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Rage, Grief, and Ambivalence towards My Mother's Death: An Inheritance of Refusal

This autoethnographic essay confronts the entangled legacies of silence, violence, ambivalence, and estrangement between a mother and daughter. Written two years after the death of the author's mother, it explores how cycles of cruelty, denial, and emotional absence shape identity, caregiving, and grief. Rather than offering a narrative of healing or reconciliation, the essay articulates "the inheritance of refusal"—a deliberate act of boundary setting, withdrawal, and nonparticipation in expected familial roles. Through narrative and theoretical reflection, the author critiques the cultural and familial expectations of daughterhood, especially for daughters who are never allowed to be children, who are expected to submit in the name of duty or redemption. Refusal, in this context, becomes an embodied survival strategy of reclaiming dignity through noncompliance. Drawing on theorists like Saidiya Hartman and Sara Ahmed, the essay positions refusal as both a personal ethic and a political stance. Ultimately, the author aims to give voice to those who grieve incoherently and survive complex maternal legacies with no decipherable cultural script. It speaks especially to those who were never protected, who learned to nurture themselves through withdrawal, and who are still learning what it means to forgive—or not.

Death

"JoAnna! Come and get me! Come and get me! JoAnna! JoAnna! JoAnna!"

I was not there when my mother died. The day before, I drove to Little Rock to see my daughter, leaving both Memphis and my mother behind. My brother told me it was okay to go. He and his wife had taken over her care: the lifting, the wiping, the feeding, the managing of her medications, and the catering to her every whim and demand. By then, she was too weak to physically assault us, but her words were as specific and cruel as ever. Her cruelty was part of her

personality. At just 4'11" and barely 120 pounds, she had always relied on cursing and screaming to compensate for her small frame.

She referred to my brother as a "broke bum" for leaving his job to care for her and accused his wife of being a "crackhead" trying to steal her jewelry. My mother refused to consider that my brother was helping her out of his loyalty to her, and my sister-in-law was helping her out of love for my brother.

But, of course, her cruellest words were reserved for me: her forsaken daughter. She was furious that I would not remain constantly by her side to submit to her abuse. She blamed my husband. She accused me of being controlled, pitiful, weak, and stupid.

Yet whenever I sat with her—almost always intending to give my brother and his wife some reprieve—there was nothing about me that was off-limits. The shape of my body, the size of my nose, my clothes, and my life choices were all targets for mockery. For example, she could never comprehend why I was still in school, pursuing a postdoc after earning a PhD. "You must be really stupid," she sneered, "Can't get a real job. Still in school?"

This was the reason my brother encouraged me to leave. He said it hurt him to witness it. He had already confessed how much guilt and shame he carried from our childhood as he came to reflect on how differently we had been treated. He once said, "I keep searching my memory and searching my memory, and I can't come up with any reason why—why was I told not to talk to you? To stay away from you? What did you do? I keep trying to remember but… we was kids. There is nothing you could have done."

Still, I should have been there—at least for him. Like he said, "We was kids"; it was not his fault.

We all knew she was dying, but we did not know when. She had already spent two months in the hospital, admitted once again for heart failure. When the doctors suggested hospice, she initially refused. They sent her to a rehab facility, but after just one day, the facility called, saying she had been so abusive to the staff that they could not keep her. She had thrown a full cup of Sprite (with ice) at a nurse. The hospital took her back but made it immediately clear: If we did not come to get her, they would discharge her into the street. On the way there, my brother, my sister-in-law, and I joked about letting them. It was gallows humour, of course. We would not have really done that.

But by that point, we were all exhausted: my brother, his wife, the hospital staff, and the rehab nurses. Finally, it was determined that she was no longer fit to make her own medical decisions. We worked with her primary care doctor to transfer her care to a home hospice team. They delivered a bed to my brother's house, and for the final ten days of her life, that is where she would stay. I am certain that if you asked my mother, she would tell you that we killed her. This is why she had resisted hospice so fiercely to begin with. Hospice meant that she was dying, and she had decided not to die. By

overriding her decision, we had decided that she was.

As I consider this now, maybe she had a right to be so pissed.

On her last night of life, I remained on the phone with my brother. She had not let him sleep. She thrashed around. She ripped off her clothes, clawed at the bedrails, and tried to throw herself over the side. By that time, her body was so swollen with fluid that she had become impossible for my brother to lift. I consistently contemplated whether I should make the three-hour drive back to Memphis. "What would you do if you were here, Jo? There is nothing you can really do."

Of course, we did not know that night was the last. She had been dying for months, and she had similar episodes before. But that night, she was screaming for me to come and get her. This is the reason my brother called me. He wanted me to hear it. Her screaming was surreal and unsettling, like something not quite human. It was high-pitched, rageful, almost disembodied: "Come get me, JoAnna! JoAnna! Come and get me!" she shrieked my name over and over, howling it out, lengthening it, and stretching out the vowels. While my brother was on the phone with me, my sister-in-law was on the phone with the hospice care team. They were told to drop my mother's bed to the lowest level, raise the rails, and give her a certain dose of morphine. Hours later, they would be told to give her more morphine. She screamed "JoAnna" three times until she abruptly fell asleep. By this time, it was around 4:00 a.m. She would be pronounced dead at 10:38 a.m. later that day.

Refusal

"I'm not doing this today."

I was not my mother's primary caregiver. My sister-in-law was. I did not bathe my mother, did not lift her swollen limbs, and did not wipe the fluids that seeped from her splitting skin. I visited. I brought food. I sat with her when I could tolerate it. And then I left.

One day, when I arrived, she accused me of stealing money from her bank account—money I had been using to pay her bills with my brother's permission. Just the fact that I had access to her account was enough for her to believe I was looting it. That day, I was quick to gather my things and walk out the door that I had just walked in. "I'm not doing this today."

This is what I inherited from my mother: refusal.

She had refused to be my mother, so I refused to be her daughter. It was her cruelty that had trained me to leave. She had refused the script of motherhood. She was never nurturing, never loving. My earliest memories are of sharp slaps, burning scratches on my face, and a consistently tender scalp from where she would yank my hair. As a little child, she would point out how flat-chested I was, how I had no hips, and how I lacked any attributes that might attract a

man. It was cruelty that taught me how to withdraw, how to leave both physically and emotionally. In turn, I learned to refuse the expectations of daughterhood.

The "inheritance of refusal" represents a concept born from the emotional and relational dynamics between my mother and me. Our relationship was shaped by years of neglect, cruelty, and emotional manipulation. In this context, refusal becomes a learned survival mechanism. It was my way to reclaim autonomy in a relationship marked by powerlessness and toxic dependency.

In this way, refusal is both a personal and relational theory, offering insight into how traumatic family dynamics can influence future generations' approaches to caregiving and emotional responsibility. It is not characterized by mere physical absence; it is an emotional withdrawal. As a child, I buried myself in books, journals, daydreams, and fantasies. Refusing to be mentally or emotionally present becomes a form of self-preservation. This inheritance shaped my approach to her in the final days of her life. Even when I was there, I was not.

This writing is, in part, an act of sense-making. I draw on autoethnography as a methodological approach that allows for the self to be used as a site of inquiry (Ellis). I aim to consider how inherited trauma and generational silence leave their imprint on a life. This work also engages trauma studies, particularly theories that recognize trauma as fragmented, nonlinear, and often transmitted intergenerationally (Caruth). In that sense, what I recount here is my record of affective survival.

Refusal is not always an act of rebellion. Sometimes, it is the only language available when all others have failed. In her work, Saidiya Hartman traces how young Black women navigated life on the margins of respectability, often making choices that defied societal norms. These choices were radical expressions of autonomy and survival.

I have come to understand my refusal through this lens. It was not resistance for its own sake but a necessary disengagement from a performance that demanded my silence, sacrifice, and self-erasure. I would not give myself over to a woman who had regarded me with contempt. I would not sacrifice myself at the altar of daughterhood, especially when the role I was cast in never included love. My refusal became my ethic: a willful stance, not just a reaction.

Sara Ahmed theorizes "willfulness" as the act of refusing to go along with what is expected or demanded within family systems, especially those prioritizing obedience and docility. The willful subject is cast as a problem or a troublemaker because she willfully refuses the role assigned to her. She is scripted as irrational, disobedient, and difficult. Ahmed argues that to be willful is to be inconvenient to power. Ahmed holds that in family systems, willfulness is often gendered and pathologized. I recall how my father would often compare me to my mother whenever I displayed any anger or defensive-

ness. He would shake his head and chuckle: "You're just like your mother, Jo. Just like her! You both got a temper!"

From my father's perspective, my willfulness was not understood as an expression of grief or pain. It was an irrational act of temperament. I was just like my mother.

Her

"Growing up, I thought your mom was the most beautiful woman in the world."

My mother was born in 1950 in Pattaya, Thailand. Beyond that, all I know about her is a patchwork of stories. She would not speak about her childhood, her parents, her siblings, or the life she had before she came to the United States (US). When asked, she would snap, "It's none of your business." If pressed further, she would say, "I forgot."

Yet there were a handful of stories she told repeatedly. There was the one about the Chinese boy whose family owned a candy store. She hated that boy for a reason that was never fully explained. She spent an entire day sharpening pencils, tying them together, and then climbed into a tree to wait. When he passed by after school, she leapt from the branches and stabbed him in the neck. She told this story with a smirk and a sense of righteous pride.

She would also speak with intensity about her fear and hatred of monkeys. She claimed they threw coconuts at her on her way to school. They stole her pet pig. Then there was the story about the frogs. She described being held down by other children while they covered her body in frogs. She screamed until she peed on herself. She never said who did it or why. Just that it happened, and she hated frogs.

The rest of her memories may have been in the journals she kept. She would write in them daily using the flowery script of the Thai alphabet, which I never learned to read. Her writing was beautiful and indecipherable. I would stare at the letters like treasured secrets. She never offered to translate, and I would never dare to ask. At some point, the journals disappeared. I do not know where they went. Perhaps she destroyed them. They were the closest thing to her interior life, and they were never meant for anyone but herself.

Most of what I know about her past comes from my father. He met her while stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War. He told me she was selling soup to American soldiers outside the Air Force base. She was fifteen years old, and he was thirty. He described her as small and sweet, wearing "red bell-bottoms." She had sun-kissed caramel skin and long, thick waves of black hair that fell down her back. She had a little sister. My dad would describe that sister as clinging to his legs and kissing his feet the last day they were in Thailand, right before they left for the US. He said she was around twelve

years old and begged him to take her with them. He would only tell us this story out of earshot of my mother. Whenever she heard him speaking about the past, she would scream at him to "shut the fuck up!"

Her favourite subject seemed to be herself. She spoke proudly of her hair and even more proudly of her skin, always commenting on its hairlessness, smoothness, and glow. In elementary school, the kids said she looked like Marilyn McCoo from *Solid Gold*. Later, one of my childhood friends told me, "Growing up, I thought your mom was the most beautiful woman in the world."

Yet for all her vainglorious boasting, I do not think my mother was truly convinced she was beautiful.

There were two places I most often saw my mother: sitting in front of the television and sitting in front of the vanity mirror in her bedroom. One delivered images of the world's ideal beauty, and the other reflected her struggle to live up to them. She spent many hours smearing beauty creams on her face, oiling her hair, and plucking her eyebrows. I would watch her watch herself. She once noticed me and flatly said, "Men don't like women like us. They like blondes. Tall. Blue eyes. Big breasts. We don't look like that."

She stated it as a well-known fact. This belief reflects the logic of "colonial mimicry," a term Homi Bhabha uses to describe the ambivalent desire of the colonized to resemble the colonizer. They can only imitate to the point of mimicry. My mother's use of beauty creams and meticulous grooming was a striving towards a beauty ideal she could never fully attain. No matter how attractive she was perceived to be, she was not a white woman.

She was deeply defensive when people mistook her for Black or biracial. "I'm Thai," she would snap. "I'm Asian! I'm not Black!" The assumption was always received like an insult, although that was rarely the intention. I did not understand it then, but now I can see how the misrecognition touched on racialized stereotypes she could not escape. She simply did not match the narrow perceptions of what an Asian woman was supposed to look like, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, before the internet began to complicate the image.

Her hips were too full. Her skin was too dark. Her beauty was untranslatable.

David Eng and Shinhee Han's concept of "racial melancholia" helps me understand her anguish more clearly now. They describe racial melancholia as the psychic pain that results from the pressure to assimilate into white culture while being perpetually excluded from it. For immigrants and their children, this melancholia often shows up in the sorrow of displacement and the impossible longing to be seen as desirable, acceptable, or normal. It is a form of grief.

The fact that strangers sometimes assumed she was Black interrupted the fragile proximity to whiteness that the model minority myth falsely promises to Asian Americans. Looking back, I see now her rejection of Blackness as rooted in a desperate attempt to navigate the brutal hierarchies of race in the US. The pressure to assert her Asianness was, in some ways, an attempt to assert her worth. She may have been mourning a version of herself she was not allowed to become.

Her struggle echoes what Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde describes as a contested racial terrain of Asian American femininity: a terrain shaped by a long history of orientalist fantasies and racialized misogyny. Asian women are often caught between invisibility and hypervisibility. As Valverde notes, the meanings assigned to Asian female bodies are never neutral; they are always saturated with histories of war, empire, migration, and colonial desire.

My mother did not have the language for any of this. English was not her first language. She never had a Thai friend to talk to. She never had a family. She never had anyone. I do not know why.

But I know what loneliness feels like. Perhaps this is something else I inherited from her.

Me

"You know your mom is just jealous of you, right?"

Memories of my childhood are fragmented. There are many moments I simply cannot recall. My brother tells me a story about a time when our mother threw Chinese takeout at me. He describes how grains of rice and pieces of shrimp clung to my hair. I have no memory of this incident. Perhaps it is the result of trauma, or perhaps it is simply how the mind protects itself. Elizabeth Loftus, a prominent psychological researcher, has shown that traumatic memories can be suppressed, distorted, or even forgotten entirely as a coping mechanism.

Perhaps this, too, is something I inherited from my mother: a refusal to remember—a generational passing down of emotional distance and unspoken wounds. We learn not only to withhold but also to reject the parts of ourselves and our memories that are too painful to confront. The refusal makes us feel safer. It makes it easier to navigate a world that feels dangerous and untrustworthy.

But, of course, there are things I do remember. I remember belt buckles breaking my skin, being dragged by my hair, and fingernails digging into my flesh. I remember crying until I was dry heaving. I remember my father's voice trying to interrupt the violence, his soft southern drawl pleading, "C'mon, babe, stop. Leave her alone. Stop." And for that moment, she would.

Still, maybe I am being unfair to her. Maybe I should also say that the closest she ever came to tenderness was after a beating, when she would call me into her room, her face streaked with tears, a menthol cigarette in one hand. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

And maybe she was sorry.

And maybe I am refusing to forgive her.

Maybe that, too, is part of the inheritance.

I was a pretty child. I knew this because of how people reacted to me. I was always picked up, fawned over, and given random free items. This behaviour would continue into young adulthood. I also credit my father for this awareness. He was often absent, lost somewhere between alcohol and the night terrors left over from Vietnam, but somehow, he always managed to convince me that I was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He would look at me with complete awe and admiration, calling me "Princess," "Tiger," and "Snake Eyes." I remember how, during the Miss Universe pageants, he would watch the screen with a Marlboro hanging from his mouth, gesture towards me with absolute certainty, and say, "You're way prettier than her. You could win that when you grow up."

I was smart, too. I made the honour roll. I placed second in the school spelling bee. I was one of those overly polite children who sought validation from adults, always trying to be good, trying to be liked. And I was. Everyone liked me. They told me I was bright. Charismatic. Special. Everyone except my mother.

She criticized everything. My thin hair. My supposedly wide nose. My feet would eventually grow to size seven, perfectly average. However, it was monstrous compared to her tiny size five: "Look at my feet and look at yours. You have feet like a man."

And unlike her, I had body hair. A faint mustache formed on my upper lip as I got older, and she never missed the chance to point it out. According to her, no one would want me. No one would ever desire a girl like me. "Look at you…no ass, no titties. Mustache like your dad. You gonna be bald like your dad, too. Look at my hair and look at yours."

For my mother, a woman's worth was directly tied to male attention. And I received plenty. Despite what she said, boys did want me. Men did, too. Constantly. Harassingly. Violently. I was victimized from a young age, and as I grew older, the attention only became more confusing, more dangerous.

I also began standing up to her. I stopped letting her hit me. I refused to undress at her demand. I would snatch the belt from her hands. I screamed back. I blocked her attempts to claw at my face. I ran away. Once, she called the police on me. An officer separated us and pulled me aside. "You know your mom is just jealous of you, right?" he said. "You're younger than her. Prettier than her. You speak English properly. You're an American."

I clung to his words as truth. He was the first person who offered any rationalization for what I was experiencing.

But that same officer would learn my school route. He would follow me home. He would circle back into my life in a different way.

And I blame my mother for that, too.

Life

"You keep trying to prove how great you are, but everyone already knows it."

Since my mother died in 2023, I have avoided confronting any emotions I have about her absence. I do not really know if I feel anything at all. Yet… I must. Otherwise, why would I be writing this? Why would I have answered the call for this paper? Something in me needed to speak, even if I am unsure of what I want to say.

When I answered this call, I wanted to discuss how, at some point in my later adulthood, I gave up. I refused to keep trying to make amends, to find closure, and to make sense of my life. I originally built this essay around the theory I named "the inheritance of refusal." I wanted to write about estrangement, about boundaries, and about when I intentionally decided, in later adulthood, to stop trying.

I have never dealt with my relationship with my mother. Not in any therapeutic, redemptive, or confessional sense. I just left. I moved on. I married at eighteen, after my mother threw all my clothes on the front porch. I had only known my husband for two months. He was thirty. Like her, I chose a man older than me—someone who, at the time, seemed to offer protection or maybe just escape. Maybe I am more like her than I want to admit. Maybe this, too, is part of the inheritance.

I must ask: What does it do to a person when the world tells you that you are smart and pretty, but your own mother does not? How does that kind of absence shape a person's hunger for validation?

I have been called a perfectionist in both my academic and personal life. Someone close to me said I carry hubris—a kind of excessive pride or self-confidence, the kind that offends the gods. But I do not feel excessive. I feel like someone who has spent her life doing too much just to prove she was barely enough.

I did not go to college until I was thirty-six. I married at eighteen and had five children by the time I was twenty-seven. Yet I do not regret that timeline. I am proud of my long marriage, of thirty-plus years with a man who has remained loyal and loving to me. I am proud of my beautiful children and of the life I built before I ever stepped into a college classroom. And I am proud of going to college when I was thirty-six years old. I earned scholarships, grants, and top paper awards. I graduated with a PhD at forty-eight.

Still, I have fretted and stressed over everything I did not win, everything I did not accomplish. As a student, my heart sank at every single point I lost in any assignment. I even scheduled a meeting with my English professor to ask why I had received a ninety-nine instead of a perfect score. Other students were devastated by failing grades, but I was obsessed with a single point. A friend, who was also a classmate, said to me: "You keep trying to prove how great you are, but everyone already knows it."

Un-Conclusion

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

I raised five beautiful and accomplished children. And while I was certainly not like my mother, I wonder if I ended up more like my father. I was never lost in alcohol, but I may have been lost in myself. I grew up alongside them. I played games with them, read to them, and spoiled them with toys and late-night snacks. But I often retreated into my world: books, journals, gaming, and quiet corners of fantasy I built for myself.

Many of the things I did for them, I realize now, I was also doing for me. The backyard menagerie of pets? That was my dream. Recklessly throwing paint on canvas? I wanted to do that. Smashing video game controllers to pummel my son in *Tekken Tag Team*? I enjoyed that. No mercy!

And there were five of them. It was chaos. I may have spent much of their childhoods retreating into myself, not being as emotionally present as a mother should be. Sometimes, I fear I passed on the same silences I inherited—the same self-doubt disguised as self-discipline, the same ache to be seen, buried beneath achievements and productivity.

But I know they know I love them. Perhaps excessively. I praise them. I celebrate them. I have intentionally tried to be what my mother was not.

Whenever I think about her, my mind always reverts to the image of her sitting in the dark with her menthol cigarette, saying, "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

Perhaps this is because it is the most sympathetic image I can think of.

Every other memory is marred by violence and insult.

And I do not know what I feel towards her: Rage? Grief? Ambivalence?

People say I am accomplished. I have a beautiful family. I am educated. I am well-liked. But I keep circling back to the same question: Why is it not enough?

Because, deep down, I am still angry.

I did not know this until I wrote this.

Why is a lifetime of accomplishments not enough to compensate for a little girl who just wanted her mother to like her?

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