

Stigmata

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I AM NO LONGER A MOTHER. I will always be a mother. I am the mother of a dead child. Useless and pathetic as a glove without a hand, I am a limp, empty reminder of something that is no longer there.

I am going shopping. *Bereaved mother: shopping.* I collect my purse from its hook in the closet and rummage inside until my fingers close around a sharp cluster of keys. I step outside and pull the door closed behind me. The sun is shining and I am momentarily blinded, but my feet know the flagstones by memory, and I walk forward in bright blindness until the car comes into slow focus ahead of me.

I climb into the driver's seat and draw my seatbelt across my chest. I sit still for a minute, looking through the windshield at the drowsy green haze of summer, split in two halves by a diagonal crack in the glass. I turn the key in the ignition and pull out of the driveway.

Traffic is sparse and meandering for a Saturday. Even so, I chide myself for not running these errands on a weekday while I still can, before I'm back to making hurried detours on the way home from the office.

I haven't been back to work yet. I don't mind the thought of working, but I'm not ready for the conspicuousness of bereavement. Everyone will feel obligated to say something to me, and they won't know what to say—what *is* the right thing to say? I don't think there is any right thing—and I'll have to invest a lot of energy, energy I don't have yet, in assuming some sort of downplayed attitude of surviving, of recovering, in order to make my co-workers less uncomfortable. They'll resent me, albeit unconsciously, for the intrusion of my grief on their daily routines, and I'll resent them for resenting me, though I'd feel the same in their places.

My supervisor called yesterday to reassure me yet again that I can take all the time off that I need. Her tone was appropriately soothing and respectful, and she correctly replaced the pedestrian "How are you?" with the more post-tragedy-appropriate "How are you holding up?" I adopted the requisite posture of sombre stoicism and affirmed my immanent return to work. Was a committee formed at some point in the history of civilization to decree how these exchanges should go? I feel I've had the same conversation a thousand times. Making jokes is forbidden. Outright cheerfulness is forbidden, but so is outright grief. "You take care of yourself," my boss recited over the line, as though we are friends and not two

people who merely tolerate each other for the sake of professional decorum.

"I will," I said. "Thank you." I hung up the phone with a burning ache in my chest, passively angry at having been reminded of my loss.

It's been over a month now. Five weeks and three days, to be mercilessly precise. I can't stop ticking off the days since it happened, like a tally scratched on a prison wall. It's strange, this counting up away from, this backward-looking meter; all my life I had been counting down toward things, especially since she was born. The milestones in her life felt so significant: four more years and she'll be in high school. Five more and she'll be old enough to drive. That countdown has stopped forever, aborted in mid-stroke, and now my own life has two halves: a retrospectively blithe before and a long, shadowed after where nothing will ever be the same. I feel like a boat drifting off its moorings, aimlessly floating farther and farther from the harbour, toward nothing.

I arrive at the mall. The parking lot is a patchwork of empty spaces; I pick one at random. I lock the car and set off toward the mall entrance, striding diagonally across the grid of yellow lines. I need socks and tea towels. The acquisition of such mundane items doesn't deserve the designation "shopping," which has a taint of impulsive consumerism. No, this is something blander, a mere "errand."

Buying socks is deceptively complicated. By all rights it should take no time at all, but I always grab the first ones I see and wind up with useless ankle socks or the wrong size. Today I take my time; my progress is hindered, at any rate, by a pair of elderly women blocking the aisle, ponderously squeezing packages of socks as though they are cantaloupes. I stand between two racks bearing hats and gloves, staring at their backs, two concave masses in lurid floral print. Is there some chromosome, some genetic process triggered by old age, that causes a sudden and uncontrollable predilection for polyester? When I reach sixty-five, will I awake one morning to find my closet mysteriously full of nautical print blouses with oversized mock brass buttons and shoulder pads?

When I am old, will I still feel like this? Will realization still land on me like a kick in the stomach every morning when I wake up?

I suppose it's impossible for my mind to keep up this level of abject misery. I'll adjust, I'll adapt—it's inevitable. The idea of acclimatization carries its own misery, of course: how can I stop being upset? How can I let go of this anger without letting go of her? I can't conceive of not feeling this way. I can't imagine stepping out of this small, rigid box of pain.

The aisle is clear now and I grab four packages of black socks. I wander toward Housewares and the unremittingly pastel collection of tea towels. Must I

forever dry my dishes on horrible bland sunflowers? The set I just managed to wear out was a gift: ducks. Wretched blue ducks. I think my setting one of them down on a hot element was deliberate on some level. I dig through the neatly folded stacks of towels and manage to find something not too precious; I drape three sets over my arm and head for the nearest cash register.

The cashier is taciturn; she accepts my bank card without comment. She has limp blonde hair clutched back in an oversized plastic clip and a solid line of brown lipstick around the outside of her mouth, like a cartoon drawing of lips. I lean against the counter while the machine processes the transaction: please wait. The cashier stuffs my purchases into a crisp plastic bag. I look to my left and I wait. I see nothing. This patch of stillness is making me writhe inside myself. I feel like a fish: if I stop swimming I will die. Stillness lets it all come rushing in; agony fills me up in a sudden flood. I feel like I'm going to burst with it, suffocate under it. I am alone. *She is never never never coming back.* How can this be? God. Oh God.

The register grinds out my receipt. I accept the bag with a nod and move toward the store entrance, a small square of sunlight behind a thicket of mannequins. I am moving: I am walking. *Bereaved mother: walking.* I am walking and I am breathing. The horrible howling mess inside me begins to recede. I force myself to walk. Breathe. Those moments of random quiet—when I am distracted and they catch me unaware—are the hardest. Activity forces me to engage with the world. One foot forward. One foot forward. Walk. Eat. Bathe. Drive. Run errands. When I am active I am forced to skim the surface, where inside meets outside, like a fish feeding. When I stop I plunge into an awful depth, a never-ending nautilus of inner space where the walls are all covered with her death, with that instant of crash and smoke and pain.

Pain. Pain. This is the word that presides over the nightmare of my contemplation. *She didn't suffer, they said at the hospital. She didn't suffer, they were told to say.* How could they know that? There must have been an instant, at the least, of terror and agony, and that imagined instant is a red exclamation point that stands forever outside of time. *She's with the angels now,* well-meaning women said at the funeral. Christmas card relatives, come to do their grim familial duty; distant aunts with small gold crucifixes dangling primly around their loose corded necks. As if that sanitized emotional Band-Aid redeems her suffering. As if some amorphous reassurance could erase that horrifying red eternal instant. I wear that flaming moment like stigmata—the temporal wound of the beloved that will bleed out of me forever.

The parking lot sparkles. A quick rain has swept past while I was inside; now everything is bright and clean-smelling. The silver of my side mirror is a flashing beacon as I walk toward my car. I see a discarded milk carton caught in a tangle of weeds; somehow it is made beautiful by the crisp, shining wet. In a strange sliver of time between footfalls, things slide suddenly into a momentary image of completeness. For a brief shiver of a second—a pause between breaths—my mind lurches inexplicably upward and everything comes into perfect, encompassing perspective: *everything is OK. I really will be OK.* I exhale and it's gone. I'm left with the dizziness of altitude and a grinding reconnection with reality.

I get back in the car. What now? My days are dark, yawning expanses to be filled, traversed gingerly, moved through from one activity to the next like stepping stones. I don't want to go home; it seems a waste, anyway, to drive all the way across town just for a small sad bundle of towels and socks. I list off potential pastimes: a movie? No. I could go for lunch, but I'm not hungry. A coffee? Fine.

There's a half-finished book in the passenger seat, peeking out from under my shopping bag. I can read that. Good. I start the car and drive toward the mall exit. I brake at the intersection; a fat woman crosses in front of me, running for the bus. She pumps her arms strenuously, all her flesh painfully aloft. I watch her climb the bus steps, gasping for breath. I drive on. Swift-moving clouds billow over the sun, gray and swollen with rain. The day darkens.

I pull in at a chain coffee shop. I buy a cappuccino and find a table by the front windows. I park my chair facing out and open my book. I look down at it. The pages are crisp as lettuce leaves. The book was a gift from my mother last Christmas, and I've only just opened it this week. I can faintly smell the printing chemicals, mingled with the acrid scent of the coffee. Whiskers of steam lace the air above the coffee cup. Outside, the sky has been washed with charcoal and the clouds look fretful; it will probably rain again. The light is gentle and clear.

This is the kind of day I used to love: serenely overcast and quiet. The thought registers with me mechanically. It occurs to me that I should be feeling pleasure in this small island of calm. I do not. I'm grateful to feel nothing. To enjoy the taste of cinnamon and foam, to become involved in this novel, would be to have lost her and to be able to cope with that. To allow myself to dip into the agony that swells beneath my thoughts like a roiling black undercurrent would be to open the floodgates and never come up again.

The late afternoon light teases the scratches on the tabletop into a faint

relief. I fold my legs underneath my chair. I read a paragraph, uninterested. It feels like a sigh.

The stillness of this way of being aches like a cold cramp. It aches like a muscle held rigidly motionless for too long. The emptiness of my life is pulled tight around me, smothering me like wet, heavy cloth. I itch all over, from the inside out, desperate to feel again, to never feel anything ever again.

What can I do in the face of this? Funny the difference between knowing a fact intellectually and knowing it in its reality. I'd always flattered myself that I didn't take life for granted: I knew that everything I had could be taken away from me at any moment. I carried a slight disdain for people who reacted with surprise when faced with misfortune: *You never think this kind of thing will happen to you*. Why the hell not? It has to happen to somebody. The faceless, nebulous crowds of "someone else" are all solipsistic centres of their own universes: each of them, faced with the gravity of selfhood, imagining themselves somehow separate from the passing backdrop of life, but every one poised blithely under a hovering sword, one hairbreadth from becoming a statistic.

I knew this. I imagined that if I ever found myself a leading player in a tragedy, at the very least I wouldn't waste stage time being surprised about it. But that fancied mental preparedness was incinerated in the blast of my daughter's death. I learned in a single day the real, awful, initiatory meaning of the words, "nothing can ever prepare you."

I learned that I have no personality. Everything I thought I knew about myself, every accumulated pattern of behaviour, every opinion and inclination, suddenly meant nothing, like useless currency in a strange new country. I was stripped down to my core, shown the wretched, exposed nerve endings of my life. I was left writhing in the dirt with no skin and no map out of this featureless landscape.

It still sends a shudder through my body to think of those first days. My throat stings with the memory of the crying I did: I cried with my whole body in great, wracking waves. I wailed like an animal. And when I stopped crying it was worse: I thought I would rip in two. Her father arrived and all the barbed lines of tension between us disappeared into the black hole of her absence. We clung to each other, drawn together by the swelling gravity of her loss. Those days are still a minefield in my memory; probably they always will be.

That's another word that has been turned over in my mind, reversed to reveal a raw, crawling new aspect of meaning: "always." The certainties in my life are not promises anymore. They are ugly inevitabilities, stretching off into the distance like rusted train tracks. I will always miss her. I will always be someone who

has lost a child, no matter where I go or what new life finds me.

I realize that I have read the same paragraph in my book five times now, and I still don't know what it says. I put the book down without bothering to mark my place. I stare at the remains of my coffee, half-empty and cold. It takes a tangible force of will to cut through the murky swath of my thoughts and move. Get up. The experience of being here has run bitter and tepid like the coffee dregs; the itch inside me demands something else. I get up; I move. I must keep moving away from the electric burn of my thoughts. Always away.

Back in the car, I drive aimlessly; it feels good to turn corners. I listen to the sound of my own breathing, drawing its rhythm like a veil across my consciousness. The familiar train of thought snakes through my mind: *I can't take this. I can't do this. This cannot be.* Then I ponder the meaning of can't as the late-afternoon sun warms the steering wheel under my fingers. Can't implies that there is some sort of choice in the matter: I can't do this, and so I won't. . . and then what? Where does this choice lead? A nervous breakdown? Suicide? Both seem appealing in the vagueness of contemplation; anything would be preferable to this daily walk over knives. I long to have my power taken away. I want to have no choice. I want to be carried along, flailing and helpless, instead of having to make, every moment of every day, these small, torturous choices to go on living: get out of bed. Eat. Breathe.

Stopped at an intersection, I watch a wedding party emerge from a church across the street. The bride is an explosion of white as the wind tosses the layers of her dress like tumbling clouds. She smiles, holding her veil with one hand. Someone leans in and says something to her and she laughs. The groom holds himself rather rigidly, smiling with his lips closed. What are they thinking right now? They are probably thinking, *I am supposed to be happy.* Moments of overt importance in life are always like that: you're too busy appreciating them to feel them; you're too busy pressing every moment into a mental scrapbook.

On impulse I pull the car over. The wedding party begins to thin; the bride and groom are bundled into a white limousine covered with ugly plastic flowers. I cross the street and enter the church.

Apart from the funeral and a few weddings, I haven't set foot in a church since I was a teenager. The smell is familiar, though: mouldy paper and varnished wood. This church has a lavish abundance of stained glass. The light seems antique, liquid. Stillness fills the vaulted space, pressing down on the small actions of the few remaining members of the wedding party, who pull down bunches of roses from an arched trellis in front of the altar.

I'm not sure what I'm doing here. I slink into a back pew, feeling self-conscious. I look up at the radiating spectacle of the windows, saints' robes glowing like jewels, white faces tilted, oblong, like flattened eggs. I sit still. Half-heartedly, I launch a challenge: *Well, if you've got anything for me, now's the time.*

I'd parted with any anthropomorphic conception of deity long before she died. I haven't undergone any crisis of faith or railing against God—it didn't occur to me that any sentient force did this to her. I nodded at the reassurances of my beige-stockinged aunts—*She's with the angels now*—for their sakes more than mine. For most of my adult life religion has occupied a spare and designated space in my mind. It always seemed to me that people used religion as a sort of imagined insurance against bad luck, and alternately as an imagined rationalization for bad luck when it inevitably occurred. Religion struck me as a kind of sedative for the intellect; all my contemplations of faith were tainted with a slight mental sneer.

But here I am. Am I giving in in desperation? Have I come, weakened and under duress, for my dose of the tranquilizer? Am I sublimating my need for a parental figure who will gather me up, dust me off, and tell me that everything will be all right?

I don't know what I want. I watch dust motes twirling lazily in the amber air. I run my hands over the smooth surface of the pew. People continue to come and go; the doors let in periodic chunks of sunlight and swing closed with a muffled thump. I slide a copy of the Bible from the rack on the back of the bench in front of me. The pages are edged with gold, thin and translucent as tissue paper in a lingerie gift box. I close the cover and hug the book's thickness between my two hands. I look up. My mind settles beneath the thick, weighted stillness. I slide under it like a quilt.

I am sad. I am so very sad.

The Virgin's cloak is a pure, aching blue: it is the colour of my heart.

I sit still for a long time. The sunlight is beginning to take on the tarnish of evening. I sigh and slide the Bible back into its slot. I hoist myself out of the pew and walk back toward the entrance. An older man in a blue suit holds the door for me and smiles. He thinks I'm with the wedding. I smile back—it feels odd on my face, but pleasant, like a stretched muscle. I walk to my car through the clinging spider webs of my pain, every step a choice. Walk. Breathe. Live.