

My Mother's Birthday

It is my mother's birthday today, July 5th when I am writing this. There's no reason to choose the perfect card with just the right words. It seems pointless to write my own birthday message to her, to craft the words that remind her who she was in my eyes, what force she was in my life, what she taught and shared with me.

My mother has Alzheimer's and today and yesterday and all the remaining days no longer have a name or any significance to them. And most days I grieve that the memories that have been long extinguished for my mother include me. Of all the faces and names that have faded from her memory, she forgot me first. She remembered her nieces and nephews and friends long after she had forgotten me. And I am transformed into a child, waiting to be chosen on a team for pick-up baseball. I'm still standing at the edge of the ball diamond while everyone else has a spot, has run off to play. I am forgotten.

I'm reluctant to confess my sorrow at being the first memory to slip from my mother's grip. It is selfish of me, childish. What my mother has lost is a far greater tragedy than mine, more cruel. But still, my truth just is, the wound is real despite feeling shame in my admission.

I think I sometimes expect that life shouldn't come with any discomfort, any bumps or bruises. I am surprised when it does, often disappointed. I was riding my bike the other day and the path was even and solid and it wound between giant rose bushes smothered in blooms and the fragrance enveloped me like an ambrosial cloud. The sun was perfect, just warm and comfortable, not hot and burning. The breeze was gentle, an almost mist on my face and arms. I was smiling a huge involuntary smile and I was thinking that when life changes, not if but when, I hope I can remember this moment, when everything was absolutely perfect.

I wonder what moments my mother clung to when she knew she was forgetting more than she could remember. I wonder which instant she dug her nails into and held most tightly to, what sounds she tried to hear, what tune she tried to hum, what favourite poem, what colour. I wonder if she tried to hold on to the sound of her own mother's voice.

I realize now it is my obligation, my lucky duty to remember for my mother, to brush her hair the way she loved it done, smoothing it back and gently running the bristles up the back of her neck until she shivered. So perhaps I would write on her birthday card that I continue to hear her play the piano, see her knees bouncing in rhythm, her head thrown back in laughter, her talent innate, an ease to her as simple as learning to walk. I'd tell her about her passion to teach, standing at the front of her class challenging her students to learn and giving them the best parts of herself. I'd remind her of her love for parties and people and fun. I'd giggle about seeing someone wearing red high heels and wanting to point and tell her that my mother loved red high heels. Oh how she loved shoes. I'd tell her that her eyes are more black than brown and her perfect fingernails that I never saw her fussing over. I'd write about the big pot of cocoa bubbling on her stove for all the many who came tobogganing at our farm. I'd applaud the way she shrugged off things that disappointed and chose instead to focus on what created joy. I'd thank her for all she taught me. She told me not to let the word *can't* creep into my vocabulary. "Keep that word out," she told me.

Then I'd put my loss up on the shelf, behind the photos of her shining face, her eager eyes. It's not about me. It was never supposed to be.

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