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WHAT HAPPENED TO MY MOTHER

*As chocolatier to the rich and famous,
Martucci Angiano has posed with many celebrities.
But today she held in her hand a figure more dazzling
than any Hollywood star: a 2-inch-tall column of chocolate drippings
that workers at Bodega Chocolates say bears a striking resemblance to the Virgin Mary.
About the market for Virgin Mary's,
a grilled cheese bearing the likeness of the Virgin Mary
sold for \$28,000 on eBay in 2004. But a honey-mustard pretzel,
believed to be shaped like Mary holding the baby Jesus,
sold for only \$10,600 in 2005, despite the fact that it had two figures
and was twice the size of the grilled cheese.
Said Terry Power, Head of Merrill Lynch, Beverly Hills,
'The Virgin Mary market, wracked by uncertainty
and disbelief, is in a downward spiral! We don't know where
this is headed, whether the market can be resurrected
or not.' The Virgin was off with Britney
Spears and unavailable for comment.*

My mother taught me to iron. Just as she washed my hair in the cold metal basin in the cellar, using beer and eggs and experimenting with other household items (lemons, brown soap and anise), she had her own way of ironing. She'd pull the board out from under the queen-sized bed, strands of red hair swinging into her eyes, flip the contraption over, smack the board on its back, then reach under it, prying its pinions. Voila! Its praying mantis legs would sigh and open. Bearing down on the board, she would rock her body gingerly shifting the rubber feet, waiting for the soft ca-chunk that indicated the stand had locked in place. Then with a frown and quiet tilt of the head that said she and the board understood one another, she'd run her palms over the board, straightening its

cloth, tucking it in here and there like she did with my father before he left for work everyday, even when he didn't need straightening. Women find incredible satisfaction in straightening out a man, in oh so many ways. It is part of our nesting behavior. The smart man simply gives in to it.

The iron itself was an entirely different matter. She'd grab the appliance by the handle and rapidly unwind the cord, disregarding how the wire smacked again and again across the metal body, until the cable was played out and she could plug it into the wall. She would pour in water from the tap, using a coffee cup and a funnel, filling the appliance to the brim, but turn the iron on cool, no steam.

She'd get the clothes, the sheets and linens, the towels, already sitting in a wicker basket, in color and texture-coded piles: slick slight polyesters, aerated chiffons, raw then smooth linens, flannels to be ironed inside out, starchable cottons, cottons unstarched, and fluffy things, whether bath sheets or athletic socks. At first I thought she was merely sensuous, but no. In this way she could work methodically from items requiring a cool/no steam iron, like a polyester blouse, to those requiring high heat/steam, like bath sheets, lost in her own parade of thoughts.

What did she dream of? Musicals, mostly. The leggy Cyd Charisse, forget about Debbie Reynolds, Singing in the Rain. Gene Kelly's solo, dancing under umbrellas, hopping off curbs. Esther Williams and her synchronized swim team, the swimmers' scissor legs opening and closing like petals of a perfect flower, he loves me, he loves me not. Of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, tapping down the ceramic steps of La Chiesa di Santa Maria in Caltagirone, which they may never have done, but which was one of the highlights of her mother's childhood. The church itself, I mean, in Sicily where my

grandmother grew up. At the thought of the church (which she had never seen) my mother would slip from reality. She could act, she could dance, she could sing. I caught her once in a Viennese waltz, led by, I believe, a starched white blouse. And then a rumba. Missing a step, she was cross with me for hours.

I have two pictures in my photo album. Picture one: my mother at sixteen, en pointe, en face, her left hand heavy on the ballet barre, right leg lifted and slightly bent in attitude, right arm stretched above her head, back arched to the left like a falling bird. She seemed a determined young woman even then, pale face pinched tight as a perfume bottle, lavender cheekbones sunken in. Big lips on long legs. She wore white, sparks of light reflecting in her close-set, sparrow-like eyes. Her long body balanced carefully atop one incongruously shapely left leg, the three powerful quadriceps muscles bulging in her thigh, a hint of pleasure in the thick brown hair (which she hated) falling about her shoulders in chunky curls, like a chocolate mink.

There is the other picture. Me at five, dressed like a little Jacqueline Kennedy in a pink and powder blue suit hemmed with little yellow flowers. I wear a pillbox hat tied at the chin. The thick brown curls of my stylish pageboy flip up sticking to the rim. I am holding my mother's hand, looking down at my first pair of patent leather shoes, the black smooth straps cutting into my stretchy white stockings just below my ankles. My mother (28) is thinner here, more vacant, wearing an identical dress to mine (Nana made them both) and staring stupidly into the camera, her dry, white face a slash of too-red lipstick, the overarched eyebrows thickened with Egyptian black, the eyes sunk back in their sockets like small brown pits in decaying fruit, her skin diaphanous, her breasts shrunk to tiny walnuts, her legs poking out like twigs. Gone the beautiful mane. In its place a

sparse black mat, spongy as mongoose fur, as brittle to the touch, reminding me of church veils and first communion. Her pillbox hat, its perfect circle, does not sit well on this mat. It is springtime, mimosa blooms fallen to the grass, and we stand in the sun near my grandmother's stoop. My father, taking the picture, is the shadow on the lawn to our left. Nana - I can tell by her smaller wiry shadow - is hovering close, her head nearly touching his elbow. In my right hand, I hold a fistful of bright red African daisies. I am pressed like a petal against my mother's dress.

If only I could have been that quiet child behind the daisies, a mere splash against my mother's skirts, accepting, gentle, quiet. Maybe then, they would never have noticed me, how big, how vociferous I was. How willing to fight. How unwilling to let it go. "My mother is gone, don't you know? Don't you know?!" Maybe then I could've quietly slunk away and the family would've let me. It would all have been uneventful, apart from the usual transitions - high school prom and graduation, entering a sleepaway college with a real campus with green grass and trees, coming home in the summertime, dad's checks complimenting my part-time income from Chicken Little or Denny's Dream, getting chucked behind the ear now and again (instead of pinched by Uncle Joey on the legs), my first job, saving to share my first apartment with a roommate, college graduation and the move to the big city, mom and dad mailing the occasional checks ("Love and kisses. Love and kisses. Love and kisses."), and Nana sending a box of towels or a starter set of pots or a piece of cellar furniture, then, finally, one day my very own place.

I would invite them all to dinner, spaghetti with meat sauce, a salad with oil and vinegar in an old acrylic bowl and Asti Spumanti to drink. They would bring nice things for the house.

This is what happened to my mother.

April 10th, 1958. My little brother Anthony had just been born. My father and I, in excitement's after-crash, were home, fast asleep. My 25-year-old mother and the new baby, in separate rooms, were resting at Jamaica Hospital, where she had delivered satisfactorily and where my musical Uncle Sal, her younger brother, had inveigled himself a late night visit. True to form, he'd chatted up the nurse, singing a verse or two of Old Blue Eyes' Luck Be a Lady, and trading cigarettes, Marlboros no doubt, with a young hard-working doctor who, like my uncle, might also have joined a big band once were it not for the rules – no smoking, no drinking, no girls. So my Uncle Sal said “No Frank Sinatra!” And though he never joined up with Frank Sinatra and his big band, he had been allowed in toward the end of visiting hours to see my mother.

The hospital rooms were dark. The patients in the maternity ward, all new mothers with looks of beatific relief on their faces, were fast asleep. Sal easily found my mother's room, number 405. Drumming on his leg a swing tune - In the Mood was one of his favorites - he opened the door and danced, in time to the rhythm, inside. The air was cold, thin, antiseptic. The floor was yellowed linoleum, peeling. The beige walls were bare. Jamaica Hospital catered to a population of immigrant families and blacks and did not have much money at that time. It was the Appalachia of hospitals.

Uncle Sal was wearing leather shoes that my grandfather, the cobbler, made him at the front of his store, blocks away, while chomping on cherry wood cigars. The shoes were a perfect fit. So when my uncle soft-shoed across the slick linoleum, wet with god-knows-what, he was in the middle of his dance routine before he slipped and fell on his back, the beginning of lifelong sciatica. He flailed around a bit. It hurt, probably. And

there was plenty of water in the puddle. His jacket and pants soaked, he flipped over, got up and hit the light switch. I can only imagine the look on his face, the narrowing then widening of his soft young eyes, the trembling of his lip: shock, fear, disbelief. There was blood on the floor, spreading everywhere, tendrils opening to the light like the edges of the petals of a flower, thick pools here, luminescent fragments there. The bed itself soaked. All of it red. All of it coming from my mother.

Uncle Sal immediately called for the doctor who, once he was pried away from the night nurses' (plural) kisses, called in the specialist post haste. Words of surprise were murmured under the specialist's breath. An emergency bell also sounded, squealing and honking through the quiet corridors, stealing away the other mothers' sweet, fat, baby dreams, tempering them with a fearful under-net of whispers.

“Who is it?”

“A baby?”

“A mother?”

“403?”

“405?”

The attendants wheeled my mother, IV attached, white sheet clinging to her, into operating room 102, the mistake room, not the room for deliveries. That night, she became the watched unlucky one, pasty-faced, moaning, “What? What is happening? Why?” They rushed her past all those questioning faces, the other mothers spared her fate only by the grace of luck and God. And those who waited to deliver, praying for themselves. Then they had at her again.

In the hours that followed, my mother took 14 pints of blood. All the relatives

donated and some neighbors, the blacks, the Jews, even the Mick-Micks, the Irish, though, I am told, some who could have helped, did not. Older folk, for instance, believed they could lose their souls. The doctors stopped the bleeding, sewed her up rather indelicately and wheeled her back to her room. She hemorrhaged that morning again, blood spreading across the mattress. She would hemorrhage two more times, they would operate two more times, before they decided to put her in the IC unit and, finally, to perform a hysterectomy. Still the bleeding came. Days and days of blood. Like thick rich orchids, blood inhabited her pelvis. The petals blossomed, shrunk and convulsed. Until, like any wound, whether one lives or dies, the flowers grew smaller and smaller, the tendrils slowly retreating into muscle fiber and bone.

My mother was in intensive care, I was told, for three or maybe four months depending upon which relative told me. She had had the equivalent of three bodies of blood. She was open the whole time, saline solution keeping her moist, until the doctors felt safe to close her up. What I overheard was this:

- She was perfectly alright.
- She had the cancer.
- The doctors left something inside.
- They took something out.
- It was congenital, inherited.
- It was a tipped uterus.
- It was malpractice.
- Someone/God made a mistake.
- You're her daughter. And it could happen to you. But it probably won't.

It took over 40 years of secrets and whispers to piece together the truth. That my mother was not the schizophrenic I thought she was. That brain damage, which triggers violence and cannot be reversed, is more shameful to a family than insanity. That my mother had been suddenly physically and psychologically disfigured -- whatever happened to Baby Jane had happened to my mother. And that my family had slipped into a state of shock and disbelief that lingered for decades.

Only my father, grandparents and an occasional aunt or uncle – from my mother's side, not my father's - were permitted to visit my mother during those three or four months she wove in and out of consciousness. My brother and I, safe and sound in some ways, in others not, were cared for by relatives. Our physical needs were cared for. There was food on the table, we were clothed and held and bathed. But every day at home, seeking her voice, her touch, her smell – like cold cream and White Shoulders – I stood on tip-toe outside her room, clinging to the doorknob and peering through the keyhole. Catching my breath I saw her shadow once. An unfinished dress, pink organza, waved to me from atop her sewing machine, an ephemeral net – empty -- caught by the sun and swept up in the summer breeze.

When she was awake in the hospital my mother called for my brother, her baby, and sometimes, they say, for me. “Where is my baby?” she asked. “I had a baby, where is he?” And then, meeting stony faces, more quickly, under her breath, “Is he...is my baby...?”

For the doctors, in their barbarous wisdom, had forbidden my family to mention to my mother she'd actually had a baby. Saying the patient had actually had the child or even been pregnant could, they warned, cause my fragile mother such great pains of

separation, such intense anxiety, that she would surely suffer an irrevocable psychological rift, not to mention physical relapse. The doctors, apparently, did not consider what kind of rift might occur in a woman who knew she'd been pregnant, remembered entering hospital for the purpose of delivering a baby, gone through labor, a thing no woman forgets, delivered said healthy baby, then woken up an indeterminate period of time later in ICU, possibly brain-damaged, trying to hold onto whatever shred of reality might have existed and whatever comfort might be recalled (a fine, healthy baby?) only to find everyone she knows and trusts in firm denial of her slim, painful grasp on reality, the baby gone, relatives too abandoning her, not answering if her questions were too insistent. She was only able to get fragments of information, as she replayed the scenes over and over again in her drugged and adulterated mind, milking the sad, moist-eyes of her guilty visitors (or were they?), who looked down or aside (or did they?), her relatives, gritting their teeth and clenching their jaws (am I dying? Am I dead? she must have wondered) and, finally, shaking their heads in silence. She was in Siberia with only a match for warmth. Families are where we learn to lie.

My terrified family was, thus, not permitted to discuss the pregnancy, the child, the state of the child's health or any of what had happened to my mother with my mother as she suffered those long months. They handled her like this.

"Where is my baby?" my mother moaned through a morphine-induced haze. Her eyes darted around the room like a trapped bird. She was so tired, so endlessly tired. She fixated on the shadow of the daffodils my father brought her, blueness falling across her bed.

My father sat up straighter in the chair beside, tugged at his shirt cuffs and suit

sleeves. He kept his jacket on, the first two buttons buttoned tight as the perfect vest beneath, his black shoes carefully shined. “The daffodils?... They... they’re flowers...” He took her hand, noting her vacant stare. Her being awake, in any event, was a good sign. “Pauline?”

“I had a baby, didn’t I?”

He stared hard at his shoes, clenched his jaw. He had seen people die.

She looked at her reflection in the side table. The pale face of a stranger stared back, elongated by the convex steel. “I had a baby, didn’t I?...” She had lost most of her hair. “My lipstick,” she moaned. “My lipsh,” my father heard. She had trouble keeping her eyes open, making her mouth work. The drugs pulsed in her veins.

“You’re beautiful.” My father winced, helplessly. The first time he’d made this particular face, cheeks up, mouth open, pain behind his eyes. We would grow to know those hardened lines.

“Why?... What is it, Sam?”

“Rest, now, Pauline”. He held her hand between both of his, a moth protected from a flame. He cleared his throat, a man that never cried.

She wanted to say she loved him, as the walls of the room dissolved. She wanted to tell him about the boy she kissed once when he was in Korea, as she slipped into that night of mermaids and moons, of impossible twinings. Under the boardwalk. The sand cold, her feet bare. It was my father she missed but the boy with the clean shaven face, the smell of citrus and the dark dank hair was indisputably there. His hand brushed her cheek as their lips met. The sea roared on. In the pain of my father’s absence, my mother sat with the boy. And thought of other lives. This is what we do in pain. I could

still be a ballerina, she wanted to cry. I could still make babies. Most of all she wanted him, my father, inside, inside. To fill this hollowness inside.

“Everything is fine,” my father cooed, to soothe himself, for she was fast asleep already. He looked down. Something electric hit his heart and he dropped her hand. The wedding ring wasn’t there. *This is not my beautiful house... this is not my beautiful wife.* Then he remembered. It was home in the jewelry box he’d bought her in Korea -- beside a small jar of cold cream, cover off, exposing the swish of her fingers. “Everything is fine.”

He was holding her waist, so small, like the tiny dancing girl inside the jewelry box, a ballerina, who twirled and twirled, the tinny melody, the fullness of my mother’s hips under his hands, the timbre of her voice, not low, not high – in his dreams she always laughed -- my cries and the babbling of my brother, the tick-tock-tick of the starburst clock in our hall, the dripping sink, dishes piled high, wet clothes that flapped into the laundry bag. And footsteps. Such are the echoes of a family, no one there. Every night, it was like that. “Everything is fine.”

Every night she was here.

My father stood, dying for a cigarette but he could not smoke in these sterile rooms. He shifted his thoughts to his work, because chemistry was always easy, thinking of the titration he must make next morning. The solution. How life was like a saturate, its sudden crystallization from the falling of a final grain. Of the toughness, the viability of petrochemical plastics. How capable they were. My father was a “Plastics” man. Using the handkerchief she ironed for him, he blew his nose, wiped his eyes.

She only saw his shadow then, heard the faint hum of the machines, morphine

dripping into her veins. Drifting, she smelled the smell of him, her husband. Her fingers traced his lips in the dream. The salt of his skin, the starched crispness of his collar, the heat of him like an iron, the oily coils of his hair, faintly mixed with the scent of tape and saline, the metallic taste of the IV feed. The light was out: he'd turned it down, set the stage. Somewhere in the dark, a baby cried. It was her. She was the baby, center stage, as we often are in dreams, especially the shy among us. She was on someone's knees, bouncing, an aunt's, an uncle's, she was passed from hand to hand. There was a bright beach ball, red, yellow, green, and laughter. The ball, thrown with speed, flew toward her. Bigger and bigger. She grew frightened, suddenly. It would fly in her face, no one to stop it. It would obliterate everything. "No, no, please, don't go. Please!" she shouted. Or thought she did. At the height of this eclipse, she tried to sit up but her box of a body fell back.

My father, hand on the doorknob, heard her moans. "I'm here," he said, and turned back. But he wasn't. He too was lost. Thinking of the national athlete he once was, running the 440 around an asphalt track. The all-night lover he could have been with Giselle or Gertrude or Pru, given half the chance. The IBM VP climbing into his Olds in Poughkeepsie. The Princeton scholar, finishing his masters, my mother and brother and I applauding, as photographers snapped pictures and he alone explained how plastics would save the world. That beautiful mistress he might have had if he wasn't a good Catholic and didn't turn her down. They would be in Peru or Fiji, stripped down in a bed, bathing in the heat of one another. But at that moment, there was only the honorable husband, the benevolent father, the good son left to him, the terror of raising me and my brother very possibly alone, a piquant scent of hospital, and the remembered

touch of my mother's sex the first time they'd made love, her legs wrapped around him. So away he was, though, of course, he turned back and ever so carefully, placed his arm under her shoulder.

"Sammy?" she said, closed her eyes and smiled. He would have crooned to her but he was not that sort of man. His body rocked back and forth, ever so slightly, as he sat on the edge of the chair. He hummed, perhaps he whistled, but the immovable arm lay anchored beneath her pillow, his fingers searching her hair. He leaned in, breathed her breath, the perfume of her sweat and wear. The night this baby was conceived he had felt her flush, felt her pull him in, then release, then pull him in again. He wanted her lips, the taste of them. She looked so like a child, her face pale, her eyelids lavender. He kissed her forehead. When she fell asleep again, he removed his arm without displacing the folds of her hair on the pillow. And kissed her lips, parting them.

My father stepped outside. He looked around at the night – how odd that it was night, that it was anything. He took a deep breath of the cool night air and then he ran, my mother's kiss inside him. He flew down the block, over to the bus stop, all the way to the end of the line, racing that bus, just racing it, though he could easily have caught it and paid the fare, his heart bursting inside, before he stopped, broke down and cried.

My mother lived in this twilight, this medicated comatose state of disinformation, until my Aunt Clara in the third month, unable to take it anymore, standing over her, sponging her forehead, finally burst out, "You had a baby, Pauline," she cried. "You had a baby! And the baby, a boy, is fine."

By that point, like the soldier in the film *Jacob's Ladder*, given LSD and sent out into the world without being told he'd taken the drug, my mother could no longer

distinguish imagination from reality. In Jacob's Ladder, Tim Robbins is taken to a hospital, tied to a gurney. The deeper he travels the more the place is filled with mad people and then blood and body parts strewn all over the floor. The people she loved had held back the only piece of information that could keep her sane. One tiny piece of truth. But unlike the film, there was no end for my mother. The mind plays tricks sometimes. Who has not imagined stepping off the cliffs of the Palisades, for instance, into sheer atmosphere and, after a lovely, windswept, all too brief drop, being embraced, caught by the beautiful swaying maple trees, their arms outstretched with longing, far, far below? Only one step more to crazyland. Not that difficult to imagine. Most people live in a false sense of reality anyway. So, why not this mother. My mother.

Crazy as could be, she was then sent home, without any fucking help, to care for a one-and-a-half year old and a four-month old. Her illness granted a certain degree of freedom. I forgot to pick up bread and milk at the supermarket because I'm crazy. I forgot to walk the rabbit and feed the duck because I'm crazy. I forgot to pick up my daughter at whatever school that was, oh, yes, kindergarten, because I am stark raving nuts! I was very very jealous of her for years.

My aunt entered the house the next day and found my mother in the kitchen, banging her head against the wall, me running about buck naked except for my shoes, with which, from time-to-time, I stomped on my infant brother who lay in his crib and whose bottle I sorely wanted. I had, apparently, just palmed the bottle, and was climbing out through the bars, when she grabbed me. It took longer to stop my mother. She had, apparently, been going at it – the head banging -- for an hour and a half, though I have no recollection of this fact.

She would beat me into a damp cemented corner of the basement, pummeling my back, which I arched like an animal, offering up the hard knobs of my spine, the extensions of my ribs, my tailbone, and my preferred beating place, my white, soft ass. I learned early that the back is strong. Much stronger than the stomach, throat and eyes. When your nemesis has cunning, of course, you must never turn your back. But when she is weak and out of control, you must, so as to save both of you. At such times, hunched up, contracting and expanding like a drum to the rhythm of her blows, covering my face with my arms and trying to make the rest of me very small, I could feel the grind of the cement walls as I pushed up against them.

Loose mortar, like hard uncooked rice, the crumbled bonding material indented my forearms, wrists and shoulders, burning when I moved. It was meant to hold things together. So real it felt, so much realer than what was happening, that I could actually taste its grit in my mouth. Synesthesia they call this, when one sense supplies the input for another: hearing colors, tasting shapes, seeing tastes. When you see green and taste lime for instance, or flex a muscle and release a color, say pink, against the sky. Or when you orgasm and, opening your eyes, spy those large frayed purple and green petals, after-images of sex, giant dying flowers. At such times we enter the realm of poets. We are sensorially privileged, hypersensitive to life's antipathetic connections and disconnections. Crumbling bonding material. This was what I tasted through my skin, the very walls reinforcing the true state of affairs. She was not always this way, of course, or I would not be here. Let me make one thing clear. I loved my mother.

This happened more than once. I faced it alone.

Over the years, the family, unable to grasp the tragedy, looked to lay blame. My

father's sisters, Zia and Tina, said it was my mother's sister Clara's fault, for telling my mother what the doctors clearly said should not be told. My mother, Pauline, said it was my brother Tony's fault for kicking both before and after he was born. My maternal grandmother Rose said it was my father Sam's fault for (sanely) not wanting to marry her daughter Pauline at all. For being pushed into it. We would not have had Sam, she said, except Pauline wanted him and that was all. My paternal grandmother Concetta blamed my maternal grandmother Rose for passing on her crazy schizophrenic genes. We kids, all cousins – Lisa, Maria, Gianni, Frankie and Mike - blamed my paternal grandmother Concetta for the vendetta she waged against my maternal grandmother Rose, where relatives from one family would never set foot in the houses of relatives of the other family – so my poor parents had to drag us back and forth, back and forth every weekend, Saturdays with the Sepia's and Sundays with the Brancato's -- a war that went on until both grandmothers died. My maternal uncles – there were several – Tony, Sal, Nunzio and so on -- believed it was my harmonica playing uncle Sal's fault for not finding my mother soon enough, specifically for dilly-dallying with “those nurses, Norma, Miriam and Aretha and his songs”. They were just jealous. Both grandmothers blamed their husbands, I never knew their first names, because that was how women kept men in line. It was my dead maternal grandfather's fault for living until the first man walked on the moon, thus chewing up the family resources. It was my dead paternal grandfather's fault for dying young and throwing his wife into working penury because unlike my mother's mother Rose, who had quite a mouth, my father's mother Concetta was a lady, unable to yell loud enough at anyone but the immediate family, unable to unionize her sweatshop or firmly shut it down, only to make her own children – Zia, Tina and Sam -- into

quivering slabs of jello, a state of inaction that, after she created it, she would often rail about as also her dead no-name husband's fault. Not to be outdone, my father thought it was my fault, for having weakened my mother by using up all of her calcium and iron, though I later made sure she ate spinach and steak all the time. My harmonica-playing uncle Sal, thoroughly pissed off by now, insisted it was my mother's fault for turning down the Fred Astaire college scholarship to marry my father, thus dissing the greatest dance-man of all time. My littlest cousins, Loretta, Joanie, Annette, Steven, Ernie, Laura, Gianni, Craig, who were not even born then but felt a need to pontificate, like people who criticize films they have not yet seen and do not even intend to sit through, believed it was mostly the fault of my gay closeted cousin Junior, who still thinks we don't know. My poorest uncles – there were nine -- blamed my one rich uncle and his Westchester country club clan. My less religious, more feminist second cousins – fourteen of those -- blamed the young doctors, the old nurses, the impoverished hospital, the over-prescribed medications and fundamentalist belief in God. Friends who were like family and my one Jewish aunt, Merele, still having to cultivate favor, took a distant route and blamed the Pope, the church, the priests, the nuns and God. They forewent redemption, trying to stay on everyone's good side. Our pets Pooki and Lewis pointed paws at everything from kitty litter to old shoes. Even our goldfish, Jim, blubbering in his glass bowl, had a point of view, blaming my mother's unfortunate proximity to his fish food. In the end, this was what the family told me, the credo I learned to live by. There was one fact upon which we all agreed: "There's nothing wrong with your mother. Paula, your mother is fine."

This would have been a good time for re-gifting. But I was a greedy child.

The beatings, I thought, were what it would be like to be in prison. Sensory explosions. Far, far away. I could see, I could hear, I could feel her touch, hot and rapid some times, slow as a boulder at others, but like a sedated patient, none of what I sensed was actually happening to me. My pain was over there somewhere in a corner across the room. I have always been mistaken in this way, my world filled with ambiguity and surprise. "I will give you a ring tomorrow" might mean someone would actually give me jewelry. I would spend days thinking about the actual kind of jewelry. Italian 14 k gold. British crown diamonds. The jade of Nefertiti. When I was beaten or brushed aside in any way – "I'll give you a ring tomorrow!" -- my mind would go elsewhere, to the seashore where we had been a handful of times, or kneeling in front of my vanity, praying to the Virgin Mary for deliverance, placing in front of her statue a fistful of the finest dandelions. Dandy lions. Fit for a Queen.

Sometimes my mother was not so fast. Her darting, dashing energy would turn back on itself -- she was in the service of it and not the other way around – sending her over and over the same ground until she would get confused. Then I got away, on good days as far as the yard when she chased me, where I crouched in the sun against the grounding wall, wet grass cushioning my knees, and hugged the bricks of the house. They were so red, so gritty. I wanted to swipe myself against them and just bleed, as if that would release me. This is why people do odd things, like hurt themselves. To feel what they cannot feel, a sharp quick cut, a slow cigarette burn, so as to distract themselves from the equivalent of a broken leg. To not feel what they can. People commit suicide, not to kill themselves but to finish pain.

My mother said words too. She screamed then. *Che stupida!* How stupid I was.

Egoista! How selfish. *T'uccidero!* How, in particular, she planned to tie me up and kill me. What saved me during the beatings was that I knew things existed other than her. Yellow sun, red bricks, green grass, yellow, red and green lights made white if you swirled them together. Mixing them as pigments made black. Yellow, red and green were also the colors of certain sickly sweet lollipops and candy canes. The sugar-coated guilt she would feel after, that I would have to save her from, sometimes for hours, sometimes days, several years when she knocked my teeth out once. She smacked me across the mouth, backhanded me. Her wedding ring did the rest. My two lower front teeth exploded and I spit them, bloody, down the drain. "It's only baby teeth," she insisted. But they were adult teeth. I was 10. She could do things to my body, certainly, but she could not control my thoughts and so I thought of the orange soda pop my grandmother sometimes gave me mixed with tablespoons of red wine. I thought of the thinness of my legs and would I ever get any hips or breasts. I thought about places I'd read about in books, the snowy Russia of Tolstoy's War and Peace, the fiery attic in Jane Eyre, Narnia in the Witch and the Wardrobe. I put myself there. Anything till the beating was over. Strange thoughts appeared. Do your eyes get squashed when you sleep and is that why, when you wake up, it is always so difficult to focus? Or how much I really wanted to kick Terry Dorino's ass in the 50 yard dash because she had long blond curly hair, almost perfect. I was taller than her, than most girls, until the second grade. She was a big girl, Terry, and never let me forget it, slapping the basketball from my hands as I dribbled full tilt across the key, making an empty-handed jump shot. She swatted my victories away from my fingertips and into her own large mitts as casually as she picked a nit off her sweater. Anything to get the hell out of there. It was then I began

to write stories.

I often wondered during these beatings, many of which were sustained, or came in chapters, wasn't my mother getting tired already? She was breathing hard but her breath was never acrid. And her sweat, even as her hands slipped off me, was lovely, a mix of eggshells, salt and sand. When I was not so quick, she would catch and twirl me around by my ponytail, up, up through the air, round and round, in ever widening arcs, my feet trailing up and down like the hem of a skirt, never touching the ground. By a certain age, when I was still a smallish 8 or 9 and not yet weighing enough to make her tired, I became adept at pulling back on my hair so as to hold it onto my scalp when she swung me, so that only the hair itself, and not my scalp, would break.

She hit my back, slapped my face and kicked my ribs. Once she became so scared of what she might do, she threw me down a flight of stairs. Or rather a stoop. A stoop is five or six brick steps which lead to the entryway of a house. A stoop is shamefully out in the open. Passersby would see me, flailing arms, legs, head then walk on by without stopping. That is why they call them passersby. They are like bad lovers who come into your life to watch your story then bail out when it seems a scene or two might actually concern them. I would like to say this is what people did *in those days*, but they do it still. No one likes trouble. An abused child reeks of trouble: trouble that bore them, trouble that is happening to them and trouble they will one day turn on the world. Our neighbors could also see but they too turned their eyes away, filled with the guilt of knowing that this concerned them, and not just the neighbors who were family either. It was happening right out there on the stoop and on the lawn, for goodness sake, which, in suburbia is like a happening in international waters. Everyone's touched by it,

perhaps, but no one's quite sure whose jurisdiction should fix the problem. "Pull", my mother would plead with those tiger lily eyes. That is what I thought she was saying, "Pull." She would want the devil out of her. I too wanted an exorcism. Or at least, not to be hit again. I wanted to pull the devil out and put her soul back, but I was only a wild intractable child, unable to hold her pain inside. I was only able to hold her, finally. No mean feat, as she was flapping about like a windmill. To wrap myself around her big black heart, like a straight jacket, straining to calm her down. Until I too would mew like a kitten, my own black heart, beating, finally. My own tiger lily eyes.

I have spent my whole life trying to put these two things together, my mother and me, me and my mother. Like a fish caught in her eddy, I swim from side to side.