

Seven, or, Meeting My Mom Again

by Susan Collins

An hour had passed and my mother and I still stood on that crowded street corner, and I watched the mid-day Chicago traffic speed through the busy intersections. The top of my head reached my mother's knees and I hugged her thin legs tightly with both arms, shivering. It was a misty afternoon, thick with metropolitan fog and as chilly as a butcher's meat locker. My mother stood quietly--her yellow eyes scanned the streets in all directions, pausing only to glance impatiently at her gold wristwatch. A rusty green pickup truck appeared and pulled up to the curb in front of us, and I felt my mother breathe a sigh of relief. The door opened with a creak and out stepped a man whom I did not recognize. I looked up at my mother and asked her who the man was. Without ever taking her eyes off of him she replied, "That's your father, Sweetie. You know that. You're going with him today." I let go of my mother's legs and she pushed me toward the stranger. I was frightened and shaking, but the biting cold masked my fear. He helped me into his green pickup truck without saying much except that I would be staying with him for a while. I turned around in my seat and saw my picturesque mother with wild blonde hair and ripped jeans still standing on the street corner, expressionless, framed by the city mist. I watched her until she disappeared into the fog. The next time I saw my mother again I had grown two feet, and the top of my head reached her breasts.

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The night that my mother flew out to Chicago to pick me up from my grandmother's house, she arrived four hours late. It was mid December, and she told my grandmother and me that she would be staying with us for a week, to celebrate the holidays and give me my Christmas presents. The last time I had seen her I was three years old. Now I was seven, and I wondered what life was like for my mother in California. I also wondered what kind of person she would be--I couldn't recall what she looked like, except that she was blonde, like me. I sat down quietly on the living room couch the moment she was expected to arrive and I didn't move again until I answered the ringing intercom to let her in the front gate. When I heard her heavy boots stomping up the fifth flight of stairs, I threw open the door and she nearly fell over when I tackled her, arms open and demanding a hug. Her hair was now a fiery red, and I noticed as if for the first time that her eyes were a golden yellow. She said nothing about how tall I had grown, and nothing about how nice I looked with my hair combed back and my prettiest dress on. Instead, she said that she had had a long flight and wanted to sit down for a moment to rest. She handed me a stuffed bear and a tube of peanut butter cups wrapped in red and green tinfoil, and made her way to the couch that I had kept warm for her for over four hours.

The first thing my mother must have seen when she passed through my grandmother's front door that mid-December night was the bedpan. It stood nearly as tall as me, and at the time it was filled with my grandmother's urine and excrement. My grandmother was in a car accident during my two-year stay at her house and had been immobilized for three months by the time my mother arrived. Her foot was still swollen,

purple and monstrous beneath her knee-length cast. My mother, tired from her flight, sat down on the couch and struggled to find the words to shape a light, casual conversation with her mother-in-law. She didn't say anything about my grandmother's bedpan until she watched me carry it into the bathroom to empty and clean it. That was when the shit, if you will, hit the fan, and my mother revealed her true purpose for the visit. It was not, as she had claimed, to spend the holidays with my grandmother and me; instead, my mother decided it was time for me to live with her again. She decided it was time for me to go to California.

My grandmother demanded answers. She wanted to know why my mother had the right to take me away without warning. She wanted to know who would help her once I was gone. But my mother felt no need to explain herself. She told me to go to my room and to get my things as quickly as I could because we had to leave right away. I didn't know if I would ever come back to that little apartment in Chicago or not, so I grabbed my favorite doll--the one my grandmother bought me for my sixth birthday--my favorite shirt--red, black and blue pinstripes--and anything else I could easily find. I looked around my room one last time: nearly everything in the room was my grandmother's aside from the toys I had scattered all over the floor. The one thing I knew I would not miss was my makeshift bed. The mat that I slept on that was terribly uncomfortable and cramped. I switched off the light and ran back into the living room where my grandmother was sobbing in her easy chair, and my mother was towering above her, screaming. I held my duffel bag in one hand and my doll in the other, and I thought that if my mother had a real bed waiting for me in California, maybe leaving the Windy City wouldn't be so bad after all.

The first night that I spent in California was also the first night that my mother spent in our new apartment. It had been four years since she had the responsibility of minding a child, and I recall that at the time I could not decide who seemed more terrified of the whole experience, my mother or me. Our living room was scattered with boxes that had not yet become makeshift tables, television stands and computer desks. These boxes were filled with my mother's clothes and books and dishes. I spent the entire night pacing up and down the hallway, chewing gum as if my life depended on it. My mother spent the entire night consulting her Californian friends over the phone, asking them if she had done the right thing, and telling them that she had no choice. Her primary concern was my level of anxiety. She told her friends on the phone that she didn't think it was healthy to uproot a child with such frequency. She knew as well as I did that this apartment was the eighth I had lived in by then, and she was fearful that I would suffer from attachment issues. I sensed her increasing anxiety and I responded by pacing faster and chewing harder, finishing off a pack of gum like a chain smoker finishes a pack of cigarettes.

I had lived in Chicago all my life, aside from a brief stay with my father in Indiana, and I was still very attached to my Midwestern roots. Back in Chicago I could build snowmen, and in the winter the schools would close down on the coldest days. Torrance, California was too hot, and I had brought only a handful of clothing with me, which was more suited for a snowstorm than a day at the beach. The real California was not the California I pictured when my grandmother would describe the place where my mother lived. I had not seen one movie star or tar pit, and I was yet to experience even a minor geological tremor. I had a real bed in California, but I didn't have much else, and I missed my father's side of the family a great deal. In fewer words, I began to wonder if I

had been pushed out of the frying pan and thrown face-first into the fire. Bedpans aren't so heavy, after all.

By the time I had lived with my mother for two months, I became accustomed to seeing her bedroom door shut. I was under strict orders never to open a closed door without clear permission from the occupant of the room, lest I suffer a punishment worse than being grounded. So if a door was shut I always knocked, and, being seven, if a door was open, even a crack, I always considered it unspoken, then, that I could enter. But on this particular day, my mother's door was left open about a foot, and looking back, I can't say for certain whether it was meant to have been shut or not. It is unlike my mother to be careless, but in those days her reckless addictions poured out into every little nook and cranny of her life. All that was on my mind, anyway, was the fact that I wanted to go to my friend's house, and that I wanted my mother to tell me it would be all right.

The first thing I saw when I walked past the open door was the sunlight that bled in through the thick blinds. The western sun shone through the window next to my mother's bed, and her room was filled with daylight. The walls were white and bare, reflecting an odd glow that was mixed with daylight and stale cigarette smoke. Her alarm clock sat on a large cardboard box which doubled as a nightstand. The cardboard box, which used to house a twenty-seven-inch television set, now stored several hundred of my mom's personal records. The two single pieces of furnishing my mother had in her room at the end of the hall--her bed and the makeshift nightstand--were momentarily buried beneath some of the clothing and the week-old newspapers she had amassed. The dim fluorescent light coming from her bathroom was nearly swallowed by the California sun that poured in from the window across the room. It was like my mother to turn the lights on during the day. The bathroom door was wide open, but I hesitated to make my presence known. I began to suspect that it was time to reconsider my previous notions that a door left open is an invitation. There was a possibility that a door left open may actually be a door that somebody forgot to shut.

My mother stood facing the bathroom mirror with her back towards me. The light made her red hair glow and it stood out brightly against the contrast of her black leather jacket. Her wrists and fingers were adorned with gold jewelry, and in front of her on the bathroom counter I could see a gold mirror lying face up. The counter was cluttered with makeup and moisturizers and jewelry, and everything had been pushed closer together to make room for the mirror. My mother bent down to put her face towards the mirror, and she put a straw into her nose and sniffed as hard as she could, then she put her finger to her nose and sniffed again. I stood there quietly until I was finally moved by the fear that if my mother saw me standing there she would become angry and yell. It didn't matter anyway. All of a sudden I didn't want to go to my friend's house so badly anymore. I turned around and walked out of the room, being careful to shut the door quietly behind me. All of a sudden I didn't want to ask my mother permission for anything.

I loved my mother because she was my mother, but I knew little about her, and was afraid that if I got lost in a supermarket, I would not be able to recognize her in the crowd. Likewise, she knew little about me, and currently lacked the kind of fundamental understanding for her child that most mothers generally have mastered by that time. It would still be several more years before my mother finally decided to tell me why she had come back for me, and for now our level of communication was nothing but a dim and stubborn spark that refused to burn to full potential. I never told my mother about

what I had seen that night, but it wouldn't have mattered. At seven years old, I had reached an understanding about all of the rusty razorblades and straws that were tucked away in the drawers and hidden under the couches throughout our house. For some time my worries had centered around my grandmother's bed pan--whether or not I would spill it during transportation--and whether it would be difficult to clean once it spilled. Now I wondered what drugs were like, and why someone would take them, and if they were expensive or not. I wondered if the reason I had spent so much time at my grandmother's house was because of this fine white powder that I found scattered on all of the solid surfaces in our apartment. I didn't know then that it would take more than a decade for my mother and me to understand each other. All I knew then was that my grandmother was very far away, and that I would probably never see Chicago again.