if guiltily praying to a disinterested god. When she did voice a question, I would hold my breath, waiting for her voice to catch and trip on the words as it often did; I'd only remember to breath when she was done talking.

As I got to know the nooks and crannies of my mother's personhood, I shaped myself around her, paying close attention to ensure that while there was closeness, no part of us ever overlapped. I made myself to be bigger than her, speaking to ensure my sentences were never followed by the question mark that seemed to haunt hers. I would study her--- the uncertainty that rounded her small shoulders and made her eyes flitter away from others--- and I would do the opposite. I would stand with my back pin straight, taking long, careful measure to look at people directly in the eyes till they looked away in discomfort. Through her refusal to make small talk, I learned how to have a conversation with anyone, the topics she refrained from--- the weather, hobbies, all the meaningless babble--- becoming a space of comfort for me.

I hated how emotional my mother was. My mother cried a lot. At old photos of me, at the ends of bad rom-coms, and even once at a Coca-Cola commercial with a polar bear. Her eyes would well up and flash so strikingly blue, I would turn away, half in disgust and half with overwhelming love. She would tell me that she wasn't like this before she had me. That my birth jumbled up all her hormones, made her soft. But while she was soft, she was also prone to anger. Her anger would come out in sudden bursts and dissolve just as quickly. It was without reason or warning, a sudden, sharp thing that she never explained. As I got older, I would poke at this anger, stoking the fire till it roared. I liked to see how controlled I could be in the face of her turmoil. I thought her show of emotion made her weak and I thought of myself as strong for not falling victim to it. I liked to see our contrast in those moments, how stark and ugly it could get.

The most obvious contrast between my mother and I are the shades that we are made of. My biological father is Vietnamese. My mother is white. All the parts of my mother that are light—her eyes, hair, skin--- are several shadows darker on me. When we stand in the mirror together it looks like a painting, all the spaces of light on her, colored in with sooty ink. Once outside of a store a woman with poorly drawn on lipstick asked my mother where she had “got” me. My mother had become furious, her mouth thinning into a razor-sharp line. I had just watched in silence. I used to be angry that I looked different than my mother--- at the fact that people did not recognize me as her's when our lives were so bound up together that I wasn't sure either of us could exist without the other--- but as I got older, I reveled in it. That when I introduced my mother, people's faces would slide into shock and a guilty discomfort as they tried to piece together our family tree. I felt like I had achieved

something when they did not recognize us as two halves of a whole. Like I had put on a mask and tricked them.

I resented my mother for the direction of her life--- the way she held it with a too-loose grip. From my point of view, she had done it all wrong. She had done the unthinkable: she had ended up exactly where she started. She had traded in skyscrapers and night clubs for the town where she had gotten bullied on the playground and kissed at prom by a pimple-faced teenager named Toby. The more I resented her for this decision--- this crooked way of reverting back in time --- the more I criticized her. I blamed her for letting go of the life she had and thought of her as a fool for doing so. I blamed her choice of major---English Literature. I blamed her refusal to stay in Philly. I blamed her for forcing herself into the corner that sent her home, never mind I was the one holding her hand the whole time.

That is where I have worked the hardest to put as much distance between my mother and me, to ensure our paths in life end on very different notes. It is through this fear of making the mistakes my mother did that I have mapped out my future, making sure to keep a firm, solid hold of where life takes me. I spend hours fretting about becoming a writer, worried that the wrong choice will set me back to a place I can't escape. I stalk the Wikipedia pages of famous authors, trying to mimic their steps rather than my mother's. I stress about internships and jobs and careers, all so that I never return to the doorstep of my childhood home, exhausted and alone, with nowhere else to go.

It was not till I got older that I came to know the version of my mother before me--- the version I was a stranger to. As I would look through the photographs kept in the small, red book on our bookshelf, I came to piece together this foreign, unknown person. In all the photos, her small silhouette could be found at the center of the room with all the blurry faces turned towards her, hanging onto whatever words were about to slip from her mouth. Life was always moving around her in those photos; bright and fast with her at the middle of it. In those photos, her back was always straight, and her eyes held, solid and unrelenting.

With time, I realized that despite our closeness there were parts of my mother's life that I would always be a stranger to. I was a stranger to the side of my mother that strutted down the stale, sun-soaked streets in four-inch platforms and shades that took up half her face. I was a stranger to the woman who had people follow her home off the subway just to talk to the pretty girl they sat beside. I was a stranger to the girl that danced at late-night parties full of shiny, pretty people, half of them drunk and already in love with her.

I used to hate my mother's clothing, wishing that she would dress in the same sweatshirts and jeans as the other volleyball moms. As time has passed, I've found

myself stealing more and more of her clothes, shedding the t-shirts and leggings of my town for the flare jeans and platforms she wore in the city. These days, I wear whole outfits of hers as I walk around campus.

Two months ago I was home, showing her pictures from college. As I scrolled through the blurry images, cradled next to her on the couch with my chin pressed up against the crook of her neck, her finger lifted to pause on one. It was a photo of me in front of some red bricks of a random house, my hair up and eyes a little smudged and glassy from the night. My mother got up and reached for the red book on the shelf. She took it down and flipped to one of the last pages, holding it open for me to see. I stared at the picture for a long time. The outfit was the same with the same red bricks behind it. The posture was the same, shoulders rolled back, and head cocked slightly to the side. The same easy slide of the mouth like somebody said something amusing right before the camera flashed. In that moment, I saw how the lines of our faces mimicked each other and the curve of our nose followed the same exact path.

I found out later that the reason my mother moved back to our small town was because after I was born, she couldn't afford to pay for my daycare while keeping the apartment we were living in. The extra stress of being a single parent made her lose her job. So, she took me, and she left, returned to the town she hated and vowed she would never come back to, wanting a better life for me. Better than her own.

When I describe my future, it looks like my mother's past. I've realized I'm still trying to be the version of my mother before me, all the while being the very reason, I resent the version of her now. The older I get, the more the lines that I carefully drew between my mother and I start to blur. The same uncertainty that seemed to hollow her out, has found me. I question myself in the same way, worrying over the smallest detail again and again, wearing myself down. The seemingly controlled disposition I prided myself on, slips, into the same currents of sadness and anger my mother would get lost in. The same passions that I blamed her for--- writing and art instead of science and math--- have derailed my own expectations of my life.

All the things that I dislike--- her softness, her emotion, the out of place feelings she seems to always carry--- have all been shaped by me. I thought I was shaping myself around her, but I've been shaping myself into her, and she's been doing the same. And all those things I blamed her for---her major, her career, her love-life--- were just ways to not blame myself. And when we stand in the mirror together now, and the lighting is just right, I can't tell the difference from my mother's face and my own, and I think how our lives rest on top of each other's like stacked spoons, one bound to form around the other.