

## Mother

The day I finally find myself visiting a sequence of past events in my life, Mother had slipped into a coma, where I imagine her surroundings are darkness, as opposed to the bright, sterile light of the waiting room, where I am sitting without feeling, unable to distinguish where the hard edge of the chair ends and my thighs start, where one more hour of a machine beeping and the vapid reports of a subordinate doctor will push me farther into the numbness of my own mind. The hospital glass is dark with specks of light that shine like stars dotting it, and I look out, trying to find another space in time, only to be drawn back to the reality of my own existence, the stars burning into my reflection. Mother is distant from me now, more distant than she had ever been, more distant than the day in March when I heard her hushed voice on the phone with the doctor, more silent than the silence in the ultrasound room when the core of the curve of my belly was projected on to the screen for the world to see in the first of a series of violations to come.

I consider that day in the doctor's room to be the point when my life really started. Before that, everything swam in a haze of incoherence. But after those few minutes in the doctor's room, I had achieved a new awareness – the awareness of my womb, which held the capacity to be the size of a raspberry and a cavernous room, all at once. Suddenly, in a moment, those narrow confines of muscle, mucous, liquid, made room for a lifetime of dreams, possibilities, unbearable losses each the size of blue elephants. A whole sea of submerged marine animals filled up the space in my womb. There were forests, there were cavernous tree trunks on which

grew yellow and green mosses; an undergrowth grew too, alive with creatures that looked strange and smelled strange and hummed darkly.

With the knowledge of the new universe I carried within me, I walked out of the doctor's room, and in a moment the world outside became remote to me. I saw everything from a distance, it was as though my feet did not touch but merely glided over the crowded streets I had grown up in. I heard the usual noises, the cacophony of cars honking, the chicken seller's coarse calls rising out of the bazaar, but over the din of it all, I could not recall anything I heard. They meant nothing to me.

It was spring and the sun was still making its way to the tropics. The day was warm but not scalding, so when I reached home I had found father sitting on the front porch, drinking sweetened milk tea with digestive biscuits. Avoiding his eye contact, I had crept my way into the bedroom, closed my door and cried, before making the call and breaking the news to D. We were both silent for a long time, because we did not know what to say or do and the silence was comforting. When I saw him in the afternoon, I knew I had changed, but though he could feel that I had changed he could not place what had changed about me. 'Why do you have your thousand yard stare,' he asked me, and all I could think about was something I had read in a book, the name of which was lost to me then. If two people meet after a long time, they both imagine themselves to have changed greatly, but neither can perceive the other to have changed very much. To him, I remained the same person that I had always been.

That afternoon, D and I made love. We made love unhurriedly, slowly, painstakingly. We made love as though the most important thing in the world was to continue to make love for the

longest time. But it would be wrong to say that D and I made love for really, the three of us made love. The whole ecosystem that had grown out of my womb made love with us. The tops of the trees bristled together, the tall elephant grass danced in the wind, a tidal wave rose from within the sea and swept over everything. And afterwards, the three of us were together on his big, white bed which seemed to rock like a boat.

Later, we reached a decision. Or rather, a decision was reached. 'It would be stupid,' he said, 'And what about college?' I agreed, for life was long, and we were just at the start. He stroked my hair as the last of the sun seeped in and warmed his bed. 'I never noticed your hair was brown,' he said.

After a while, I asked him, 'Should I tell Mother?' 'You have to,' he replied.

That's when it started, the silence. Silence when I told her, silence afterwards, it was as though her voice was silenced. Even on the phone she whispered. And I, sitting in my room, put together all the S-words I knew like a string of pearl. Silence. Shame. Society. Seclusion. Sex. Silence. Shame.

She said, 'Come, Daughter, we have to go.' 'Tell your father we're going to your aunt's.'

But I sat in my room, not in any hurry to get moving, and I stared at the open pages of a book before me. At a point, my tea ran cold, someone came in to put the fresh laundry in the drawers, and finally, the shadow of my father crossed the door. 'What are you reading?' he asked me. I quickly checked the name of the book. 'Siddhartha,' I said. Father talked at length about his dislike for Herman Hesse and words streamed out of his mouth, of which I only caught a few. My father looked old in the light which threw his face under scrutiny. He had

missed spots of his beard which were grey specks against his dark skin. His was a life that had no time for mysticism or romance. Having come of age in a decade of wars, he was truly modern, and the specifications of bombers interested him more than South American magic realism. The images of burning Buddhist monks were burned into the back of his head, so that he could not separate the two ideas and quit Eastern mysticism altogether. Though I felt immense affection for the man, I also knew that if he found out about my situation he would never be able to forgive me.

My mother entered the room in haste to pull excuses about where we were going, and soon I found myself in the car, as the unreality of the city rushed by me. Though she sat only a seat away from me, the distance between us was so great that I could not touch her, even if I had reached out for her. The rest of what passed between us that day remains hazy to me, for all I remember is the cold whitewashed walls of the medical facility, waking from a deep sleep with a start, only to confront a hollowness that resounded within me. The calm waters with landscapes of hills underneath had disappeared, now there was the tremendous crashing of waves on barren sands. And I, no longer 'We', found myself more alone than I had ever felt in my entire life. Everything I had imagined was no more, the name which was so real to me sounded laughable, and I felt my worth as a person to have lessened. I was without purpose. I found myself stringing together S-words once again, Silence, Stillness, Sanity.

At that time, one thing I had not wondered was why she had helped me, especially when that meant going against her morality, religion, and honor. It had meant days spent making excuses for my appearance, as intrusive relatives had asked her one question after another. "Why does she look so sickly? Why did she lose so much weight?" What had happened to me, asked my

father, unable to put together the connection between my sudden emotional withdrawal from the world and my hourly physical withdrawals into the bathroom. Many other things surfaced to me at that time, the most ironic realization being that I was only beautiful when I was sickly. Relatives, fat aunties in monstrous hair buns, snickering cousins in skin-tight jeans, suddenly took it upon themselves to comment on how much weight I had lost, and how beautiful it made me look. As they complimented me, suggested new clothes that I was now worthy enough to fit into, all I could think about was the dead-chicken smell I carried in my nostril everywhere like a bane, that would make my stomach turn when faced with food.

Mother, Mother, I had always wanted to ask, why are you still here for me? For the next five years, neither of us ever mentioned what had happened. I moved on with my life, broke things off with D, flew ten thousand miles to painfully separate myself from my roots, changed house, found bits and scraps of paper that were clues to my Mother's life, of which I took no notice in the perpetual hurry I found myself in. Yet, sitting in the waiting room, I had begun to piece my mother's life together.

I recalled the love-letters, hidden away from prying eyes for many years, containing illicit conversations with boys, testimonials to the subversive South Asian teenager that existed within the Mother figure I had always known. I thought of the imprints upon the notebook pages where her first rose must have been, and I thought of her first kiss, which must have echoed from her feet to her breasts. I imagined her marriage at eighteen, a hasty affair, pushing her forward into a societal role that she was not braced for, only to be solidified by her first and only pregnancy, me.

I had always held Mother in such reverence, that I too had been a part of the societal forces that shaped her. My own secret was so taboo that I had to tuck it away and forget it, in doing which I had to put away a part of my own history. It left many gaping questions that I should have addressed, except both our selves had been shadowed over by the same system of shame and silence. In the waiting room, for the thousandth time in my life, I was putting together S words. Shame. Silence. Suppression. Subversion. Self. The list would keep growing longer in the years to come.

It was only when faced with impending loss of such magnitude that I could put into perspective the other great loss of my life.