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Regeneration: A Modern Song Cycle

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1

Third Person

My mother is 85, and I am 60. Recently, we have been living in the third person, apart but together. She subsists, barely, with my father in a small apartment in a complex for senior citizens in a coastal town in Maine, where she has lived nearly all of her adult life. She has been bedridden for almost a year and is dying. I live in an affluent suburb nearby and take care of her on some days, and when that happens, we cannot bear to be ourselves. Awkwardly shaped bedpans and tepid water sponge baths force an unwelcome physical intimacy that unravels the life that we have knit together for sixty years. Her hard work and good deeds as a devoted mother recede from my memory, and contact with her scaly skin repels me. My mother says she pretends to be someone else in these moments. I pretend I am somewhere else, where everyone is young and healthy. I wonder, *are we imposters, this mother and daughter?* How long have we been pretending?

2

Fellow Travelers I

Together we travel to new places. In the early stages of my mother's Parkinson's disease, we talk about options, go to neurologist's appointments together, and share research articles about experimental treatments. I help her follow the countless suggestions the physical therapists and occupational therapists propose to help her maintain her physical strength and coordination. We make garter stitch squares with large knitting needles and a leftover ball of purple yarn from a project completed years ago. We ignore the dropped stitches and uneven edges that signal her diminishing dexterity. We giggle as we march in place in the living room, pretend we are majorettes with fancy batons, make sweeping circles with our arms, and sashay sideways along the kitchen table. As her disease progresses, when these movements are no longer possible and we are learning how to transfer safely from the wheelchair to the hospital bed, we wear forced grins at this new role reversal. Now the daughter helps the mother to stand and take small steps, offers encouraging words when the mother's old body freezes in place and her conscious efforts cannot force her feet to move, dishes out false praise when she is safely in bed. We no longer talk about future options, but ponder instead quality of life with the hospice nurse.

3

Time Without Mind

Separately, we travel to murky destinations. There was a time when my mother's life was a smooth straight line, reflecting cause and effect and linear time, from childhood to adulthood, and from old age to an afterlife. Now, her brain makes peculiar connections, creates new neural circuitry, and the straight line is knotted and tangled. In her confusion, she sees furniture from her childhood bedroom in Ohio, her mother sitting in her room here in Maine, and small children she doesn't recognize, in church basements from the past. She knows she is hallucinating, and initially she is distressed, but later on, she doesn't care. I think, perhaps cruelly and perhaps not, that dementia is a godsend when the body deteriorates at a glacial pace.

4

Time Travel

I travel back in time and explore my childhood. For months, I look for times when my mother and I were happy together, but I can't retrieve them. I need a bright spot in this grim reality, but I find only angry wishes for a different upbringing. I wish I'd had a guide to steer me out of the bizarre bubble of our religious household, where the afterlife was more important than the here and now. I desperately wanted to live in the normal world of the teachers and students in the nine schools I at-

tended in twelve years. Instead, I stumbled between the sacred and the secular on my own. I knew the ins and outs of church sanctuaries and vestibules, naves and narthexes, and the cupboards that stored the stainless steel communion trays—the outer ring reserved for tiny glass cups of Welch’s grape juice for alcoholics and the inner rings for cups of cheap wine for everyone else—but I didn’t understand how to shop for brand name clothes at the mall or order appetizers from a restaurant menu. I had to learn on my own how to navigate where I actually lived, in the present tense. Now, when I take care of my mother’s body, I am well served by that scrappy transition to adulthood and my stubborn insistence on figuring out how to live in the world of the flesh.

5

Surviving the Patriarch

My father is in charge now, like he always has been. As a pastor, he was called to interpret life and death for his flock, and he created his identity as the pundit with the answers to life’s mysteries. He has softened in recent years, and no longer insists he has a monopoly on the solutions—the keys to the kingdom—at least not all the time. My mother sees herself in the biblical story of Ruth and, like Ruth says to her mother-in-law, my mother says to her husband, “For where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be

buried.” I finally understand this path she has chosen, to follow a way forward that was only dimly in focus, and lit by her husband’s light. She has made few decisions of consequence in their life together, and now she makes none, but she will have the last word. “I made that,” she said one afternoon, looking at a color photo of her three children and seven grandchildren at her granddaughter’s wedding on an alpine meadow. While he was working days, nights, and weekends ministering to his congregation, she was at home making her own mark on the world.

6

Eat the Rich

My father came from a poor family, and sometimes his impoverished past seeps into the apartment and fills the rooms like a noxious gas. It suffocates conversations I have with my mother, who remains silent when he is in the room. He watches cable news and he mutters hostile epithets at slick politicians who only help rich people get richer, while poor people get poorer. In the elevator, he chats with the Puerto Rican building janitor and imagines a humble, kind man being taken advantage of by rich people who pay low wages. He talks to his neighbor down the hall, a widower who is stooped and walks with a cane, and somehow he knows this is a rich man who hoards his wealth instead of sharing it with people who need it. He pays the rent for the apartment and insists that the building owners are ripping him off.

Everywhere he sees the same thing. The rich exploit the poor. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. He keeps a tight rein on this narrative. This scaffolding he has erected to contain his experiences remains intact. He cannot escape his past.

7

Retrospective

For Mother's Day this year, I put together a small album of old photos. I dig through cardboard boxes in my cluttered basement and find photos of my parents' first few years of married life. They were a fertile couple and had four pregnancies and three children in the four years after their church wedding in 1956. My mother took most of the square black and white snapshots with her Brownie camera—a few of my father holding his infant children, a few documenting the construction of their first house, and several of toddlers splashing in a blow-up backyard pool and eating popsicles. Yellow Scotch tape marks stain the corners of the photos. My mother is in just two of the faded prints from those early years. In one, she is holding my younger brother on her slender hip. He is about eighteen months old, and he is looking up at her, showing her a dandelion in his hands. She is looking back at him, smiling. There must have been a soft breeze, because her hair is wafting just slightly away from her face. I see a tender moment of motherhood. I imagine myself as the mother holding the child, and I smile, too. In the other picture, I am four years old, and she is sit-

ting next to me on a split-rail fence, a grassy pasture in the background. Her right hand is behind my back, and her left hand is on the fence, steadying us both. We are grinning at each other, squinting in the sun. I don't remember this mother-and-daughter moment, but I imagine being that child and loving this afternoon in the country with my mother. As I put the photos in the new photo album, I realize this will probably be her last Mother's Day and I find this unbearable. I cannot manage life without a mother, my mother, and I cannot bear the thought of losing this connection to my past and myself, and finally, I weep.

8

Fellow Travelers II

My mother's life is fading, and another is coming into view. She counts the days to the end of life, while my thirty-year-old daughter, who will soon have a child, is counting the days to the beginning. The promise of new life inspires my mother to live, just a little longer, to meet her great-grandchild. My daughter, busy with work and planning for the baby's arrival, focuses on her swollen belly and barely notices her grandmother's demise. I will soon be a grandmother, and this reassures me. My transition from daughter to mother to grandmother is the past in the present in the future, and I feel connected to the unfathomable arc of existence. My mother made this transition, and perhaps my daughter will too one day. Our lives are forever entwined, at times like neatly crocheted

chain stitches and at other times like a jumble of different pieces of yarn, impossible to untangle. My daughter will soon learn what daughters learn when they become mothers. She will learn that a mother is a fellow traveler who knows you like no one else. She was with you from the very beginning, even before the beginning, but not always to the end.

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