

Falling Away

The shrill ring of the telephone breaks the early-morning darkness.

“This is it,” my sister Candy says. She pauses as if to gather strength before she continues. “You’d better get here as soon as you can.”

Time blurs during the two-hour drive over Minnesota roads that twist and turn, roads I have traveled many times since I left my mother’s home thirty-seven years ago. Even after all this time, returning to Pequot Lakes brings back the old feelings, the same fears that crowd my thoughts whenever the night surrounds me. I push the uneasiness aside and drive faster, propelling my car through the darkness, wondering if I will get there in time.

The homes and businesses are all asleep as I pass through the small town of Hinckley. I drive on to Isle and the roads that swirl around Mille Lacs Lake, its waters a black hole in the early dawn light. As I reach Highway 18, the last stretch of road before Brainerd and the Good Samaritan memory unit where Mom has lived for the last year, dawn lights the sky in shades of pink and blue. But not with hope. My hands ache from their tight clutch on the steering wheel.

When I open the door to Mom’s room, she lies on the hospice bed, her white head jerking with each gasp. Already the room smells of death. Candy and I sit vigil all day, phoning family to let them know Mom is unresponsive, unable to wake or talk.

“If you want to see her, you’d better come now,” I tell them, watching Mom’s chest rise in bursts with each belabored breath. “It’s time.”

Late in the evening, after family and guests have left, I stay with Mom to watch through the long night. I am determined she won’t be alone. As I sit with her, memories skip through my brain like a flat stone skims over water—Mom when I was small, dressed for the barn chores. Mom in her navy-blue dress the day of my father’s funeral. A few months later, Mom’s head

pressed against her boyfriend Butch's chest, gazing into his face with that desperate longing she had then.

I rest in the chair but can't sleep. I know the dream will come to me. It's already with me. The past crowding the present. The face. Butch's face, peering into my window.

The open door to Mom's room spills just enough light for me to see. Mom's pale-blue robe is draped over the chair near the closet. Boxes of wet wipes and adult diapers are stacked against the wall and family pictures from each generation hang above the dresser. In one, Mom and Dad stand locked in a black and white embrace, the photo grainy. It was taken when they were first married, back before their problems began. Pictures of each of my three older sisters and their families are on the wall, too, along with Mom's favorite photo of my brother Frank. He wears a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, his dark curls spilling from underneath. Next to Frank's picture is a 1979 photo from my wedding day. I hold a bouquet of red roses and my long hair is feathered and curled. Our smiling faces are all there on the wall—all the family who has loved Mom in spite of the problems she created in our lives.

I rub the back of my neck, stiff from sitting in the too short recliner next to Mom's bed. I resist the urge to turn on the lights. My eyes search the darkened corners of the room as if expecting the tall frame of Butch's ghost to appear. The window shade is open an inch to the blackness outside and I pull it shut, fighting back the fear. *He isn't here*, I tell myself. I pull the afghan around my shoulders and settle back into the chair.

The fear lingers. I have carried this fear for almost forty years and along with it, the rejection I felt when Mom chose her boyfriend over me, the resentment that lingers no matter how often I tell myself I have forgiven her. When will I finally let it go?

I watch as Mom sleeps. She fights for each gasp of air. I sit in the darkened room and

count the long seconds between her raspy breaths.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m here.” I lean forward to pull the blanket over her shoulders. She had once been so powerful. When I was a child, her hands were capable of kindness, but more often, of punishment. Frank and I would stand in front of her like miniature soldiers prepared for battle. Each in turn would bend over Mom’s knees, our bottoms bared. We’d bite our lips and shut our eyes against the pain as her hand spanked our tender skin over and over. But that had been the easy pain, the kind we could forget as we played our cowboy games. At least until the next time. The real pain was the face in the window that has haunted my dreams.

The minutes tick by. My thoughts jumble. Over the last years, Alzheimer’s chipped away at Mom’s mind until she lost the bad memories she had spent a lifetime denying. Sometimes I think she was the lucky one and wish I could do the same. Just skip over the memories that haunt my nights and shadow all the happy moments I have had with Mom.

But there is that face. The face peering in my memory’s window.

As the darkness of night falls away to dawn, I add another thought to the litany that flits across my brain. A prayer for a forgiveness that’s whole and complete, a falling away of the memories I carry.

Brat

Mom leans over the steering wheel and peers through a small hole blown clean by the car's defroster. The wipers move back and forth as they scrape the wet snow from the window. The darkness and fresh snowfall make it impossible to see where the road ends and the ditch begins. I know why Mom made me come with her. She told Dad I had something at school, an excuse so she could meet Butch. I'll never get used to the lies.

We pull into a driveway marked with orange reflectors. "It'll just take a few minutes," she explains as we park. "I have to check on Butch. He has another bad headache."

The bullet-shaped trailer sits on a piece of land surrounded by snow covered oaks that have lost their leaves. An abandoned house looms behind with blank staring windows. It leans to one side as if pushed by a giant hand.

This is the home of the man who hangs around the restaurant where Mom and I waitress. Butch is a sour man—a big guy. He sits at the counter and watches as Mom moves between the customers. When he's around, Mom is flushed and happy. He compliments her shapely legs and her blue eyes. She giggles like a schoolgirl. Only my Mom isn't a girl. She's close to fifty and a married woman. I try to ignore them both, but I hate the looks they give each other. The remarks from the customers make me sick. "How does your dad like your mom's new friend?" they ask with a knowing look.

The metal steps ping as we make our way to the front door. Mom enters without knocking. I follow close behind, stomping the snow from my shoes. The smell of Ben-Gay and fried fish fills the trailer.

Butch lies on the couch groaning with agony. Mom hurries to the couch and cradles his head in her lap, talking to him in a soft voice. I look around, amazed at how compact it is. A

miniature stove, tiny refrigerator, even the black and white television is small. The entire trailer could fit into our living room.

“You poor man,” she croons. She rubs his head and pats him like a lap dog.

“Can’t you just give him an aspirin?” I ask as I plop into the only other chair. Mom gives me a look and I turn my attention to the television. The fuzzy TV drones the evening weather. More snow.

“Mom, I need to get home. I have homework.”

“I can’t leave him like this,” she answers in a loud whisper.

I mess with the television antenna, trying to clear the picture. The weather report ends and Archie and Edith Bunker sit at a piano singing “Those Were the Days” in off-key voices. The laughter and clapping bring on a fresh round of groans from Butch. I turn the volume up a little.

“The snow is getting worse,” I say, as I look out the window again. “You can’t even see the driveway.”

Another hour passes and I hear a rustling noise from the couch. Mom slaps at Butch’s hand and giggles. She leans down to whisper in his ear.

The minutes drag by. It’s 9:00 p.m. on the kitchen clock before Butch finally sits up. He holds his head like he’s afraid it might explode. “It still hurts but I can stand it,” he says, as he rises from the couch.

I know a faker when I see one. I grab my jacket and move towards the door.

“Wait. I want to show you something before you go,” he says, motioning to me as he steps towards a closet tucked into the wall. He pulls out a purple mini skirt and holds it up. In the closet behind him, skirts and blouses hang in a neat row. Shoes and boots line up along the

floor.

“Wow! Whose clothes are these?” I ask as I admire a pair of thigh high boots and a red velvet skirt.

“They belong to a niece that stayed here. I bought her all these clothes and shoes,” he says as he pulls out a pair of blue jeans. “She was about the same size as you.” He gives me a slow once over. “You’re a little taller. She was sixteen. What are you, fifteen?”

“Annie just turned fourteen last month,” Mom said. “She’s tall for her age.”

He pulls out a jacket with fake fur sleeves and continues as if Mom hasn’t answered him. “She ran away. Left everything.”

I look up, startled. “She left her clothes? Why would she leave her clothes?”

“She was a mouthy girl. A brat. Didn’t appreciate anything,” he says to me with a long stare.

“How about you?” he says. “Are you mouthy?”

I move back, tossing the boot into the closet.

“Nobody knows where she is,” he continues. He takes a step towards me. “She just disappeared.” He unfurls his fingers into my face like he’s delivering magic. “Poof.”

Mom puts on her jacket and gathers her purse. “She just didn’t realize how good she had it. You are a wonderful man to have given her such a nice home and that beautiful wardrobe.”

He doesn’t answer her, but stares over her head into my eyes, a smirk on his face.

I reach for the doorknob. “Let’s go.”

Butch leans into Mom and whispers something in her ear. Her face flushes and she cups her hand over her mouth to answer in a low voice.

We maneuver our way down the narrow steps. Mom calls over her shoulder, “You get

some rest now.”

Butch stands in the doorway, his hand raised in goodbye.

I can feel his eyes follow me all the way to the car.

I yank the frozen door of the Buick open and it groans in protest. We get inside and Mom turns the key and flips on the defroster.

The wipers clack and scrape across the snowy windshield. The defroster fan kicks into high.

“He’s such a good man,” Mom says as we wait for the windshield to clear. “Do you know he reads his Bible every night?”

She pauses for a moment before she shifts the car into reverse. The tires spin with a sharp whine and finally catch. The Buick moves backward up the small hill.

I scrape away a thin layer of ice to peer at the driveway. The snow lifts and twists in the wind.

The trailer lights dim and a shadow appears in the kitchen window. Butch watches as the car backs away.

I slump towards the car door, my temple pressed against the cold glass. The wind blows and swirls. My feet have left deep holes, a path from the trailer to the car. Already they fade into the deepening snow, swallowed by the storm.

Penance

It's 1989, at least a dozen years before Mom develops memory problems. I can feel every one of my thirty-two years pressing on my bones like a heavy weight. Last night I had jumped out of bed too many times to count as one after another my three small sons had cried out. All night long, it seemed they had needed something—a drink of water, a trip to the bathroom, assurances that a scary dream wasn't real. And then the long day at our sporting goods store where I had completed the payroll checks, placed the orders for bobbers and hooks, paid the bills, and bagged the minnows for the customers.

I had been late to pick up the boys from daycare. A customer lingered at the cash register as he told me about his latest catch. He stretched his long arms to show the fish's length, ignoring my furtive glances at the clock. Tomorrow is Saturday, the busiest day of the week at our store and another work day for me. At least I'll be able to sleep a little later. My brother Frank always opens the store for the early bait customers on Saturday mornings.

“What's for dinner?” Joey asks as we drive home. The youngest, James, rubs his eyes as he whines with hunger.

As I pull into the driveway of our small, two-story home, I see Mom's Pontiac parked in front of the house. I'm embarrassed about the chaos I left the house in this morning. I should have straightened the living room before I left for work. At least picked up the toys and folded the clean laundry on the couch. But there is never enough time to get it all done and when I left this morning, the dirty breakfast dishes were in the kitchen sink and the floor by the high chair was sticky with apple juice.

Already I am so tired I could fall asleep on my feet.

When I walk in the door, I smell roast beef and there's a kettle of potatoes boiling on the

stove. Mom is in the kitchen. The dishes are washed and she has picked up the living room, run the vacuum cleaner, washed a load of clothes, and folded my laundry basket of mismatched socks, a job I despise.

The boys jump up and down, “Grandma’s here.”

Mom has a big smile on her face and hugs each of the boys. “Dinner’s almost ready. Who’s hungry?” She has worked a job all week long and I know she must be tired, but she is a whirlwind of energy as she sets the table and directs the boys to help. Since divorcing Butch, I know she’s been lonely. She fills her spare time trying to mend our relationship.

We eat our dinner in a clean kitchen, and for once, the boys don’t complain but eat whatever is put in front of them. Mom presses more food on me, telling me I need to eat more, to keep up my strength. I laugh and say, “Enough. I have at least ten extra pounds of strength on my hips.”

Afterwards, Mom helps me wash the dishes and offers to take one of the boys for the night.

“It’s my turn!” Joey, my middle son says, and I climb the stairs to his bedroom to find pajamas and clean clothes for the next day. I wonder how Mom does it. She’s almost at retirement age and works as a house mother at a group home. All week long she mothers them—cooks the meals, washes their clothes, and all the other things a traditional mother does.

And now she is at my home to care for me.

What drives her past the exhaustion she must feel to do these things for me? Is this her way of balancing the guilt?

I gather up Joey’s favorite teddy bear and stuff it into the overnight bag with his clean clothes. I sigh with relief, glad to have one less child to care for, one less mouth to feed before I

leave for work in the morning. With the work Mom has done, my evening will be much easier.

“Joey’s all set.” I walk into the kitchen, expecting Mom to be ready, her purse over her arm. But when I walk back into the kitchen, Mom is on her knees scrubbing my kitchen floor.

“I’ll get that later. You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do.” She doesn’t even look up as she uses her fingernail to dislodge a piece of dried food from the printed linoleum.

“Come on. Leave it. Joey’s ready to go.”

She ignores my pleas and continues to scrub the floor. Her arms move in wide circles. Her face has the same determined look she had that day years ago when she had come to my work and told me she was leaving Butch. “He’s knocked me around for the last time,” she said. We stood there in the rain outside the front door and she told me she would make things right with me and with Frank. “Things will be different,” she said. “You’ll see.” We hugged then and as I turned to go back inside, she called out, raising her fist in the air as she spoke, her face triumphant. “I got him with a good right hook. Right on his nose.” I had laughed then at the thought of my tiny mother punching Butch.

Did I know forgiveness would begin its slow measure that day with Mom’s fist raised in the air, the rain on her face?

Ever since that day she’s tried to make things right. That’s why she insists on helping me. Why she pushes aside her own exhaustion to fold my laundry and wash my kitchen floor. It’s an act of contrition that only she and I understand. It’s the only way she has to show me how sorry she is for the things that have happened in the past. It’s her only way to tell me the words she can’t seem to say.

Mom splashes soapy water on the floor and scrubs harder.

“You don’t need to do that,” I say again, knowing how tired she must be. But she ignores me, bends her white head towards the floor. Her arms stubbornly scrub faster.

Why must she persist in this penance without the confession? Why can’t she just say what needs to be said, the apology I have waited so many years to hear? Jamie wails out a tired cry and Joey stands at the door, his bag clutched in his arms. He kicks at the door in frustration as he waits. I glance at the darkened windows and feel that familiar bump of fear in my chest. The time to discuss the past never seems right. Perhaps if we could talk, the pain would go away, the fear would leave. Maybe we could finally settle it all.

My mouth opens, ready to say the words. To tell her she doesn’t need to do these things. That the past has been set aside. But I don’t know how to say the words anymore than she does and the moment passes.

I look down at Mom’s white head, bent as if in prayer. Her arms scrub the floor as if to wash away her sins.

Exhaustion rolls over me. Slumps my shoulders. My arms hang useless by my side.