

Context

By Marjorie F. Weber

Who am I if I am not my mother's daughter anymore, if there is no one in my life who knows I resemble my father around the eyes or that I have my mother's fine straight hair and the same giggle as my sister? Who am I if there is no one left who knows my family's stories, my family's secrets, no one left who shares the same memories I have of who we used to be?

Do I exist only in context?

Thursday, December 3, 1992

While I am drinking coffee at my desk in Princeton at 10:35 on a crisp, spectacularly sunny December morning, the driver of a car rounding a bend on Rte. 10 in Gratham, New Hampshire, loses control of his car. My father, in the opposite lane, turns the wheel sharply to the right to take the full brunt of the impact on the driver's side of the Toyota, away from my mother in the passenger seat.

While I am taking a last sip of coffee and contemplating a second cup, paramedics are extricating my mother from the car for transport to the hospital. My father, paralyzed and trapped in the wreckage, watches, unable to help her, unable to move. She is the love of his life. He thinks she is already gone. He thinks he has killed her. Already he blames himself for what is not his fault.

She dies en route.

It is early afternoon in Princeton and the sun is streaming in the west window, catching dust motes in its light. The office is hushed, sleepy, peaceful. My keyboard clicks as I enter test cases and data validations for the latest project in my computer. "When an order is approved, an invoice is created. Order and invoice totals must match," I write. "Customer ID must be on the database before an order can be created." While I am writing, EMS workers are using the jaws of life to extricate my father.

He is bereft.

There are no cell phones. I don't hear until I am home. On my answering machine, a stranger identifies himself as my parents' minister. My parents are not religious. I know something is wrong. I return his call, wait endless seconds while someone who is not the minister answers the phone, retrieves him. "Are my parents dead?" I ask, wasting no time for amenities.

"Your mother is," he says. I listen, numbly jot down details. My father has broken his neck and has suffered some paralysis. The stranger's voice is smooth, even, carefully modulated, practiced for just such occasions. He tells me that Uncle Ollie is with my father already at the hospital. Why is this minister calling instead of my uncle, I think, but do not ask. If I can't talk to my father, I long to hear the warm tenor of my uncle's voice, so like my father's.

I place the phone on its cradle, close my eyes. The minister – the stranger – with his cool, even voice, does not tell me what I need to know. I imagine the impact, hear the screech of metal twisting, and the stillness right after. I imagine my mother, chatting with Dad as he drove, and gone the next instant. Did she suffer? Will he make it? They were married almost 53 years. Can he live through – or with – this loss?

And I wonder how this could happen, that my mother could die and my father could be injured, how there could be this seismic shift in my life and I did not know.

It surprises me that I had a perfectly fine day, that I had not one gut feeling, not a single stray thought that something could be wrong. The thought still haunts me.

I call my daughter at college, tell her. She screams. I wish I could.

My Mother

My mother had been ill with Myasthenia Gravis for years. I thought we would be prepared for her death.

But not this way.

She knew she was failing. “Come up for Christmas,” she said during our last conversation on Thanksgiving. “See the new house.” And she added, as if she were prescient, “I’m not going to be around much longer.”

“Maybe. I’ll see,” I said, not relishing the idea of a six hour drive north in wintry weather and not sure my daughter’s and my schedules would allow it. I was sure there would be time, another summer.

It was the first thought I had, when I heard the news, that I’d wish I’d said yes, we’ll be there.

My Father

Propped up in the hospital bed, he is wearing a neck collar. He has broken his C2 and C3 vertebrae and has lost mobility in his arms and his hands but he can still breathe on his own and, for now, he can still move his legs. Today, the doctors are optimistic. But there are surgeries ahead and no guarantees that he will fully recover. And there are no antidotes for grief.

He tears up, smiles when he sees us, relieved we are here.

I glance across the room to the space next to his bed, half expecting to see Mom bend to kiss him, plump up his pillows, sit beside him talking doctor talk: prognosis, surgery, medicine, when he will be able to go home. I take the hand that she would have been holding, and my father, my daughter and I cry together. They would have been married 53 years, come January.

Is death easier if you can say good-bye?

My parents’ minister drops by to pray over my father. He is loud and pious. My paralyzed father, who, with my mother, raised us as plain vanilla Presbyterians, listens politely. I say nothing. Maybe Dad finds comfort in this. How things have already changed.

The New House

On the porch, I stoop to pick up the UPS package, the breadmaker I sent Mom for Christmas, delivered a day too late.

Our footsteps echo on the new wood floors as we walk through the house, seeing it for the first time. In the December dusk, the late afternoon light is thin, white, bleeding color out of the rooms, washing sofas, chairs, tables and rugs in taupes, grays and browns. We breathe in the smells of fresh paint and floor polish and the remnants of the fire they enjoyed two nights ago.

Her reading glasses lie waiting where she left them on the end table by the sofa, next to the book open to the page she was reading that morning. Her sweater is neatly laid out on the bed as if she will be back momentarily.

I close my eyes and imagine how it should have been – that this is Christmas and the house is fragrant with the mingled smells of roast turkey and stuffing, of sweet potatoes with marshmallow topping and homemade pumpkin pie, that Mom is giving us the grand tour, telling us how she and Dad discovered the place, showing us the sweeping views from the living room of the snow topped New Hampshire mountains beyond. And we are walking beside her, smiling, nodding, praising her choices, her fine taste.

Without her, we are intruders.

In the bedroom, my daughter runs her fingers through the spill of jewelry in the jewel case on the dresser. She opens the closet, runs her hand over her grandmother's fur coat, buries her face in it, closing her eyes, breathing in her perfume, as if to hold on to, seal in one last memory of her.

If Only

My parents' next door neighbor in Grantham appears at the front door, touches my arm, tells us Mom stopped by just before they left to run errands that day. "If only I'd kept her longer," she says. "She'd be here now."

"If only I'd turned the wheel harder," my father told me, not 10 minutes after we arrive at the hospital, "she might have lived." "It's my fault she died," he repeats again and again, tearing up each time. "If only we had taken the Olds instead of the Toyota."

We know from the accident report that this is not true, that, in turning the car as he did, he took the full impact of the crash and almost killed himself. She died because her bones shattered on impact, because she was fragile.

If only we'd had the chance to say good-bye, to hug her one last time.

If only. There would be a lot of them this trip.

A waste of time.

Meant to Be

Why is it, in tragedy, that people think it's comforting to say "it's meant to be" or "it's God's will" or that "someday I'll understand?" I'm sure, believing I was being helpful, I'd said those same words to someone at one time or another.

But now I can't make sense of it. If God is good and kind and benevolent, how could an accident like this, that left my mother dead and my father permanently crippled, be by design? This time, it was personal. How different I felt.

"How can there be a reason for this?" I ask my coworker.

He turns to me, throws up his hands. "Sh-- happens," he says, but with great compassion.

"Then I don't have to understand why?"

He shakes his head no and I feel the weight of it lift.

Sunday Morning Back Home

It is 9:30 already. I have overslept. I roll over, sleepily reach for the phone and speed dial my parents' number. I listen for the ring, then, remembering, hang up the phone.

So this is what death really is, not hearing her voice again.