

Mother's Bosom

I was in a cab heading to LIC. I had just left my friend's apartment in Astoria. Those two adjacent Queens neighborhoods were linked by Northern Blvd., a daily pipeline for thousands of cars. The elevated subway track snakes above it, shadowing the wide curves of the road.

We sped through an area that looked industrial, then one that looked more like a war zone with excavations left and right where developers had flattened every structure, cleared every empty lot, and generally stamped out anything that was there before so they could get at the gold. They knew that every swanky residential building they could raise from the reclaimed ground would make them more money than finding oil.

We coasted through Long Island City, a real estate bonanza for new residential developments, and flypaper

for dozens of builders, both big and small. The signs of overbuilding were everywhere. One night you might pass a parking garage filled with hundreds of cars and then the next morning you'd blink and scratch your head at the same building, now as empty as the streets in a zombie movie. It would be boarded up, effectively cocooned within acres of hideous green sheetrock, the type the developers use to broadcast the fact that they are the mighty champions of change here. Silhouettes that had stood for decades could be swept away in a flash flood of property speculation.

This neighborhood was just 15 minutes away from Manhattan, which made it ideal for me. I lived on the other side, right by the river, away from the construction zone, but I passed it every time a cab took me from Astoria back to the other side of LIC by Center Boulevard.

I was watching it go up every day. Each cab ride gave me a new view like a single frame from a movie. I should have taken snapshots, then strung them together and watched it grow while I munched popcorn.

Perhaps the prospect of change was what prompted me to call mom. I dialed mechanically. I would never normally reach out to her. I never looked forward to hearing her voice or sharing her company. I didn't dislike her, it was just that after the childhood I'd had I was left with a deep ambivalence.

I remembered her reaction to my dad's non-stop drinking spree. The endless arguments were unsettling at first but then they dwindled to mere white noise in the background, and it's a bad sign when that happens. It's like if you can watch a car crash without feeling empathy, then you know that something inside you has left. Watch your parents fight for the thousandth time and it's just the same. I became oblivious, conditioned. This dramaless

drama was how it was for me until the day she left, but I was a teenager when my parents split, so raging hormones were a distraction that helped me to tune out from it.

Afterwards, I grew somewhat distant from my mother.

She became peripheral, no more a part of my life than a character in a film that I'd once watched. You'll

understand this is somewhat difficult to discuss, in part, because in this culture, and in most cultures, motherhood is revered. It's a force of nature that we are trained to respect automatically, and criticism of motherhood is not always heard in the way it should be. I suppose it's because they give you life, but like mine, they don't always make it easy for you to live. I've noticed that I sabotage myself at times, and then blame others for it. When your parents don't parent this is one of the things that happens. You recreate the chaos and look in vain for rescue that doesn't come.

(or set up the conditions to fall victim of my own conspiracy so I can always blame another for my own sabotage- this needs work) . (Not sure I've nailed this)

When my father passed away I left the apartment, then the town and eventually the country. I had lost two parents and it propelled me to new places. In a way, this was an unconscious escape from my family, an escape from Bulgaria, my country of origin, and I did not miss it any more than I missed my mom.

She became more like a fairy from some myth, or maybe like the Virgin Mary from the Christian myth. But was she in my story or was I in hers, a character there to help make the story new? She was a surrogate mother, a biological substitute who'd just provided a conduit into this world and nothing more, nothing less. We had our moments, and she loved me, but in a different way from the usual, whatever that is. I tried to imagine how a mother usually loves and to picture the ideal mother, but

what was the point of imagining? I was locked into this drama. At other times, I thought of her love as being almost supernatural. There was something divine about it. She was the reincarnation of light in a never-aging body. Her sparrow-like frame held a towering spirit that left me confused. Sometimes, I tried to understand but her language was incomprehensible, and she spoke in adjectives that spilled out and ran off in every direction. There was no pinning them down.

Like a new-age pop station, she bristled with beauty, niceness, courage, and loveliness. Maybe she was speaking from the heart, but it was a heart without a mind (and that made me hate those who would suggest that I am always intellectualizing things, and it was a matter of the “heart”, not the mind....) I thought she had lost her mind, somewhere in the many life experiences that hadn't gone her way (so she has gone with the wind).(Not sure

that fits.) She was like a fawn jumping around in a glorious forever-green field of bamboozlement.

Sometimes, I would attempt to explain to her that it was important to pay attention to income, and to make sure that we were well off since Monday she would inevitably reach retirement age and work would become impossible. But then she would explain that “God” knew things and she was His child and she would be taken care of.

She was right of course. God was looking after her, sending her money through me. Not all the time though, but she always managed to make ends meet. Perhaps this means she did have divine help? (sometimes, other times it remained a mystery how she met ends...). God had given her a son who was blessed with the gift of logic, and who perceived the deep connectedness between not having any money, starvation and homelessness (wow, funny me could it be that sometimes caught up in this

logical connectedness, I could not see her fairy tale domain).

I would get angry at her, because I thought she was a hypocrite. She would not even attempt to acknowledge the rational, common sense requirements of physical life. Her blind spot for the connection between cause and effect was hugely irritating to me, made worse by the fact that I wanted to change her, but was never able to. Of course, she wanted to change me too.

Her messages never made it to my inbox because I devoted them to a separate mom spam folder. I did not have the time to review them, nor read all about the “Cosmology from the teacher Peter Dunov and his white brotherhood”, “The pentagram and the enlightenment society”, “The fabric of the cosmos”, “36 touches for self-healing”, “Sacred places with energy healing in Bulgaria” and all the rest of it. I consigned those articles to an electronic bin and still considered the space they took up

in the system to be a waste. Those bytes of information piled up like a layer of dust that threatened my sanity and derail me from my path of building a stable life, but somehow, I could never bring myself to delete them entirely. (why)

What does it mean to love someone? Is it to accept them as they are, insanity and all? What if the insane person is your mother? How can you accept her for who she is then?

I don't have answers. AA tells the recovering addict to take life one day at a time, so that is what I do. I took a deep breath, dialed her number directly (something I rarely did) and she answered.

“Da,” which meant yes.

“Hi Mom, do you remember you told me that you spoke to a fortuneteller who told you that I would be more prolific in my mid 50's. Was that true?”

I think I wanted distraction from my dark thoughts(what), and reassurance from my mother, even if it came in the form of something illogical (even better). A few months before, when she recalled how a fortune teller had promised that my life would be all roses in my 50s, I diverted this message to the spam folder in my head. But now, my diagnosis had driven me to dig for hope everywhere, even in the pile marked “mom’s absurdities”. If some bit of nonsense could be read as proof that I would survive, then I was willing to take it. Any port in a storm.

“Razbira se, Dode” she confirmed.

“Mom, I hope I was a good son”, I began, a note of sadness in my voice. I felt nostalgic for motherly compassion. The strong Atlas I had seen myself as was no more. He had cracked and the news about my condition was crushing me.

Apart from the reassurance, I think I needed to find a way to tell her that things were not good. Or maybe I was saying goodbye? It felt as if I was playing out some kind of drama, a scene near the end of the story where the lost son returns to his mother's bosom.

“Hi Dode”, she said, using my childhood nickname. In her mind I was still the little boy, the image frozen in time, and it did not matter that I was a man in my mid 30's now. That simple name conjured memories for us both, I think. In her mind she was probably picking up the little curly haired boy in her arms and carrying him around. She could physically lift me from one place and transplant me somewhere else, which feels monumental at that age.

In my own head I was the little boy of 5 who was digging in the ice-cream bowl, scooping it up and shoving it in my mouth, throwing angry jealous eyebrows at her covering my bowl when she tried to sneak her spoon in.

“Kak si?”, she said, a general enquiry about how I was, no different from “How’s it going?” It’s a greeting that isn’t seriously expected to be answered at length, an answer of “fine” is expected, which I wanted to do, but I also wanted to say that actually, no, I was not fine, things were looking bad, but I couldn’t do that either, so without language and with so much backed up in me I burst out crying, reduced to a gushing snotty mess in seconds. It felt like I was trying to vomit knots of emotions. I convulsed in front of my mother, the person that I felt the least inclined to show my weak side to.

I felt ashamed of myself but then felt surprised at the shame. Despite the deluge it was like a part of me was taking notes. I certainly realized that I didn’t mind showing weakness in front of my girlfriend, or my friends but my mother? To do that was sacrilege. It broke the rules of my self-built jailhouse, a speculative piece of real estate I had always been determined to control.

I used to call her Nadia, her first name, an unconscious distancing from the weak(she was not really weak, I perceived her as such , she was actually strong enough to find strength to leave her only son behind since this was his will....) mother who had left me. I did not use “mom”, but now that she knew how vulnerable I was it was back on my lips once more.

(what I accepted as Her old betrayal lived in me like a wet infected wound gushing pus, and no matter how hard I tried to rationalize her behavior back then and forgive her... or have I ? I just assumed I did in order to feel better with myself and perceive myself as the one more well integrated, elated , logically coherent individual who has overcame my child trauma and can live like a perfect adult), my adult self couldn't subdue the emotional pain of the child's torn family. I did not blame her for it. That would be like blaming an illness, maybe hereditary predisposition that just made me different in life (tough

one) . But it was a hard lesson to learn that I was helpless then and it was hard to know that I was still helpless now(wow, so there is another argument here our independence is stronger when we recognize the chains of our dependency to others). The past could not be changed and the future was getting shorter.

“Kkavo ima, Dode?” she continued, and the sound of her voice trembled and shrank to the size of a rodent’s squeak. I did not want to worry her but some things have to be said, “I have a brain tumor and I am scheduled for surgery on the 6th of March”. The cab driver left me at Center Blvd.

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