

reunion

It wasn't till years after the operation that I realized my mother would never have died from it. She came from a long line of unscrupulously healthy women who had dedicated their entire lives to surpassing each other in maturity. They no longer counted their age in years, but in reunions, and nothing under fifty was counted at all.

My mother lived for the reunions. Every year and a half she would dress us up and lead us, trembling and fearful, to the skirts of our grandmothers, great-grandmothers and great-aunts. They towered over us at an impressive height, their legs thickly swathed in flesh-colored stockings. My sister and I were left to ourselves during the ceremonies; we looked wistfully on while the women were photographed, smiling and blowing out huge numbers of birthday candles, more set against the idea of death every day. Their pictures still hang on our

living room wall, so close together a finger can't fit between the frames.

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It was the first time that any woman in the family had gone into a hospital. My cousins wouldn't even go there to give birth for fear people would suspect them of going for something else. Naturally my mother was questioned, cajoled and warned against the dangers of lost reputation, but she went anyway, taking the largest of the reunion photographs in her suitcase. It was a newspaper clipping of her great-grandmother's sisters seated around a silver trophy bearing the slogan of the American Longevity Association. Their names were listed in order of age in the caption.

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My mother left on a Thursday. The only thing she said before she shut the door was, "Take care of your father." She always worried about him.

"What for?" said my sister. She and I were the only ones home with him and didn't know how to take care of a fifty-five-year-old man. We didn't want her to go away; at a distance she would seem more vulnerable. Anything that happened to her would be our fault, anything we did wrong was bound to cause her pain.

My father took it harder than any of us. He hadn't really expected her to go, and just the day before he'd made her angry by pointing out that "hospitalization" would go down on her work record. He wasn't trying to hurt her; he only wanted to know where the pain was.

"Is it something to do with your . . . being female?" he asked, spotting me in the doorway.

She told him it wasn't, that it was something much less serious than he could imagine, and that certainly didn't deserve to be on a permanent record.

"Why should I have to imagine? Why don't you tell me so I don't have to imagine?"

"I'm much stronger than you might think." She was already making arrangements to take her Christmas vacation in August.

"What will I do while you're gone? What will the kids do? What will they think?" His voice warbled.

"They know there's nothing wrong with their mother." She smiled at me and I thought of all the times I'd stepped on the sidewalk cracks and then gone back to erase them, rubbing the soles of my shoes sideways along the pavement. "And I've already provided for your food."

When she wouldn't tell him the name of the hospital he accused her of making it all up.

"Why are you bothering with all this?" he asked her.

She was silent so he turned to me.

"Your mother isn't like anyone else," he said.

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When we told him she'd gone he called all the hospitals until he tracked her down at Northern Memorial, but the operator said my mother's number was unlisted.

"What room is she in?" he asked.

"I'm not allowed to give out that information," said the operator.

"Well how big is your hospital?"

"Thirty-six floors."

My father was dumbfounded. "Do you know what she's in for?" he asked.

The operator said she didn't know.

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My mother called the next day, but wouldn't give us her room or phone number. She said she was fine. She didn't want any visitors, and told us not to send flowers, the room was full of them from the families of other patients. (The flowers we'd already sent were later returned in a cellophane bag, a note taped to the outside with the message: "Put these in the dining room—big yellow vase  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of sugar water.") She asked about my father and we told her he was angry about the unlisted number and didn't want to talk. She sighed and told us to watch that he didn't get upset.

My father was furious.

"She didn't even *ask* to talk to me?"

"No, she just asked how you were. She told us to watch out for you."

He didn't want to know anything more about it. He had the extension wired for the next time she called so that he could hear without being heard, and he would answer all her questions while laughing to himself that she didn't know he was listening.

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Once in a while the woman who shared my mother's room would call for her, explaining that my mother was busy—getting signatures on a petition for fresh vegetables on the lunch trays. We didn't know what to say to

the woman, but felt obligated to talk to her since my mother had asked her to call.

"What are you in for?" we asked her.

"I'm a kidney patient," she said.

"Kidneys?" said my father, shouting into the dead mouthpiece.

"Your mother's a very nice person. She talks to everyone," said the woman.

"What does she say?"

"She talks about sports and politics, you know."

"Well tell her we said hello."

"Tell her we don't want to talk to any more kidney patients," said my father.

When my mother called back she wanted to know how my father was doing. "Does he ask about me very often?" she said.

I looked at my father's back in the hallway. He was sitting on the floor with the extension to his ear, his legs spread straight in front of him. He looked like a bear in a picture I'd seen once.

"All the time," I said, and I saw him shift the extension to his other ear.

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One day I found him staring at the space left on the wall where my mother had taken the picture.

"Something's missing," he told me.

"She took it with her," I said.

"There are no men on this wall," said my father, ignoring me.

I looked. There were no men on the wall. The men in my mother's family weren't important; no one knew

anything about them except who they were married to, and as soon as they'd produced a few children they seemed to disappear. On the other hand it was well known that my maternal grandmother had once set fire to her own home rather than see it knocked down, and at the height of the blaze, jumped out a second-story window to the ground, her eighty-three-year-old legs sturdy as a cat's when she landed. My great-grandmother came to America on a freight ship, disguised as a sailor, and before reaching shore had been promoted to first mate.

"I guess the women live to be older," I said.

"It looks like a family of clones," he said. "Not a man in the group. There's no pictures of your mother, either."

I looked. Everyone in the pictures was at least sixty-five. "She's probably not old enough," I said.

He searched the house until he found a picture of my mother, and then he put it on the coffee table. It showed her gardening, leaning over the tomato bushes in the back yard, perspiration stains up and down the back of her shirt. It was a good likeness. She seemed about to stand up, and the way she bent over the tomatoes made her look even stronger than usual. She could have been an advertisement for vegetables. Photographs always had a way of immortalizing her; even when she was standing next to me I'd imagine her in a different pose. I had a collection of them in my head, and she was different in every one.

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My great-grandmothers brought us casseroles and desserts, dropping them off on the step after dark so the

neighbors wouldn't see them and start asking questions. They must have been communicating with my mother in spite of their disapproval; one dish of manicotti came over with a tiny envelope on its lid, and the note inside said: "I never use ricotta cheese, it's too expensive. Cottage cheese is just as good and I'm sure they won't know the difference. M." We passed it once around the table and let the dog lick the dishes. My father got angry because we didn't leave enough on our plates.

"Jesus Christ, what's the dog supposed to live on?" he shouted.

It was obvious the strain was affecting him. He still refused to talk to my mother on the phone, but he started giving us lists of questions to ask her: whether the doctors were men or women and how old they were, how many people shared her room, how many times a day she got to eat . . . Sometimes he would sit with the receiver to his ear for hours after she'd hung up, and whenever I walked by him in the hallway he would block my path with his legs and ask me another question.

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The next time my mother called she said we shouldn't expect her to call so often, that she wouldn't be calling for two or three days. She said she'd be having an operation, a small one, but that everything was fine, there was no reason to worry.

My father almost tore the extension from the wall. He started shouting into the receiver saying she'd promised it wasn't serious, saying she had to come home immediately. She could hear his voice from the echoes bouncing

into the kitchen, and she shouted back, "I'm fine, Frederick, they're just going to fix me up a little." When the echoes subsided she said, "Tell your father I'll be fine."

He didn't believe it. He told us all the horror stories he'd ever heard about hospitals.

"During the war there was a man," he said, "a Polish general, who was so weak he couldn't eat. By the end of a month he was shrunken beyond recognition. They'd starved him almost to death, and it was up to his wife to get him out of the country. She had to wrap him in blankets and pull him across the border in a toy wagon."

"You mean she disguised him as a baby and nobody could tell he was really an old man?" we asked.

"He wasn't supposed to look like a baby," said my father. "How could a sixty-year-old man look like a baby? You're missing the whole point."

"Well what does it have to do with Mommy's operation anyway?"

He shook his head as if we were being stupid.

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The day of the operation I found him hanging a picture in the empty space on the wall. It was a photograph of an old man wearing a brown coat and a bland expression.

"Who's that?" said my sister.

"My Uncle Jack. He lived to be eighty-seven."

"That doesn't sound very old," we said.

"Just by comparison. No one in your mother's family ever dies. People in my family die early."

"What do they die of?" we asked.

"That's beside the point." He walked to the opposite wall, took a picture of my mother out of his wallet, and

tucked its edges into the corner of a reunion photograph, smoothing it down with his thumb. "Way beside the point." It was a newspaper clipping of my mother on the median strip of a highway, a white flag tied to the antenna of her broken-down VW. The picture was taken by a helicopter during the worst traffic jam of the year, and my mother was looking up and waving just when the camera clicked. She was just big enough so that I could recognize her.

"What does all this have to do with Mommy's operation anyway?"

"You don't like the picture?" said my father.

"That's not the point," I said.

"No, I guess it isn't," he agreed.

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She came home on a Saturday. The front yard was covered with blackbirds fighting over crusts of pizza we'd thrown out the night before, and as my mother walked over the grass she shooed them away, picking up the crusts and bringing them in the house. "What have you been eating all this time?" she asked, waving the mutilated crusts in front of her. My father took her by the hand and sat her down on the couch. She had a long red scar across the front of her neck.

He was speechless. This had never happened before; it was the first scar in the family, the end of an era.

"Did it hurt?" he asked, finally.

She got up and walked over to the mirror. The scar went straight across the front of her throat, but wasn't obvious unless she tipped her head back. She tilted her head carefully, still looking in the mirror, and ran her

fingers over the bluish-red skin, pulling lightly down with one finger and up with another.

"Does it hurt now?" asked my father.

"No." She turned and saw the picture of Uncle Jack on the wall. "Who's this?"

"No one," said my father.

"Why is he hanging on the wall then?"

"He's the one they dressed up as a baby," my sister told her.

"He was *not* dressed up as a baby," shouted my father. "That was *not* the reason for the toy wagon."

He turned to my mother, who had just discovered her own picture. She took it down and put it between the encyclopedias.

"Are you sure it doesn't hurt?" he asked again.

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We worried about her from then on. She slept a lot. My father rented a mechanical bed for the living room and we took turns raising and lowering her legs. We never pushed the button that moved her neck even when she said it didn't hurt.

When she started talking about the next reunion, and said she wanted to be in the picture, my two great-grandmothers came over to talk her out of it. They saw the mechanical bed and looked politely away.

"You're not even gray yet," they said. They saw the picture of Uncle Jack and squinted.

"I want to be in the picture," said my mother.

"Aunt Gladys thought you were dead and buried."

"I want to be in the picture," she repeated.

They sighed. "Do you have something with a high neck?"

My mother nodded.

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Two months later it was on the living room wall. Uncle Jack had been taken down, and in his place stood my mother, dressed in a blue turtleneck. The scar was completely hidden. Since she was off to one side it was hard to tell whether she was meant to be in the picture or if she'd just walked in by accident. But she looked beautiful, and my sister and I imagined her in blue for a long time.

Aunt Gladys had come up after the candles were blown out. "I thought you were dead and buried," she said, clutching my mother's arm. "What a relief."

Eventually the scar lost its color and settled into a fold in my mother's skin. She said the doctors told her not to drive; the bones in the back of her neck will always be weak.

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It wasn't till years afterward that I realized my mother would never have died from it. At night she still stands by my bed in the dark, telling me not to worry. Whenever she leaves the house, or pulls the car out of the garage, I tell myself, my mother is stronger than anyone else's.

I see her driving down the highway, she waves to me and my heart swells. I see her crashing into the car just in front, her whole neck giving away, her head faltering, my mother, the car crossing over the median and bursting

into . . . No. It was only a small accident, she's all right, it didn't hurt for a minute. There's my mother standing on the median, safely out of the wreck, thumbing a ride. I know she won't slip, the trucks going by won't even come near her, and soon, someone will roll down their window and offer to take her home. She waves once more and the helicopter pulls back, snaps another picture, another, farther and farther away until she's just a normal woman on a highway, no one's mother, no scar on her neck at all. Cars speed past in both directions, here she is by my bed, her hands cool on my back in the dark. We can sleep peacefully, knowing my mother is immortal. There she is on the highway, there in the yard, leaning over tomato bushes in the garden, and I can bring her back whenever I need her.

the private life of  
robert schumann