OASIS

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I had never seen a dead body before. I don't know what I thought it would look like, maybe ashy blue, shriveled, visibly stiff; very, very dead. But Bea was herself, heavy, filling her space, eyes peacefully closed, knowing she was where she belonged.

This isn't how my mother looked, many years later, as I sat alone beside her still pink body in the Solomon Schecter funeral home. Mom's lips were pursed. A tiny lace doily perched accusingly on her head as though to say, "I don't belong in this situation, and if you had only been a better daughter, I wouldn't be here." Even in death, my mother was waiting by the phone for me to call, so she could accuse me of not calling often enough. Once when I asked her why she didn't call me, she said that wasn't her job.

Bea, on the other hand, lay tranquilly, accusing no one. But I wasn't her daughter. Maybe her own daughter would tell another story.

Bea came into my life when I was a young mother, newly arrived in Boston with a small child and struggling to figure out who I was and where I was going. She answered my ad in the Boston Globe for a part-time housekeeper, filling my doorway with her comforting bulk, much as she later filled her coffin.

Bea stayed with me for many years, keeping my house and making succulent apple pies and roasted vegetables that we privately called "vegetables in grease." I never asked the secret to their delectability because I feared the answer, which was most likely lard.

Be that as it may, all good things come to an end, and ultimately Bea retired. We stayed in touch from time to time, with news of her husband's garage in Roxbury, or of the grandchildren that she sometimes brought with her on school vacation days.

The years passed, my small child grew up, I launched a career, and Bea and I lost touch. Then one day I had an accident. Eli and I were skiing on a mountain in France when a blizzard blew in. On a steeper slope than I should have been on, in weather I should never have been out in, I lost control and fell hard on my back. Eventually I had to have an operation to fuse two vertebrae in my spine.

As I lay in the hospital the day after the operation, the phone rang at my bedside. It was Bea, the call forwarded from my home. We hadn't talked in several years. "I dreamed you had an accident," Bea exclaimed. "I dreamed you needed me." Incredulous, I told her about my operation. "I'll come and take care of you," said Bea. And she did.

When Bea died several years later, her family called and I made the trip to a Roxbury church to attend her funeral. It was a large church, full of mourners. I came alone and sat at the back, the only white person there. As the service progressed, I heard sobs and cries from the pews. Circulating among the mourners were women dressed in white, like

nurses, holding boxes of Kleenex, offering them to the keening crowd. My hankie and the stray Kleenexes I dredged from the bottom of my purse were soon sopping, as I, too, cried for Bea. Suddenly, a woman in white appeared at my side, offering me tissues to dab my streaming eyes.

After the service, the mourners exited through the back of the sanctuary. As we passed through the heavy doors, we came to a landing, and there was Bea, heavy in her casket, open for us all to say goodbye. I had never seen an open casket before, and was unprepared for the actual presence of Bea at her funeral. The funerals of my kin were bodiless. The loved one kind of evaporated; mourned, but abstracted.

Bea was real. She was so real and so unexpected that I was undone and overcome. As I faced a steep stone staircase down to the entrance, another woman in white materialized at my side. "Here, dear. Have some Kleenex." I sobbed as she took my arm. "It's all right, dear. You just stay right here until you feel ready." And so I did. The woman in white and I stood at the top of the stairs, while I cried for Bea and her vegetables in grease, and the dream that I needed her, when I did.

Emotions for me have been dangerous things. I was an intense child, chided for being moody, prone to laughing too loud, crying at the movies even before the sad part started. I developed tics, like snuffling my nose, and squinting my eyes. At school, teachers didn't like me. I always had the answers, with my hand flapping in the air. The teachers needed to give the other children a chance to answer. I was too eager a child.

At home, my mother tried to shape me into the daughter she wanted. My parents loved their children, and there was nothing that they wouldn't provide for our betterment. I had music lessons and art lessons. My mother and I shopped for lovely clothes. My fondest memory is of the family watching weekend television in the den. I lay on the couch with my head in my mother's lap while she played with my hair. No one ever played with my hair as my mother did. As her fingers caressed the short, sensitive hairs at the nape of my neck, my scalp would thrill. "Don't stop," I would cry, and for as long as she could manage, she didn't. Every so often as I grew older, my mother's hand would drift to the nape of my neck and I would melt with the pleasure of my mother's touch.

But despite the love in my mother's touch, I always felt that I could never be good enough for her. For example, my mother scolded me for lack of poise, pointing out how much more poised her friend's daughter Carol was and suggesting that I emulate her. Consequently, I detested Carol, who was a lovely girl, totally unaware of her role as my model and nemesis.

Another of my mother's tactics was to reward me for achieving what she and my father believed was best for me, and which, indeed often was in my best interest. When in seventh grade I came home with a report card riddled with C's and a D, they offered 50 cents for Bs and a dollar for As on my next report cards. I did not get rich on that scheme. A more painful memory is of my lost skating skirt. Every Friday night, my family ice-skated at the local rink. I never could skate backwards, but I did take great

pride in my glide, one leg straight out behind me, chest parallel to the ice. I felt like a princess doing that glide, and yearned for a short velvet skating skirt, like the ones I saw on the girls that spun and leapt in the middle of the rink. My mother told me that I could have a skating skirt when I lost five pounds. I never got that skirt.

When I look back on my childhood, I realize that my mother invested in me what had never been invested in her. A child of the depression, my mother was admitted to Hunter College, but her parents wouldn't let her go. They needed the five dollars a week she would make as a secretary. She struggled with her weight, struggled as a Jew to make a home in a Christian Pittsburgh suburb where she never felt at home, though homebound with three children and no car while my father worked six days and two nights a week and played golf on Sundays.

Every so often my mother would explode, a sharp slap across the face for a swear word, or a switch to my legs for I don't remember what. If I cried after a punishment, or for some other kind of loss, my mother's usual response was, "What are you crying for? That's not so important." Perhaps at times she thought she was comforting me by telling me that there was nothing to cry about. For me it was a repudiation of my feelings, and a cause for hiding my inner life.

Eventually I learned that I had to hold it all in. I became a cipher, and the mediocre student that came home with Cs and a D in seventh grade. I remember purposefully misanswering questions on an intelligence test in junior high school. If I weren't too intelligent, no one would expect too much of me.

I hid my emotions. When I was sixteen and our beloved Irish setter, Nora, died, I ran away to cry. In front of my weeping brothers, my mother accused me of not loving our dog. I chose to let them believe that I didn't mourn Nora, rather than to reveal my sadness at her death.

I did find refuge in art and music, but that wasn't an oasis. My striving to excel, even in pursuits that I loved, became a variant of the struggle to be good enough to be acceptable, an issue I grapple with still.

My mother died three years ago at a very old age after a long illness. She mellowed over time, once telling me that the task of old age is to come to peace with who you are and what you have accomplished. She was a terrific grandmother. She provided unconditional love to grandchildren whose parents were all too often conditional in their love for their children. No surprise there.

My brothers and I in our different ways all bear scars from a childhood in which approval hinged on our accomplishments. My older brother was the golden child. He was the best and the brightest. I was the daughter who was supposed to be all that my mother didn't have a chance to be. I could never be good enough, because my mother never felt good enough. My younger brother never felt that he could be as successful as my older brother, so he too struggled with feelings of inadequacy. I can see these patterns

percolating through the generations. Yet ironically, it was my mother who let go of her judgments and perfectionism to accept her grandchildren wholeheartedly.

During her last months my mother lay in a private room in the nursing section of her retirement community. She refused hospice. If she accepted hospice, how would she measure her children's devotion in her dying days? My brothers soon let her know. My younger brother carried on his life in Arizona. My older brother went on a three-week vacation to Spain.

That left me. Every day I would make the trip to my mother's bedside, where she lay quietly, television flickering, incommunicado, and, I believe, depressed. I tried to make conversation. How she was feeling? Did she have any visitors? What did she eat? I brought food she might enjoy, and shared stories about her great grandchildren, our puppies, and our new property in the Berkshires. One day she apologized for her lack of responsiveness, saying that she was no longer of this world.

A friend and I once had a conversation about her father's death. She had traveled to Florida to be with him, looking forward to meaningful conversations about their lives and their relationship. Instead, her father watched football on television. My friend said to me, "People die as they lived." And so it was with my mother.

My mother died soon after. My brothers flew in from Arizona and Spain for a memorial service at Eli's and my home. Grandchildren arrived. A bus brought friends from the retirement community. My mother did not wish to be eulogized. Rather, her grandchildren told stories about how she listened to their troubles and gave valued advice. Her friends described her place in their lives and community. Already an oasis of memory was being formed.

I think of my mother every day and miss her. I think of her when my haircut is too short, or my blouse doesn't quite button. I wish she could see my new paintings, and wonder if she would be pleased that I'm playing my flute again. I'm still hoping to please her. But especially I miss the possibility, however remote, of the touch of her fingers on the nape of my neck.

When I think of an oasis, I imagine an island of green in the desert, a place of sustenance and safety in an otherwise barren world. However much I miss her, my mother was not my oasis. Rather, my most profound experience of oasis was that moment on a church landing in front of the body of a woman who was not my mother. There as I wept, a woman in white offered a box of tissues, saying, "It's all right, dear. Cry as much as you need. I will be here until you're ready." And she was.

Now in my late sixties I no longer hide. I weep openly at even the mention of La Boheme. I feel very free to love and create, to waste time and to express my opinions. It's as though my center of gravity has shifted from outside to within myself. I no longer seek an oasis because it resides within me.