

## In a Strange Sort of Way

I've always been slightly afraid of my mother. She eats things, sucking them inside of her. It's always an accident, but that doesn't take the edge off the loss. I had a cat once. His name was Buffy. His wide amber eyes peeked out of soft, peachy fur. I loved him. She did too. There's something you should know about my mother. She eats the things she loves.

I remember the day he died. I was struggling with the adjustment to higher levels of math. We rented *Top Hat* from the video store one afternoon as a treat. We never rent anymore because we've lost so many films, but mastering proofs demanded some sort of cinematic sacrifice. I pondered this as I went into the kitchen.

Decidedly low on supplies, I made scrambled eggs. Watching the liquid solidify, crackling, I pushed the eggs around a bit with a wooden spatula. While I waited for them to congeal, she sat down on the couch, the cracked leather cushions flattening immediately. She propped her feet up on the opposite arm rest. When they were done, I brought us platefuls of fluffy yellow eggs on ugly glass plates. She cuddled my cat close on her lap, stroking his soft fur, watching Ginger Rodgers spinning out of Fred's arms. I sat on the old recliner, my math homework on my knees. I had four or five problems to go before I was free.

As she shifted her position on the couch, I reluctantly pulled my eyes from the screen. She didn't look over at me, eyes locked on the T.V. Hugging him tighter to her chest, she forgot. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the furry bundle began to slide into her junkyard of a stomach. We both forgot ourselves. My math lay untouched on my lap, as I watched Fred and Ginger dance in the gazebo. They were so beautiful, so perfectly preserved. I marveled at the way so much makeup combined

with dozens of pin curls could seem almost natural in the world of black and white cinema. My mother curled in on herself, hugging Buffy close. A moment later, he was gone, swallowed. She didn't notice when he batted softly at the inside of her stomach. She didn't notice when he unsheathed his claws, sharpening their points on her tender skin; there was too much in there to notice. His claws slid through her organs like a spoon through warm tapioca pudding, separating, dividing. When they were removed, everything returned to its place. She said it felt like a baby's fingers stroking her skin. She stood up when the movie was over. She said she was awfully hungry; she wanted another batch of eggs. It wasn't until the next day that we noticed that Buffy was gone. Maybe he ran off around the tap sequence to terrorize the other cats in the neighborhood, she offered as an excuse. That poor cat never had a chance, eaten by my terrible, beautiful mother.

My mother doesn't do small spaces, her body spilling over armrests, through the bench slats like pudding, mushy, pliable. One time at the beach, she lay down on a bottle of sunscreen. She didn't really notice when the plastic just slid itself into her stomach, joining her vast collection of SPF 70. Here's the thing, though. Not much actually gets digested. It just sits there in a jumbled heap. She often has an upset stomach, but she's yet to replace her *joie de vivre* with apathy. To me, she's beautiful in a strange sort of way.

Sometimes, when she's quite sure that she's alone, she sits on the front stoop to stare at the trees. That's one thing about my mother. She carries her love with her wherever she goes.

She wasn't always large. Once she was quite thin with spindly fingers, but that was when she loved little. She liked food; chocolate was her vice. She still has spindly fingers and skinny arms, but the bulk of her torso has expanded.

When I took the time to really notice, I saw the list grow to include soft blankets, cats, sunscreen, sand, feathers, fields, Japanese stationary, purple eye makeup, silver watches. I hated to think of what's inside her, although such thoughts are inevitable, really. She's eaten multiple necklaces, various strands of pearls tangling into a clumpy knot. Letters from friends frequently disappear unopened; her excitement of receiving them in the first place is enough to make her hungry. She swallowed her guitar once. Every so often, I can hear the melodic hum of the strings being knocked against her grandmother's bureau. We've had to buy *Breakfast At Tiffany's* twice.

Oh, how she loved my father. Or so I like to think. They met when she was supposed to be in college. My father was a sandwich artist at the grocery. I don't remember him much. They didn't stay together very long. Although he used to come see me every so often, he hasn't been around in the last couple years. I have pictures; I'm fairly certain of where my nose comes from. She must have loved him, I'm sure of it.

Once, my mother took me fishing.

"No one can properly grow up without going fishing," she said.

We went to the pier to sit with the fisherman, watching them pull up their catch. I didn't notice much at first, except for the waving lines and the low conversations in Spanish. I didn't speak the language, but I knew it when I heard it. My mother loved it, watching the hooked fish jump on the lines. She thought they were beautiful in a terrible sort of way, their scales glinting in the sun, throwing off droplets of water, their gills heaving. Finally, she asked one of the men if I could have a try. It took some haggling; he was not particularly amenable to the idea. When I had that fishing pole in my hands, I felt weighted down. I wondered if I would

fall off the pier into the sea. I wondered if the man would be mad if the above occurred. I felt the pull of the waves on the line, watched it weave from left to right, back again. After a while, something pulled, lightly nibbling. Then, harder. The man saw. He yanked the pole out of my hands, jerking up the line to reel in the fish. For me, this was still new, the ultimate excitement. In my memories, I colored the day with exclamations. The excitement was unbound with all the men jumping up to crowd around us, yelling, laughing, joking. But in reality, no one cared but me and my mother. We jumped up and down. Her eyes were bright, happy with anticipation. I tugged on the hem of the man's shirt, desperate to see that fish.

When he hauled it up at last, my mother pushed me closer, urging me to touch the wet, quivering sea creature. Afraid suddenly, slightly horrified at the creature's blank eyes, I stepped away, hiding behind her. The man took a step forward, presumably to begin unhooking the fish from the line to stash it in his ice chest. The fish was jumping on the line, flipping its tail. It thrashed, swinging straight at my mother, whose stomach opened up and swallowed the fish easily, resealing in a blink.

The man was horrified. He began yelling to the others, pointing at where the strong fishing wire seemed to be growing out of my mother's stomach. He tugged on the wire, but the fish was stuck. My mother loved it, giggling at the sensations of the wiggling fish. There was no way to renounce her affections to retrieve the fish, so he cut the line with his pocket knife, grumbling in Spanish. Her stomach quivered a bit. You could see the fish jumping before it quickly became quite still.

Once, my friend found a Canadian penny at the bottom of his shoe.

"If it's heads-up, always pick up a penny," he said.

We were walking down Fairfax, after sandwiches at Canter's. He stooped down to collect a forgotten coin. He cradled the penny in the space above his palm, at the juncture between hand and fingers. It was old, minted in 1981, a deeper copper than that of the dozens of new pennies in my wallet.

"Hey, you want this?" he asked, offering it to me.

"Sure," I said. Examining it closely, I traced the delicate maple leaves embossed on one side. "Thanks."

I stuck it in my pocket, fingers shoving it deep so it wouldn't slip out unnoticed. It had no weight to it. After a couple blocks, I forgot it was there. That night, when I came home, when I removed my cell phone, a fistful of crisp dollar bills from my pockets, but the penny stayed deep in the folds of the fabric. Kicking off my shoes, I padded into the living room in my ratty white socks. I snaked my hand down into my pocket, pulling out my prize. We sat together, my mother and I, penny resting on my armrest, while we ate chicken apple sausages and strawberries for dinner.

I stuck an entire sausage on my fork, nibbling from both ends while we watched re-runs of *The Nanny* on T.V. When my food was done, I tossed the penny from hand to hand, holding it up close to the light bulb of my reading lamp, running the pads of my thumb over the warm metal. She asked what I was doing.

"It's a penny," I said.

She smiled, held up her hands, inviting me to toss it her way. I was tired of being wary. I threw the penny to her, like she was a normal mother who could safely pet cats, receive postcards or admire old furniture. She missed. The coin slid down into the depths of her stomach, a new ornament for the grouping of objects accumulating there. I heard a soft ping as it hit something in the junkyard. She didn't

apologize or twist around to send me apologetic looks from her seat on the couch.

We watched the remains of the episode quietly without laughter. When it was over, I went upstairs without busing my plate. I didn't wish her goodnight.

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We were out of light bulbs. We had been borrowing from the neighbors, as a just-this-once kind of thing, except repeatedly. But finally, our subtle exploitation of the building had to come to an end. I asked Mrs. Moretti for two of them, but she said no, eyes narrowed; we were always borrowing things that couldn't be returned. I drove us to the hardware store, my mother sitting in the center of the back seat. When we pulled into the parking lot, I pushed my sunglasses up to rest on top of my head.

"Don't touch anything, okay?"

The last time we went to a hardware store, she ate a whole container of shiny new bolts; we had to shell out 50 bucks for the drawer.

The store was a great warehouse. The aisles seemed to go for miles. She waddled behind me towards the lighting fixtures. Walking through the store with my mother was like walking downtown with an elephant. It's not just that she's big. You draw the attention of everyone in the immediate area. You slap on a circus smile while they stare unabashedly. Sometimes, you can see the outlines of objects pushing against the skin, her stomach about to explode. I remember hearing the crystals that dangled from Grandmother's green glass lamp clink against each other, the shape of a book pressed against her side.

When we got to the part of the aisle with the light bulbs, I told my mother to stay put. She did, at first, but after a while, she waddled over to where I stood, comparing different types. I favored the standard ones, the ones with the harsh,

yellow light, which made everyone look bad; those were the cheapest. We could get four for \$3.99. But my mother grabbed the expensive ones that produced that calming soft, white light. I wasn't surprised when we left with the nice ones. My mother was anything but practical, but I didn't mind, not really.

Installing them, I stood on a step stool, unscrewing the old dusty bulbs, placing them on the thick towel I put down beside the stool. The ceiling was still slightly out of reach; I had to stand on my toes. She stood beside me, opening the package. They were shiny and delicate, the thin light from outside dancing on the rounded surface of the light bulbs. She cradled them in her hands, staring down at our purchase. Jokingly, I poked one lightly. For a second, I wondered if it would pop. Light bulb intact, she handed it to me to screw into the fixture. When I asked for a second, they were gone. The package lay empty on the ground, each one of the delicate glass eggs swallowed.

You might be wondering where I am now. Sometimes, I wonder that too. Waking life seems but a dream. I am inside my mother. Of all the things she loved, she saved me for last.

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When my grandma died last February, we flew out to fix the funeral arrangements. I was faintly upset by this, being that we've been on separate coasts since I can remember, divided by the Midwest. We were always flying back and forth, but I never was able to spend enough time with her. I always wanted to look at her face, but memories of photographs will have to do. In the airport, I was already unhappy; the Starbucks Barista screwed up my Chai tea latte. How that is actually possible, I don't know, but that's just me. On top of that, the plane was full. I distinctly remember the smell of the carpet and the sound of the air conditioning spurring to

life. We had seats 26 B and C. I was delegated to the window seat. My mother took the middle.

She's always dreamt of meeting a man on an airplane. She thinks it's the most romantic idea in the world. I think it's all bullshit brought on by too many episodes of *The Young and the Restless*. Because of this ridiculous romanticism, I've found myself accompanying her on flights to Sacramento, only to return an hour or so later after sitting in the airport. Needless to say, we travel a lot.

An attractive man, late thirties, early forties strode purposefully down the aisle. I knew that the thumping I heard was her heart, not that guy in 22 A trying to cram his suitcase into the overhead bin. As he drew closer, I considered the possibility of her dreams coming true: sitting next to this specimen for a grand total of five hours and thirteen minutes, bonding over their love of ordering tomato juice on airplanes, falling in love, never looking back. Alas, he sat one row in front of us. Poor Dear. She snatched up the Air-Mall catalog, flipping the pages noisily.

After he sat, my mother elbowed me into switching seats with her. Just in case his pillow fell through the crack, she wanted to be the one to retrieve it for him. A few minutes later, a woman almost larger than my mother sat down beside me. I felt cramped, claustrophobic for the first time in my life. I leaned my upper body as close to my seat back as possible, hoping to have a margin of space between my arm and my mother's body. Instead, she overflowed, her arm pressed against mine. I could feel the distinct shape of stiletto heels digging into my side underneath the armrest. As the stewardess checked the aisle for takeoff, I considered asking her for help, although I knew the plane was full; it was ridiculous to expect my mother to fit into one seat.



In the instants after take-off, I tried to relax into the back of my seat. We shot higher and higher up into the sky. I tried not to think about the cramped seats and the feeling of nausea that was flooding up inside me. I elbowed her in the side, but all I hit was the case of strawberry flavored soda that she swallowed in the grocery last month. My elbow was numb. I considered swatting the side of her head, but that's not what you do to your mother.

Once again, I was struck by the privacy. How often do you notice other people on an airplane? I mean, really. You never see anyone but your seatmates until you're at the baggage claim, unless you get up to go to the bathroom. Other than that, though, it's a pretty solitary flight. I love the fact that everyone is packed in close, yet no one speaks. If you lean forward into the seat in front of you, craning your head back, maybe you can see what the person in 25 A is doing. Maybe. I wouldn't know; I always try slogging through *War and Peace* on planes.

Forty minutes later, they were sleeping, the stranger and my mother. Pressed against her side, I felt her stomach give a bit, becoming flexible and doughy. I tried moving away, leaning as far away as possible, but her mass followed me, sticking like dough to my arms. Her sides seemed to suck me in, pulling my right arm into her body. I swatted her with my other hand, tapping her forehead with my index finger, kicking her. She merely grunted and shifted a bit. When the stewardess passed by with drinks, they were both still asleep. I called out for assistance, but she didn't even notice me. My forehead pressed against the seat back in front of me, she thought I was asleep too. My breathing came faster, shallow, slightly panicked as I began to see the reality of my situation. She was swallowing me. There wasn't anything I could do.

I felt sick then, my forehead warm, the colors of the room shifting a bit, everything white-violet dizzy. I shut my eyes then, taking slow deep breaths in an attempt to calm myself. It wasn't working.

Ten minutes later, her body enveloped me, the window to the outside world closing with a pop. I was sealed inside of her.

I've had quite a while to contemplate my fate. I will never have a future. Perhaps when she dies, I'll get out. Other than that, possibilities of escape seem rather bleak. It's the ultimate declaration of love, I suppose, but it's intensely uncomfortable in here. I am rolled up into a ball. I sit face to face with my father, busying myself with chronicling these events, rather than speak. He's been silent for so long; I have nothing to say. I live surrounded by her loves: glass egg light bulbs, peacock feathers, dozens of unopened letters, awful Nora Roberts novels, that missing DVD of *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, her favorite heels, layers of shiny bolts cover the floor. That spirited fish is long dead, of course, but its bones lie on the floor of this place. Buffy, too, is here still. He sleeps mostly, unused to human company. I find it peaceful to pet him, watch his slow breaths. He's ten now, almost ready to die, but still hanging on.

I am living with a time capsule of my childhood memories interspersed with a past I didn't know. It's cramped here, with everything on top of everything else, but it's a simple existence in a way, to be loved so completely that you need nothing else. Shock will wear off eventually, I assume; bitterness will grow in its place, perhaps quiet acceptance. Of all the things she loved, she saved me for last.