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Mothering without My Mother: A Psychotherapist's Journey

Early mother loss leaves one lacking guidance, nurture, and advice, much like a ship endlessly looking for its lighthouse. How does one process the world after they have been robbed of the experience of having a mother? The author, a perinatal psychotherapist who lost her mother in adolescence, offers an examination and reflection of the multilayered ways that the loss of her mother has affected her and shaped her choices in life. To understand mothering, she becomes a mother-focussed therapist before then becoming a mother herself. She uses her own experience to share and describe the conscious and unconscious manifestations of grief, highlighting the confusion and perpetual longing that come with loss that occurs before one's identity has had a chance to fully develop. The author incorporates research on motherless mothers, ties concepts from mother and infant attachment to motherlessness, explores the power and subtlety of continuing bonds, and examines the impact that media parental representations can have on a person's loss and grief, as well as bonding. The finality of loss is juxtaposed with the endlessness of the search and pining for the deceased. Through an autoethnographic recollection of memories and reembodiment of the past, this article provides a useful accompaniment to studies on bereaved adolescents and motherless daughters attempting to navigate living life without their lighthouse.

My mom never let me pluck my eyebrows. "When something is so beautiful you don't mess with it," she would say. I was fourteen, Princess Diana hadn't yet been dead a year, and I resented the less-than-royal brows that I'd see each morning before school in the bathroom mirror. But my mom was wise and knew things I didn't, so each morning I borrowed a little of her strength, sighed into the mirror, and left them alone.

My mother died on a Saturday morning. I found out on Sunday afternoon. I fell to the ground when my father said the words. I still remember that

sentence vividly, and how I felt the power of gravity when I lost my balance, like I was an apple falling from a tree. My knees turned into jelly. The ground pulled me down. Down, down, down.

Before they buried her, I wrote her a letter and put it in a legal-sized envelope on which I wrote "Mama." My cousin threw it in the hole on top of her coffin for me, and he almost slipped and fell. His mother gasped. They asked us if they should open the casket so that we could see her one last time. "No, no, no!," my father shouted. She had burned when the car exploded and was apparently made unrecognizable. I have been wondering what she looked like in there for the past twenty-six years, feeling relief that I will never know for sure.

Many years later, a therapist told me that what I had experienced was not just a death but a disappearance. There was nothing to ground me in her death. Even though we held the traditional rituals, such as a funeral and burial, which help the brain organize itself around the loss, I never saw her body other than when it was alive and normal. With her death, my mother just kind of vanished. She was brushing her teeth, getting dressed in front of her mirror, eating a bite of toast, and an hour later she was no longer a living being. She was a body that needed to be identified and buried, a forty-three-year-old woman whose affairs needed handling, a loss that needed to be mourned and coped with. The disbelief I felt made me question reality, much like what Hope Edelman observes from other motherless daughters experiencing the sudden death of a parent (80). I wondered if she hadn't perhaps gotten lost in the woods near the highway, where the accident had happened. "Maybe she is walking around and can't get to a phone," I said. Even years later, I thought maybe it was all a big misunderstanding. She might come back, once she finds her way. But the only way for her was down into the ground, and there she stayed. Down, down, down. My mother would never be seen again.

The things that I remember are random. I remember her fainting one time, and that I felt scared. I have forgotten the sound of her voice, but I can hear her laughter safely stored in the ribcage area of my body. I remember the texture of her hair, skin, and nails, the shape of her ring finger nail, and her posture. I remember her teeth and her height. I remember we ate grapes in front of the television in the evening. She had become invested in *My So-Called Life*, the cult television show that defined my generation, much to my delight. I liked that she knew who Angela Chase was and that she knew all about Angela's problems with Jordan Catalano. I wondered what she thought of the mother in the show, Patty Chase, whose scenes I just wished I could fast-forward at the time because I was so bored by her. These days, I look at her differently. I am curious. Maybe she was the real heroine of the show. Adolescents often identify and even shape their own cultural identities based on television shows they watch (Stern 421), and *My So-Called Life* creator, Winnie

Holzman, talked about how "unfinished" the characters in the show were: "Every character was in a state of flux. Everyone was trying to figure out who they were. Everyone was trying to figure out their identity. The adults and the children and the kids" (qtd. in Seitz). What did my mother think about it all, sitting on that couch with me? It all feels unbearably unfinished.

Bethwyn Rowe and Bronwyn A. Harman found that for motherless mothers, there is a profound longing for information, knowledge, and details, which are made unrecoverable following a mother's passing (34). I'm now a practising psychotherapist based in New York City, where I work primarily with pregnant people, mothers adjusting to the postpartum period, and mothers who experienced pregnancy losses. I see fertility issues, reproductive fantasies, traumatic births survivors, anxious new moms, and fathers with irritability and mood issues trying their best to cope with the sleep deprivation that comes with having a newborn baby. I see mothers with relationship issues and couples with babies in their bassinets on Zoom. Amid a motherless life, I ensured that my professional self would be mother-full. Two years ago, I gave birth to a little girl. When she was four months old, I took her for a springtime walk in the park in a baby carrier that pressed us face to face, chest to chest. As we walked, I narrated what was in front of us. "Tree… branch… a doggie!" I was becoming fluent in Parentese. "Honey, look at that beautiful red bird! Is this your grandma? I think your grandma is here!" A spiritual thrill overwhelmed me. My chest rose, pressing it deeply into my daughter's. Heart to heart. I thought of Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman's words: "As mourners move on with their lives to find new roles, new directions, and new sources of gratification, they experience the past as very much a part of who they are. The deceased are both present and not present at the same time. It is possible to be bereft and not bereft simultaneously, to have a sense of continuity and yet to know that nothing will ever be the same." (351). My daughter answered me with an enthusiastic, full-bodied burp.

I look for my mother everywhere. I look for her in myself, in my daughter, in motherly clinical supervisors, in all the figures and the shadows. My one life was split into two: my first life, before her accident, life as I knew it, and my other life, the one without her, the motherless life. I navigated life from "oneness" (Chodorow 112) with my mother to aloneness, in perpetual search of her wisdom, trying to come to terms with the void, eventually finding gratitude for my "angels in the nursery" (Lieberman et al. 506).

She died, and we were left with all her clothes. Of course, one knows what to do with the pretty wool coat. You keep it forever, wear it to your friend's winter wedding, and smile an invisible smile when you see it hanging in the closet. But what do you do with a dead mother's bras and underwear? What about the leftovers she was going to eat that night? What do you do with her contact lenses—these pieces of plastic that would have gone on her eyes, but

now her eyes are shut forever and gone? Children who lose their mother want to know: "How come the earth doesn't stop?"

I didn't have a clue. I stood in that bathroom on a sunny-but-cold February Monday in 1998, looking at her hairbrush on the sink, the knots of dark blond hair, the only parts of her body left above ground. Then, I looked into the mirror and started to pluck my eyebrows.

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