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Dancing with My Mother

by

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My mother left me for three months with my Aunt Margaret when I was a newborn. She went to San Francisco to meet my father who had survived World War II and the torpedoes shooting at him throughout the Pacific. They never had a real honeymoon, given that my father called my mother one day in 1943 and said, I'm coming home to Indiana and let's get married. Which they did, and he went back out to sea.

I don't regret that unremembered time with my Aunt Margaret. She was a lovely woman with a gap between her teeth, already in her 30's and unmarried. I never think of her that I don't see her laughing. I miss her to this day...

But I do carry around a certain amount of resentment that I never had time with my mother. Just the two of us. That old bonding thing.

When she picked me up from Auntie's after their rather long honeymoon, she was pregnant again.

And by the time I was six, she was expecting her fourth.

She left me again, this time with my grandmother in Florida for six months, and I really can't say I blame her. In fact, I thank her every day. First off, she was overwhelmed with all those babies. And second of all, I adored my grandmother, and those days of endless, unconditional love and pampering with no dripping, crying babies around. I still flee to Florida every chance I get.

My mother always said, I left you down there too long.

After my seventh birthday in Florida, I went back home to Indiana, and the babies kept coming. Seven in number, finally. My siblings and I were always happy with the announcement of another, but my mother not so much. She was pregnant nine times, but she miscarried. Seven it was, nine not meant to be.

One time, my sister and I found a strange calendar in our mother's bottom drawer. It was tucked under the Playboy magazines and Tampax, which we figured had something to do with sex. Did she put these little white tubes in her bosom--a word we looked up in the dictionary and snickered over. Boobs were the only evidence of anything having to do with sex that we could think of. The Tampax must go there....We put the cardboard tubes with their cotton innards, which we pulled out, back in the drawer, with the frayed pink elastic belt and cotton pads. And we studied that calendar. The X's on the dates had nothing to do with holidays or birthdays, or any other special event we could figure. Except for another blessed event.

My mother always said, Rhythm doesn't work.

She just wasn't meant to have so many children. The youngest of four, she'd never been around babies. She was shy, and beautiful, and although strong and disciplined about meals and the endless, tiring regimen of practices, lessons, Girl Scout cookie sales - - even doughnut sales (What were they thinking?) -- she wasn't cut out for it. She ended up drinking: vodka (vanilla) in the afternoon and Canadian Club (chocolate) in the evening.

Growing up, I grudgingly helped out. Diapers, dishes, dusting. I babysat when I was nine for 25 cents an hour, and I had to clean and vacuum three times a week, which I saw no point in doing since my family continually scummed up the thread-bare carpet and sticky coffee table.

When my brother developed juvenile diabetes at four, I was finally able to do something worthwhile. I gave him his insulin shots that I learned to do by practicing on an orange. When my mother found out about Felix, it was the only time I saw her cry. The doctor told her he wouldn't live to 30. An accomplished swimmer through grade school into high school, mostly due to my mother's tireless efforts to weigh what he ate and drive him to practice, he is now collecting social security.

She expected a lot out of me. But we just sort of danced around each other, my father in the middle. My mother and I were never close. Not until the end.

But that was years later. In the meantime, we had our moments, and it's the weird shit I remember.

She was often critical of my appearance, especially of my rather large derriere. Well, what a fashion statement I turned out to be! Then, one day, I remember her eating an apple from my grandmother's orchard. She gave me one bite, and one bite only, and grabbed it back. I wanted more.

And that may have been part of the problem. Kids and their case of the ‘gimme’s’. I always wanted more from her, but I adored my father. My mother and I danced around him like he was a hot rack of clothing at a department store sale. He gave me authority, she declined. He preferred my bridge playing and praised my drive and school grades. My parents weren’t so happy with the party I threw while they were at a football game. My hooligan friends tore the place up, drank the booze, broke the dining room cabinet, stole his Knights of Columbus sword. I wonder where that sword is today. Probably defending the northern edges of Hammond, Indiana. We declared a truce when I went off to college, earned the grades and the fellowship. I listened to them, and I shouldn’t have. They only wanted what was best for me, but only ‘me’ would find out what that would be.

Shortly before my mother died, the two of us were sitting in her sun room. She was curled up on the love seat, a satin pillow behind her neck, a mohair throw over her knees. She was wearing a blue gingham bed jacket. I hated that bed jacket. I’d given her one years before, and she had lent it to a friend with cancer. ‘I never got it back,’ she told me, and I went out and bought her another. I’m sorry I did. It was just another reminder.

We were alone that night. Shocker. With six siblings and spouses, twenty grandchildren, and one needy father in the vicinity, this was a rare moment. The oxygen machine clap-clapped behind her. It was the only thing that relieved the cancer that was eating her up, that and the valium. She was way past the vodka stage.

She napped, and I sat glumly, staring at her, and then suddenly she jerked awake. Our conversation went something like this:

‘I haven’t done anything with my life,’ she said.

I was stunned. ‘What? Why do you say that?’ My responses to her were usually clipped. I tried to temper my conversation with humor, a bit of philosophy.

‘Why would you ever say such a thing? You and Dad put all seven of us through college. You rented a castle in Ireland. You’ve traveled from China to London. And you make the best chicken tetrazzini in the world.’

She laughed, nearly expelling the tube from her nose, while something cold whirled around me. Then I laughed, too, remembering a night in Germany, when my parents came to visit us during our stint in the Army, and she raged and sang, up and down a dark street: ‘I am woman.’ As I recall, there was Steinhager involved. Dad called her the female bull. Something came over her with the women’s lib movement. She never wanted to be Donna Reed, or that Cleaver woman.

My mother struggled to sit up. ‘Well, I missed out. But you haven’t.’ Her eyes were startling blue. ‘I’m not afraid anymore, and don’t you ever be. You’re right. I’ve had so much.’

She rarely said I was right about anything. I took it.

Her voice was strong. I thought of a candle, pooling and burning out in a final luminescent white glow. My mother waved me over. This time she was so sick, there was very little talk along the way, no light bantering down the stairs to hell. Suddenly here we were. In hell.

She said: ‘How can I ever thank you? I want to tell you something. I know being the eldest makes you feel responsibility very seriously. You’re different because you’re you, and you’re the first born. You know how I go on... There are so many good things about that; you’re strong, independent, smart and a great achiever. That’s a lot of good stuff. Besides, God made you beautiful. Isn’t that nice? And you’re blessed with good health....’

I didn’t move. She said: ‘Seems like you’re going through a giant rough spot now.’

Right again. Find husband with another woman. Get divorce. Be pissed off at the world.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘Try not to look back. And try to forgive. I know that’s hard but it’s the only way you’ll have peace. Peace is what we need. You don’t have to say or act out forgiveness. Just know that you do...’

I leaned closer. We stayed like that, together, the cold rain dinging the patio stones. I went over her words that filled the room to bursting. I locked them in. I held her hand.

I think about the last time I danced with my mother, and my mother danced with me.

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