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THE MOTHER OF ALL STORIES

My mother likes stories that are glittery, that wear wide-brim Easter hats to casual cookouts, that are larger than life. If she was telling you the story about my car breaking down on a random highway in New Jersey, she would have embellished the details. She would not have mentioned that it was a regular summer's day, just one month after I had moved back to Brooklyn, nor that I'd been a nervous driver because my father—her husband—had died in a car accident when I was four years old. Those details would not have been important to my mother's story. Her stories don't walk inside of your mind because they are all broken.

But this is my story.

My beloved car, Bella, an old Chevy I'd purchased at a dodgy used car dealership in Rhode Island was begging to retire. She usually worked well, but every few months she'd need something—a new battery, a front axle, a water pump, on and on—but I kept her alive and running. Bella and I were on our way to visit my therapist, Sandra at her house in New Jersey. We had not physically seen each other in over a year, and she invited me over for a socially distanced breakfast and to collect my housewarming present. My mother does not like Sandra. She believes Sandra tells me a lot of lies and blames her for our failed relationship. If my mother were telling this story, she would neglect to tell you this vital piece of information. She is not one for small details.

Bella hated sudden moves. When I merged into the left lane and accelerated, she started coughing and spitting exhaust from the muffler. Throngs of drivers flipped their middle fingers as they sped past, despite the visible smoke emanating from Bella. Some of them yelled at me.

“Get off the highway!”

When the drivers weren't looking, I flipped them my middle finger. I raised my volume to drown out the honking cars and my splintering anxiety. I found the nearest exit, drove to a sleepy street, and cut the engine. Bella still rumbled, but I shushed her. We were stranded somewhere in West Orange. It was early and the houses were still silent with sleep. The only people stirring were the elderly walking in the adjacent park with their masks before they were forced to isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

I popped the hood and inspected her organs as if I knew a thing about cars, while Bella still huffed and puffed. Suddenly, I became a shadow under the hood, and I felt small, like I was thirteen again when my world started coming undone. I paced up and down the street searching for a solution. Then Sandra called, "Where are you?" Her words were calculated and patient as if we were in a session. "You said you were nearby an hour ago."

"Um, I'm just having a slight delay," I said as I continued pacing.

Unlike my mother, who is not one for details, being a therapist, Sandra relishes the small things. Her life's work is to help individuals quilt the teeny-weeny details of their lives, witness the tapestry that has informed them, and then guide them to create their own. The small details are the real stories that inform us, and the big details are the results of that story. This nugget surprised me when I started therapy at twenty-seven. Out of habit, I was going to omit the small details, but she pressed.

"What happened?" This prompt was more maternal.

I was struggling with the words and the right emotions, so I reverted to a time in my life when language was new. "Bella. Not. Work. She. Dead."

"Where are you?"

I walked to the end of the street and read the address out loud.

"I'll call you back in five minutes."

As I walked back to my overheating Bella, Sandra had already called a pick-up truck and was on her way to rescue me.

You are being rescued, I told myself. My teeth unclenched, my body surrendered, my breath returned, and I donned my mask to join the walkers in the park. My mother's unflinching narcissism never rescued me, but placed me in the proverbial firing squad. She was always ready to beat me down. As I looped the park, my mother's voice began to edge its way inside of me. You should have known better. I'd spent the last ten years regulating her voice inside and outside my head. I disregarded that first punch, but she became progressively louder.

You are impossible to deal with, she barked.

Why are you bringing others into your madness?

You are just destined to fail.

I armored myself, as usual, hands on my hips, shoulders erect, ready to argue with the apparition. “I’m not doing this with you,” I said out loud. The walkers who were already walking six feet away from me distanced themselves further. “You have not been there for me, and I don’t want to hear from you!” I shouted.

“You all right, baby?” an older black woman in a church wig asked.

I removed my hands from my hips. “Yes, ma’am,” I paused. “Thanks for asking.”

As she walked away, I stood in the middle of my story, taking deep breaths, trying to regulate myself, trying not to slip into another world.

In my early teens, my mother gave up on parenting me. She did not send me away to child protective services or move out of the house, she just stopped being an audience to my expanding life. Her detachment began when we—my entire family and I—immigrated to America. This new life, of a green card holder, was the first time she was able to curate her dreams. My older siblings had “life” already figured out, but I still needed help with the details: who should I be? Should I play a sport? How do I handle the bullies at school? What will I do after high school? Why am I so different? My mother was too busy building her own dreams to answer.

If my mother were telling you the story of our first years in America, she’d joke about her countless jobs. She had four and counting. She’d also tell you that within three years of living in Brooklyn, she and my stepfather had purchased a home. You’d be so fascinated by her rags-to-riches story that you would not need the intricate details. You would not think that they involved pushing me, and anything else that blocked her destiny, out of the way.

On my third loop around the park, I pushed these stories to the back of my memory where they normally reside. Exiting, I spotted Sandra waiting for me. It had been over a year since we’d seen each other in person, and I ran to hug her, but stopped. We waved vigorously and then hugged ourselves. Just one year ago, Sandra’s face shield, plastic gloves, and mask would render her strange—a person in need of therapy herself—but before I entered her car, I showed her my negative covid test results to put her at ease. Sandra opened all the car windows and removed her face shield to drive. I inspected her skin—her olive complexion was returning, her hair was still thin, but it was growing back, and she’d regained her weight.

"It's time you get a new car," Sandra said. "You are starting a new job and you need something more reliable."

"Ah, I think your mechanic can fix Bella," I said. "Besides, I'll take the train to work."

"In a pandemic?"

There are some good things that have happened in my life as a result of my mother's unloving. I have taken many risks. For the last nine years, I have lived and worked in China, Bangladesh, Paris, and New England. I was starting my new teaching job in Montclair, New Jersey in a few weeks and I'd moved back to Brooklyn because I wanted to live near my friends. But I didn't think this part through—commuting to work during a pandemic.

"In a pandemic?" Sandra repeated.

"Something will work out," I said. "You said your mechanic has the hands of God."

We both laughed and then fell into silence. Perhaps it was knowing laughter—sometimes the details give me anxiety—and I have to deny the world around them to cope. The latter connects my mother and me. We passed freeways, big box stores, train stations, gas stations, while layers of pollution landed on my face. Twenty minutes later, we entered a nondescript suburban neighborhood. As we parked in Sandra's driveway, a woman opened the front door and two barking dogs and scurried to the car.

"These are my crazy dogs," Sandra said. I reached down to pet them, and they both toggled between her hands and mine.

There are so many moments in my life that feel like a Seinfeld episode. Sitting in Sandra's kitchen eating breakfast with her as her partner, Robin, conducted her 9-to-5 work in the living room is one of these episodes. It's slightly bizarre, yet it's familiar. I've known Sandra for thirteen years. We are both equally invested in the relationship, but she knows me better. She can draw a map of my life. *Who is she?* I quietly asked myself for the first time. I started looking at the family photos on the fridge to get a clue. Above the fridge, there was a black-and-white photograph of an elderly woman. "That's my mother," Sandra said. "She died a long time ago."

She became nostalgic and shared that, in her youth, her mother had stolen the family car and driven from Sunset Park, Brooklyn, to New Jersey with a friend. At that point in their lives, it was an adventure of a lifetime. These days, it's a regular commute.

"She was a wild girl," Sandra said.

"Really? You can hardly tell in this photo."

"Yes, she was."

I imagined this was one of the last reckless teenage things Sandra's mother had done. Afterward, the parochial life ascribed to many women in the 1930s took hold of her. She submitted to becoming a wife, then a mother, and remained forced by the sharp edges of patriarchy to stay in her lane. Her mother's sparks of wildness and joy influenced Sandra to sculpt her own freedom. "It was not easy," she exhaled. "But I had to create my own life." At one point in her life, the therapist, the homeowner, the mother, and the artist had many of the details of her life crumbed, taken away, and she had to swim her way up to reclaim it.

"We have many sides to our stories," Sandra said.

My mother sparingly told us stories about her childhood. She was born, under the watchful eye of the British Empire, into poverty. She walked the streets barefooted and often cleaned neighbor's houses for their food scraps, until she became an adult. My mother is of the same generation as Sandra, but Trinidad & Tobago became independent when my mother was nine years old, and that sense of freedom only trickled down generations later. I'm a benefactor of the freedom my mother never received. She learned the language of freedom when we immigrated to the United States, and she remade herself on these principles.

The last story my mother told about her life came from when she was thirteen years old. Her father packed up her clothes and took her to work as a maid for a wealthy Lebanese family. I imagine the family lived in Port of Spain, just an hour away from where my mother lived. In the 50s the capital was a place for the elite, and a country girl like my mother must have felt like an outsider, but she left this information out. She said they worked her like a dog. Ironing this, cooking that, cleaning a house that was already clean.

At the end of the week, her employer gave her two options: a beautiful dress that she could never afford, or the week's pay. She chose the dress, then they fired her. "I was so silly," she told me. "I took a dress instead

of getting paid.” I imagined they dropped her at the nearest bus stop, gave her just enough money for her fare, and returned to their lavish life. When she returned to her family’s one-bedroom apartment, which housed six people including her, her parents were not happy or sad to see her. “They don’t have love in them,” she once said about her family. She showed her father her new dress, and he figured out they’d be eating baked beans and butter for the rest of the week.

Perhaps she was thirteen when she started crafting big stories without the details. The small things hatch in your skin, crawl into your soul, into your essence, without your authority. In this small story, my mother blamed herself. She could not see her father as the villain. She could not see that the rich Arab family used their newfound privilege to take advantage of a poor black country girl. She could not see that in the future, this family and many like them would always use their economic and racial privilege to sustain division in Trinidad. When she told this story and was inside it, she saw herself as the villain. But her decision to choose the dress was an act of rebellion: she wanted to feel beautiful, she wanted to be seen, and her father never again forced her into labor.

There are so many ways to tell a story. There are so many ways to see a story. My siblings and I have inherited my mother’s belief that she’s a victim in the story of her life. As a result, we have been tangled between history and fiction. What is real?

Sandra cleared my empty dishes and wiped the counter down with alcohol wipes as the dogs weaved back and forth, making sure the humans still liked them. The mid-afternoon appeared, forcing us to think about the rest of the day. Sandra had virtual therapy sessions; in fact, we had a session scheduled that day. “Do you still want your session with me today?” We laughed at her question. We both needed that laugh. I had to wait for Bella to be repaired. On a regular time, I’d spent my day waiting at a cafe, but everything was closed. Sandra came up with a plan for me to hang out with her friend Lucy, a nonagenarian who lived in Montclair, just twenty minutes away. “She’s fun,” Sandra said. “You can talk about books, and she has lots of good stories.”

Before we hopped into her car, Sandra handed me the blanket she had knitted for me. “I put my love in every stitch,” she said with a smile. It was a typical summer day, the languid heat was relentlessly breathing

down my neck, but I took the blanket out of its brown paper bag and brushed the fabric against my face. “Ah,” I mused, “I can feel the love.”

We drove away from the suburb and were back on a highway. A Springsteen lyric hummed in the background of my mind, and both of us allowed the silence to rest. I watched the passing scenes without judgment: New Jersey pollution, more big box stores, more construction, tall willow trees, and sidewalks being eaten by large houses.

“We’re here!” Sandra exclaimed as she parked the car.

I hopped out of the front seat while Sandra unbuckled her seatbelt and stood. “This is my new life,” she said while shifting her body from side to side. I attempted to help her, but she waved me away. “Sometimes it takes a moment for everything to wake up.” Before her year-long battle with cancer, Sandra believed age was just a number; now, at sixty-seven and in recovery from chemotherapy, she feels her age. She feels time and has become more sacred in her practice.

Lucy greeted us at the door. As I had earlier with Sandra, I extended my hand to greet her but quickly retracted. She was dressed if she were ready for a walk around the mall: black culottes, a white blouse, and gold sneakers. We walked inside and she plopped down on her seat near the television and motioned for me to sit on the couch. I carefully counted six feet away, sanitized my hands, and tightened my mask.

After the standard introductions, Sandra departed. As an immigrant, a traveler, a writer, and someone who has spent her life outside of social circles, awkward moments are part of my life. While Lucy watched *The Wendy Williams Show*, I brainstormed some icebreakers.

“So, Lucy, when was the last time you went clubbing?” As expected, she shot me a puzzled glance, which dissolved into laughter when she saw my arched eyes.

I asked additional strange questions, and we chit-chatted for a while, then she asked me a strange question.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No,” I replied. “But I’m looking.”

“Well, hopefully, you have a way to pleasure yourself.”

When you are ninety-three years old and living through a global pandemic, with generations of your family in the grave and those ahead may never know you, you want your story to be told. Without prompting,

Lucy began telling me her story. As she talked, I interrupted with questions: “How did you feel about Martin Luther King? What were you like in the Sixties? How did it feel to be a black woman during that time? How did you find joy? Do you feel satisfied with your story?”

“Sometimes I pray to die.”

I gasped. “But you have so much more life left inside you.” Sometimes we treat the elderly like young children and tell them phantasmagorical stories because we neglect to see their personhood, but we want to believe in those glittery stories as well.

“I’m lonely,” she said.

I opened my mouth to say something revealing, but I immediately closed it. In Trinidadian culture, we don’t tell friends, family, and strangers our business, also known as our stories. We are fearful that someone will use our stories to harm us, so we keep everything locked and lost in our emotional maze. I hated this, so as a child, I used to sit under the kitchen table and tell stories to my imaginary friends. My brother and sister did not require stories to breathe, but stories were my survival. Since my mother parsimoniously doled out hers, I made up my own. But stories—personal stories, for a mass of people whose ancestors were shackled, boated through the Atlantic, and forced into slavery—are our life jackets against the tide of other people’s history, other people’s narratives. Therapy has taught me to set my story free.

“You know Lucy, I’m lonely as well.”

Wendy Willaims’ voice bleared on about celebrity cheating on his wife while Lucy and I fiddled for the right words. I’m estranged from my immediate family. I live alone, and this pandemic has forced me to think about my death every day. Before I go to sleep, I make sure I’m wearing good underwear and my apartment is clean, so whoever finds my dead body in bed would not judge me.

“Lucy, what will happen to our stories when we die?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she says. “They will remain here with others.”

In the late afternoon, Sandra returned with a fixed-up Bella, ready to hit the highway back to New York City. “The mechanic said that she’s good for now, but she’s not going to last.”

“That’s just mechanic talk.” I shrugged. “Bella will be okay.”

Sandra knows me. She knows that I procrastinate making major deci-

sions. Inviting no further discussion, she said, “Let’s go and look at some used cars next week.”

I accepted her help. *It comes from a place of love*, I told the army of stories inside my head. *It’s Sandra and she loves us.* With my mother, help came with caveats. On the rare occasion I coerced her into helping me, she’d find every opportunity to request a tenfold return of the favor. I have spent many years fearful of asking for help because I did not want to be similarly wounded.

Being a writer who is always searching for symbolism and meaning in life and my work, I called my mother a few days after my strange day with Sandra, Lucy, and Bella. We had not spoken to each other in one year. What caused the break-up this time? The same old story—she tried to manipulate me, I refused, and she told me to stop calling her. In the past, I’d return, despite feeling disgusted and gutted by her actions. But in the past few years, things had been going well for me. I had more confidence, a full-time job, savings, a solid friend group, and authentic love within myself.

I gave her a recap of my life: my new job, my lifestyle during the pandemic, my car debacle, and my move back to Brooklyn. I was rushing my words and thoughts, fearful that she’d steal my story and refocus the conversation on her, but she listened without interrupting. When there was a natural pause in the conversation, she said, “Did I ever tell you about the car breaking down on the highway on our way to Maryland? Now, that’s a story. We were stranded for six hours.” She’d told this story over and over again, each time adding an additional hour to the wait. I scrolled through social media as she spoke, and as soon as there was a lull, I hurried off the phone.

What are the real details of this story? They had gotten stranded because my stepfather was too cheap to purchase roadside assistance. The other detail: my mother stopped driving since my father was killed in a car accident. When he died, she relapsed into the depression of her youth, a depression that has transferred to me, a depression she has denied. “Pray,” she once told me. “God will take it away.”

For the first time, I realized that my mother is stuck in the middle of her story, while I keep ending old stories and starting new ones. My

mother might die with only one version of her story being told. Her childhood trauma would never allow her to explore the other stories and build a new narrative. What will happen to all my mother's stories when she dies? She's deeply ashamed of her childhood poverty, the abuse, and her unloving parents. She would not like any of her children or grandchildren to tell this story, but the dead are master storytellers because their stories live within us. We recite their stories during happy occasions or difficult times, and many times their stories come to us, without us calling for these stories.

A week later, I met Sandra at the Newark PATH train to go car shopping. She called it the “research phase” out loud and I called it the “buying phase” under my breath. The car radio was off, and we listened to the sounds of traffic. This type of awkwardness was brand new with us. She was my therapist, yes. But now a hyphen had been added to our relationship. We drove away from the factories and smog. Mountains and greenery rose in the distance. Sandra turned off the highway, and we entered a small town that reminded me of rural New England. My breath adjusted to the calm scenery, and I fiddled for something to say.

“Ah, this landscape is so beautiful for running,” I blurted out. Even as I was saying it, I was disappointed by my cocktail reception commentary.

“Yes,” Sandra responded. “It’s beautiful.”

At the car dealership, the salesman was a short, buff, cute Haitian man without a wedding ring. Sandra and I have not deeply discussed men as a genre or as a gender, and this was all new. Of course, men popped into my life, but they’d left so quickly their arrival and departure did not warrant a therapy session. The story of my mother was the throughline in my life.

I test drove a few cars while Sandra waited in the parking lot, in blistering heat, comparing them and writing their prices down on her yellow legal writing pad. I did not know this part of motherhood, this level of caring, organization, and consistency. In the car, the salesman started negotiating, but I told him we had to wait for Sandra.

“Your friend is very intense,” he said.

“She’s my shark,” I retorted.

He chuckled. It always makes me happy when men can remove their masks of masculinity and laugh deep into their boyhoods. On a normal day, I'd say more things to make him chuckle again, but I inched the music up to drown out his spiel. He'd named the hyphen that I was struggling to name all morning. Sandra was my therapist-friend. Or maybe, she was my friend-therapist. For many years Sandra was the only person I allowed to love me. Being aware of this, she held those therapeutic boundaries in place. I had to learn to connect with others, find meaningful relationships and use the lesson of my wounds to build a life full of love and chosen mothers. At this point in my life, I have had so many maternal mentors that I sometimes forget that I'm motherless. They cannot replace my mother, but they give me the love, the understanding, and the stories that she's unable to provide. And now, as my life has been outfitted, Sandra has become one of my maternal mentors.

After test driving four cars, I narrowed my list, and we walked back to the showroom. As expected, the car salesman started his pitch.

Sandra stopped him. "Right now, we are in the research phase, but we want the price..." He went to the back to bring out his closer—a chunky black man who carried a lot of weight in his midsection. He was attempting to walk with confidence, but his weight was directing his footsteps, so he limped and stumbled with each step.

They tried every trick to sell us the car. "It's a great deal," they said in unison. "This is the best deal in town." I was intimidated. I just wanted a car. I'd sign over my soul just to escape that showroom and breathe some fresh air. Before she was a therapist, Sandra used to be a prosecutor—a shark, she once said. When those men tried to force us to purchase the car, she simply ate their heads. They retreated, perhaps surprised that a middle-aged lady had so much sass and grip. I was beyond impressed. We left without a car, but I'd gained so many things from that interaction. "This is why we are in the research phase," she said as we drove back to the train station. "The next time you go into a dealership, you'll know how to bite."

My phone battery died, and I did not want to read the novel lying stiff inside my purse. Instead, I started reading the eyes behind their masks

and invented stories about them. They were all in the middle of their stories—some telenovelas, some comedies, some mysteries, some whose stories will only get told when they die. That's how writers are born; the dead whisper their stories to us. I looked at my passing reflection out of the window, and I realized that I was no longer in the middle of my mother's story. Her breathing still lingers inside of me, but along the way, I have managed to breathe on my own, create my own story. I will have many new stories, but I will never get stuck inside the middle of a story unless I choose that narrative.

As the PATH entered Manhattan, the sun dipped backstage, and New York City's silhouette began resurrecting. When I exited the train's last stop, the World Trade Center, a place familiar with my tears, I tapped on my chest to breathe. All those stories, above and below, are still screaming to be told. I took a deep breath, tapped on my chest again, and listened to all the stories that were going to walk inside my mind until they were told.