

Marilyn's Friend

Valerie Silver

My friend Marilyn has a girlfriend, Rosalind, who converses regularly with her late mother, but only while driving alone in the car. The chats are usually brief, slid in-between runs to the bank or the grocery store. Rosalind checks in with her mom about her day just as she always had, updates her on the latest goings-ons, asks for guidance when she needs it. Often, she gets answers. What is most remarkable to me about these conversations is how routine they have become in Rosalind's life. She has found a way to accommodate the loss of her mother while continuing their immutable bond.

Marilyn, knowing about the loss that I carry since my own mother's death, asked me if I ever talk to her. "Still too hard," I said. "You might try," she gently shrugged, as if nothing more could possibly be lost. The problem is, I have tried. And continue to try. And when I do, it is my mother's absence and not her presence which spills into me. Talking to my mother, I have discovered, requires an entirely different skill set than thinking of my mother or talking about her to others. Even after three years, I can't much get beyond the following three phrases: "Hi Mom," "Thanks, Mom," and, "I love you." Even the words, "I miss you," though not unlike, "I love you," almost always choke in my throat. Sentences more complex than that and the conversation pretty much falls apart.

I envy my friend's friend her easy loquaciousness, her ability to converse with her mother's spirit, to pick up where they last left off traveling down the road in her Oldsmobile. I am saddened to be so tongue-tied with my own mother, especially since talking, for us, was a nightly routine. Could it be that it is as hard for her to find the words as it is for me? Perhaps this is just something which will evolve over time or requires techniques which I haven't yet developed. Of course, there is always the possibility that spoken words will never be our common language. Perhaps we will find our way back to each other through dreams, old movies, pink camellias, or children's books. Or maybe my mother has been patiently waiting for me to discover what she had been trying to tell me all along, that my voice has always been cradled inside the curving black letters of the alphabet, waiting for the right time to re-arrange itself upon a printed page.

Nancy's Kaddish

Down and back, down and back. A loop de loop, a lifeline. Twenty years of Saturday

drives, fifty Saturdays each year. Nancy loved her mother. She rarely minded the time it took to go

from Healdsburg to Rohnert Park, Rohnert Park to home again. She liked the motion of the miles and the circular routine; she liked the way the highway linked together town with town, mother with daughter, Saturdays to Saturdays, as if they could go on forever.

Each time Nancy visited her mother at the senior living complex, Diane would greet her in the lobby, eager to get the show on the road. A trip to Costco was always high on her list, as she could never resist the pizza or hot dog samples freely offered in the grocery section. After an afternoon of noshing and browsing, shopping and laughing, mother would treat daughter to an early dinner at the Olive Garden. They would both order the minestrone soup and salad combo, and split a piece of cheesecake for dessert.

In the twentieth year of Saturday visits, life as they knew it spun down a blind alley. Diane became ill and Nancy became the one to plan and decide. Pastimes of errands and eating were overtaken by concerns of healthcare and comfort. Drives around town became walks down the hallway, gradually settling into bedside arrangements.

After her mother's difficult passing (might want to rephrase this), Nancy became as a displaced person, unsettled and anxious in the vastness of Saturdays. On one of these days, racked with restless longing, Nancy got into her car, drove to Rohnert Park, got off at her customary exit, turned around, and came back home again. Inside she felt just a little bit crazy, but her grieving self had found a gear to slip into, a remembered rhythm it needed to pursue. Southbound. Northbound. Off-ramp variations. The rolling miles became a ritual prayer. In this way, Nancy mourned her mother: summer, fall, winter, spring, until a cycle of Saturdays had been completed and accounted for.

The Dispossessed

They traveled by flatbed truck, by wheel barrow, and by handcart: stone angels, Jesuses, virgins and saints; solar lamps, wind chimes, banners and whirligigs; deer statues and dog statues, bird statues and frog statues; hearts, teddybears, trophies and trains; handmade signs and messages on paper; look for rainbows painted on stone. Alongside the hearse, alongside the shovels, alongside the mowers and trimmers and blowers, they line shelves by the hundreds: mementos of mourning in silent communion, an unintended altar banished from view.

The presence of these now-sequestered items once transformed Pleasant Hills from a burial “park” to a place of solace. The angels and the solar lamps, the stone frogs and the butterflies reminded us that bereavement had a thousand faces, that no one truly grieves alone. These altars humanized this place, heartened us, and held our stories.

Their exile came at the behest of Management to “preserve the beauty and aesthetics of the cemetery,” and “ensure the safety of those who visit and those who maintain it.” In spite of the professed intent, the mass dislocation of these items from grave sites to utility shed have profoundly altered the aesthetics of the cemetery. The lawns are bereft. The dead still rest beneath them, but their mourners have been dispossessed.

Although this mortuary claims to understand “the desire of families to pay tribute to their loved ones,” it fails to understand the desires of mourning: to sustain relationships, cultivate stories, commune with the dead. Artifacts of bereavement --however humble, weathered, or kitschy-- are not merely tributes, but expressions of how we manage loss. They are objects sanctified by grief; symbols and deeds of hearts broken open. They inhabit a world beyond the safety of manicured lawns, beyond logic, beyond words, beyond prayers. They hold reverence that can never be wheeled away, beauty beyond what the eye can see. They are envoys of the inexpressible: *you are somewhere I cannot be; may this offering carry my love to you; may this offering be a bridge between here and there...*

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