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What We've Made

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What We've Made

Really *whip* it,” my mother says, her voice sharp in my ear as she leans over my shoulder. “Use your wrist.”

We're standing in the kitchen of her house in the suburbs, the house where I grew up and where my mother now lives with her second husband. Since being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis two years ago, she rarely cooks, her cupboards crammed with yellowing recipes—split pea soup, Swedish meatballs and brown gravy, chocolate mousse cake—favorite foods her aching hands can no longer prepare. Hanging above the stove is a worn newspaper article from the summer of 1999, when my mother won first prize in our county fair's baking competition. In the photo, she wears oven mitts and a wide, toothy grin, holding out her golden apple pie like an offering. In her right fist she clutches a bright blue ribbon, its color faded over the years to a dull, disappointing gray. Now tattered cookbooks line her shelves, their pages dusty and dog-eared. Pots and pans rust beneath the sink. The once-white wallpaper has aged to ivory, flecked with grease stains from meals past.

My mother nudges me to the side with her hip, wresting the mixing bowl from my hands. Up close her knuckles look like swollen, skin-colored grapes, the bones in her wrists snapping with each flick of the whisk around the bowl. “You have to lean into it,” she tells me, making small, tired circles with the whisk until the flour and egg begin to lump together and stick. A few more strokes and she stops, wipes her hands on a towel. We both try not to notice how they shake.

“Take over from here,” she says, stepping aside to catch her breath. I return to the counter and wrap my fingers around the whisk's rubber handle. Gripping the bowl with one hand, I push the thick batter back and forth while she stands behind me, inhaling loudly through her nose. Her face is hidden, but I can picture it nonetheless: narrowed eyes, set jaw, that pinched, exasperated mouth. She clears her throat. “How about putting some muscle into it?”

“Okay, Mom.” I try to force down the irritation rising in my chest as I pry open a can of baking powder, spilling some on my sweater. At twenty-five I'm as clumsy in the kitchen as I was at thirteen, my culinary abilities extending not much further than a box of pasta and a jar of spaghetti sauce heated on the stove. My mother tried to teach me to cook as a child, but I was bored and impatient, a tomboy who preferred

the rough-and-tumble of the outdoors to the cramped view from our kitchen window, where she stood washing dishes and watching to make sure I didn't swing too high. Still, this year I've volunteered to help cook Thanksgiving dinner, despite her protests: "My hands are fine, Aim. Please, I can do it on my own."

It's killing her, this gradual loss of control. And while her stubbornness often frustrates me—sometimes she *can* do it better on her own—it's also the very trait of hers I admire, the thing that has sustained her, that has granted her the will to struggle, to survive. Whether lifting a fork to her mouth or pulling on shoes in the morning, each day presents a new obstacle, a fresh burst of pain in her slowly stiffening joints. Tasks as simple as changing a lightbulb or buttoning her shirt can leave her sore for hours, never mind the tedious commute she makes into the city every morning, fingers curled carefully around the steering wheel as she inches through traffic to Northwestern Hospital, where she is both a nurse and a patient. She understands what the doctors there mean when they say *bone erosion* and *autoimmune disease*. She listens quietly as they explain how the lining of her joints has thinned, how her body is attacking itself, and when they've stopped talking and lowered their clipboards, my mother, a recent breast cancer survivor, looks up at them and gives a brisk nod. "Thank you for your time." Gathering her things, she leaves the exam room with her face held still, sucking in her cheeks so the other patients in the waiting room won't see her cry.

As I bend over the counter, I feel her green eyes drilling into the back of my neck, sharper than the blade I'm using to peel apples for her award-winning pie. I wonder what she sees, looking at me—who is this child standing before her, this daughter so enamored with words and essays and ideas that she can't be bothered to learn to beat batter or dice an onion? Pathetic, how her daughter thinks art will save her. She'd hoped for the same with her cello, but at age twenty-two, health problems intervened, leaving her divorced and living in a small Midwest suburb instead.

Or maybe she isn't thinking any of this. It's the central conflict between us: the memoir I'm writing in secret about our life together, how I'm always trying to interpret her moods, assign meaning to her thoughts and feelings. In my family, and in the Midwestern culture in which my mother and I were both raised, expression of emotion, particularly the louder ones such as anger or fear or grief, are viewed as impolite, disloyal to place and kin. Better to mind your manners, keep your troubles to yourself. "We don't want to offend anybody," my mother would remind my sister and me before we went out in public,

checking to see that our clothes were neat, our teeth and hair brushed. To curse or talk back was to poke holes in the tidy domestic narrative she'd spun from her days of cooking and cleaning, days spent bending over the washing machine, using an iron to smooth the wrinkles from our shirts. Tell yourself a story so many times and if you're lucky, you might come to believe it; for her, this was the sweet optimism of fiction, so much kinder than fact's stern, unforgiving eye.

Appearance was everything, but once the curtains had been drawn for the night and the garage door lowered, she and I would sink into the lumpy yellow sofa and open a book, drifting beyond our suburb's gray sidewalks and skies into other worlds, other lives. She favored novels rich in description and poetic language over the true crime I devoured, baffled by my fascination with the troubled side of human nature. "Why do you want to read something so *dark*?" she'd ask as I handed my books to the silver-haired librarian behind the checkout desk, their blood-red covers luring me into the shadowy unknown, where easy answers didn't exist.

Perhaps my mother had seen enough darkness in her past and needed to look away. My mother's perfect grades and her family's meager finances earned her a full scholarship to Northwestern University, where she spent four years studying and practicing the cello until the morning she woke up deaf in her right ear. She was two months shy of graduation. Orchestra auditions, graduate school applications—she watched from a metal exam table as the future she imagined for herself slipped further and further away, growing as blurry as the lights the doctors shined in her eyes and ears. Meanwhile, her classmates dressed in concert black and filed onto the auditorium stage for senior pictures, their eyes flicking over my mother's empty seat in the first row, sad for her but secretly relieved that it hadn't been them. Beneath her name in the yearbook, an empty gray square says, "Not Pictured." And though the doctors assured her that with time she could train her ear to play again—to discern differences in pitch—maybe it was the sudden erasure of her identity that overwhelmed her, made her future feel as hollow and abstract as the plastic ear mold she wears.

The story fills itself out from here: a hasty and turbulent marriage, my mother suddenly pregnant with a daughter she isn't sure she wants. In the mornings, my father reports to work at the post office and leaves my mother to wander the narrow hallways of our ranch house alone, her bony hands cupping her blossoming belly. I was a difficult pregnancy, she will tell me later, always flailing and kicking. To calm me, she paces back and forth across the living room carpet, humming Bach preludes

and Chopin concertos, the slow rock of her footsteps lulling me to sleep inside her stomach. Some days, either for my comfort or her own, she drags the cello out of her bedroom closet and touches her bow to the strings, feeling her way back through the songs and scales she'd memorized in college. She could start over, she knows—she could return to the city, buy a digital tuner, and slowly train her ear to play again. But she's so tired and besides, there's the baby to consider, that hard, swollen reminder nestled between her and the cello's sternum.

"You're all I have," she used to say to me out of nowhere. I was ten, twelve, and she'd abruptly look up from her cup of coffee or take her eyes off the road to rest on me buckled into the passenger seat, as if in the middle of a silent conversation with herself. Said as fact—*you're all I have*—the words pressed into me, etched themselves on my skin. Her music career, her marriage, her body: all of it had failed her, and so she crafted a new narrative for herself, a story line to help organize the events of her life, make sense of them. Maybe she can't revise what happened in her past, but she can at least control how others perceive her, and in her adaptation she's the dedicated wife and mother, pressing on despite the small trials and drudgeries of her days—loyalty, one of her most valued traits.

But every good heroine needs an antagonist. Enter her daughter—critical, touchy—writer of *nonfiction*, that nosy genre loyal to no one. *We don't want to offend anybody*.

Today, helping my mother prepare Thanksgiving dinner, I do my best to keep my patience. I grit my teeth when I feel her eyes darting around my shoulder, when she stops me mid-chop to point out errors in my knife-handling technique. It's been several weeks since she told me about her dream. "You were a child," she recounted early one morning over the phone, her voice hoarse, still confused from sleep. "You were a child, throwing flour all over my kitchen. I kept yelling at you to stop, but you wouldn't obey me." She'd paused, and I'd listened to the rustle of her curly hair as she shifted the phone to her other cheek. "I woke up terrified."

We fell silent, eventually breaking into nervous laughter. I'd forgotten about the dream until now, her words floating back to me above the soft shushing of the peeler. *I woke up terrified*—but of what? Of my becoming independent? Of my writing and the family mess it threatens to expose? Years ago, when I first started to write, I asked her something about my early childhood and heard a shift in her tone of voice as she replied, "Why do you want to know?" Now, as I think of all the things I've written about—her loneliness, my loneliness, her love affairs, my love

affairs—I wonder if she'd see what I now see: that for years she was all *I* had. A mother whose largeness of desire and hunger filled the rooms of our house, whose struggle to be more than she'd been raised to be gave me the first hint of a woman's life, those dreams and demons hovering in the air, whispering *sacrifice, succeed, sacrifice, succeed*. What she might understand as betrayals are my attempts to continue her legacy, to look hard at her choices in order to investigate my own. But I still haven't told her any of this.

"Let me." Before I can protest, she's already moved in front of me, apples slipping beneath her trembling fingers. Trying to steady her hands, she manages a few shaky cuts before flinging the peeler into the garbage. "Blade was dull." She turns to face me, a look of surrender in her eyes as she steps back to rub her sore wrists. I say nothing. Selecting a new knife from the drawer, I return to my place at the counter and slice slowly, holding the wooden cutting board steady with my fingers. Long and limber, they resemble my mother's—"musician's fingers," she called them, as evenings we took our places on the hard piano bench. Her hands were beautiful then: smooth, shiny knuckles, her fingers articulate and thin as pencils. Covering my hands with hers, she tried teaching me to arch my wrists, to press down lightly on the keys, but it was no use. I was all thumbs, clunking out bass notes with my left hand while my right pounded the trebles, jarring our cats from slumber and driving them grumbling into the kitchen. The different scales and clefs made no sense to me. What I really wanted was to learn the drums, admiring the gruff, loose sounds of my favorite rock bands, but my mother refused. The drums were too loud, too messy. Piano was more refined in that it demanded delicacy and poise, both of which I lacked.

But my fingers, lithe and slender, so much like her own—my fingers gave her hope. Maybe it was her body's betrayal that caused my mother to seek refuge in mine, our hands moving together over the ivory keys as I struggled to learn the notes that were gradually becoming painful for her to play. Yet despite my hatred of the piano, part of me took secret pleasure in the evening practices, those drowsy, post-dinner hours when my mother would fall silent and surrender her voice to me. Closing her eyes, she swayed back and forth like a metronome, tapping out the rhythm on her knees: *One, twothree... One, twothree*. Her curly head dipped toward mine, and I'd lean closer to catch a whiff of her cherry lotion, holding it for a beat in my lungs. No matter how poorly I played, at the end of a song she sighed and smacked her lips, as if she had tasted something delicious. "Again?" she'd ask after a moment of quiet, and I

would rearrange my hands on the keys, her fingers hovering over mine, guiding me.

“Are you going to write a lot in Virginia?” Her voice breaks into my concentration—the knife slips, cutting me.

“Move the blade *away* from you.” She takes my hand and thrusts it under the faucet’s warm stream, pressing a towel against the nick before setting a new apple in front of me.

Sucking in a breath, I pick up the knife and resume work, my jaw tightening as she taps her feet on the linoleum. In the living room, there’s the faint roar of a football game. The oven pops and hisses, giving off the thick, starchy scent of potato casserole beginning to brown. My mother shifts her weight, knots and unknots her empty hands. Restless, she tries again.

“Do you think you’ll be lonely in Virginia?”

I shrug and reach for another apple. I can be stubborn, too.

“I mean, spending so much time by yourself?”

She’s testing me. I hold my face still, annoyed.

“I’ll be fine,” I mutter, embarrassed when I hear how defensive I sound. No matter what I do to escape my mother’s watchful eye, she always manages to spot the very thing I’ve tried to hide; in this case, my anxiety over my upcoming trip to Virginia, where I’ll be living for three weeks at an artist’s colony. For months I’d fantasized about the rustic barns and rolling hills, the brisk morning walks followed by slow, silent afternoons of writing, but lately I feel a tight knot of dread when I think of the isolation, the empty days looming in my mind like the blue-tipped mountains pictured on the colony’s website. The plan was to finish my book—but now I realize that this means I might have to show it to her. The possibility grips me with fear. After breaking down and telling her about the colony, my mother visited the website and said that while she agreed the pictures were beautiful, she didn’t understand why I wanted to go.

It looks like a scam, her e-mail said. Why pay money? If you need to get away, we have a free desk in the guest bedroom—what’s hiding in the mountains that I can’t give you at home?

Maybe it’s the secretive nature of writing that bothers my mother, who seems to view my need for solitude as a kind of rebellion. “Why write if you won’t let anyone read it?” she asked me once, shaking her head when I explained that I prefer to write for myself. “Everyone wants to be loved,” she said matter-of-factly, revealing a flash of her inner performer: memories of bright lights and audiences bathed in shadow, applauding as she rose from her seat to bow with her cello.

“Not me,” I’d snapped, “I don’t want approval,” hearing the lie before it tumbled out of my mouth. I had tried convincing myself of the same thing the day I announced my decision to quit the piano, standing before my mother in her kitchen, my palms sweating. For weeks I’d rehearsed the conversation over and over in my head, carefully planning what I was going to say—that I was seventeen; that I wanted independence; that while I appreciated her guidance, I needed space to make my own decisions. But as I faced her across the kitchen table, I felt my resolve fall away, her eyes softening with a hurt I hadn’t anticipated.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she asked in a voice so small I had to lean forward to hear her. Caught off guard, I opened my mouth to speak and then closed it. I’d expected anger—had come prepared for it—but this was something new, a vulnerability I had not yet witnessed.

Unsure how to respond, I mumbled something about wanting to focus more on homework; what I didn’t tell her was that the homework was for my creative writing class. I needed to practice harder, she was always saying, instead of living all day inside my head, but this was exactly what I loved doing, spending time alone, making up my own stories instead of simply playing the notes someone else had written. More than anything, I hated performing, hated the dimly lit audiences, the eager looks on their faces as I shuffled onstage and slid across the polished bench, arranging my hands in middle C position. Writing helped to block out the world around me. Hunched over my notebook, I heard my voice grow louder inside my head, drowning out my mother’s cries from downstairs to join her on the piano bench.

Only now do I understand her reaction that day in the kitchen. *Why are you doing this to me?* she’d asked, her face crumpled, her eyes narrowed as if bracing for an attack. With the loss of mobility in her hands comes what she might perceive as the eventual loss of her voice, of her ability to speak through her art—music. Her body is turning against her, and now she worries that I am too, using my musician’s fingers to write words that can hurt her. And no matter how hard I try to convince myself otherwise, part of me fears that she has a point—that I’m betraying her with my memoir, denying her right to a voice.

Today as I work beside my mother in her kitchen, I feel the guilt returning, warm and familiar like her hands on mine. I try to ignore her peering over my shoulder, resisting the urge to argue when she gives me instructions. “You need to press harder,” she says, and I mutter under my breath, “I know,” both of us fighting to stay patient while I push a rolling pin back and forth, making little rips in the dough. After a few minutes of this, she uncrosses her arms and steps forward.

“Let me.” Gripping the rolling pin tight in her hands, she concentrates on evening out the lumps. Her wrists tremble and I move closer, lay a palm on her arm. She brushes it off.

“Mom?” I say, gentle at first and then firm: “Mom.”

She stops working and looks at me. Her eyes are damp, flour sticks to her hair and clothes. Slowly I reach out, feeling her hands tense as I cover them with mine. Neither of us wants to need each other.

“Ready?” I turn to her, and she nods. We finish flattening the dough in silence, laying it smooth at the bottom of the pan before pouring in the apple filling and fashioning a lattice crust. My mother sets the timer. Before closing the oven door, we lean in, take one last look at what we’ve made together.