

# Motherless

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When I was ten years old my father told me a story of a man who swam the English Channel without coming up for a breath. He had been born with some amphibious defect like webbed toes, except his was gills behind his ears. My dad told me that if I held my breath long enough, often enough, I could grow gills too—or my kids might be born with them. I spent two hours each day for the next three weeks in the bathtub until I fainted underwater and nearly drowned before he found me.

That was the summer Mom died and Dad spent every evening sitting in the rusted out Ford in the backyard, pulling weeds from between the floorboards and tearing vines back from the steering wheel. He said he was going to plant lilacs in the engine box, her favorite flowers, but he never did. When he grew tired of picking burdock, we would settle into the cracking leather seats with cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon and he'd drive us to India or underneath the English Channel or to the dark side of the moon. Dad was a real fan of the imagination. He thought you could make anything happen if you just believed it enough.

That's why he was so pissed when Mom died. He was convinced she

Becoming  
motherless is an  
untethering process.  
You begin floating  
through space. Your  
home is sold and  
when you go there,  
to this new home  
that is now your  
dad's house it is not  
comfortable like it is  
yours. It is not yours  
like it would be if  
she was there. You  
can still open the  
fridge without  
asking but all you  
will find inside is  
yogurt and mustard  
and a quart of milk.  
Maybe a carton of

could have willed her way into remission. He would make her sit for hours on the back porch, that was in the spring and he'd wrap her in the orange and brown blanket she'd crocheted in the seventies and he'd enact a play-by-play of her killer t-cells attacking the cancer like Return of the Jedi. I'm pretty sure she always fell asleep, but it's one of the last times I remember her smiling.

By summer he couldn't move her out to the porch anymore. Her arms were the same size as mine when I lay next to them, but white and flakey like bone and with skin hanging down like a bat cape.

It was the day that it became fall again, that you could feel a sudden crispness in the air, that you woke up thinking about apple cider even though you'd spent the day before in the sprinklers, it was that morning that Dad started packing boxes.

I can't stay in this house any longer, was his only reply.

It began in a very clean and organized way. He grouped books, photographs, knick-knacks together and labeled each box with a permanent marker. As he moved from the living room to the den, then to my bedroom, and finally to his own, it took on a frenzy, landing in piles of clothes stacked atop cracked humidifiers, teddy bears stuffed with bottles of talcum powder into the crock pot, and jewelry twisted in a nest at the bottom of a laundry basket.

He began moving everything into the front yard. The orange metal

leftover sesame chicken, but it will be old and maybe molding. There will be wheat thins and peanuts and black licorice in the otherwise empty cupboards. Instead of a room with your yearbooks and high school photos there will be a foldout air mattress that fits in the closet, that you can plug into the wall and inflate into a fairly comfortable bed you can sleep in with your son. There will be no toys for the boy. No extra diapers. You will maroon through your days, a ship set loose at sea, as if this forward motion were always normal, which it is except the ocean is wider, I mean, it has no end,

lockers from the basement stood filled with moth-balled jackets next to boxes of ornaments, “Our First Christmas” inlaid in gold glitter; there were third grade curriculum books, Easter egg wrapping paper, silver-plated candle holders and antique flour sifters. Too much for him to look at, he said. Too much to smell.

It rained the next day on my horse books and my fragile collection, smearing the paint on my porcelain golden retriever named Misty. His old hi-fi from the garage sparked and snapped and Mrs. Basel next door told me, when she saw me loading my Barbies into an evac bus to escape the puddle flood forming in the cushion of the futon, to tell my dad that she’d call the police if the stuff wasn’t gone in the morning.

Dad posted a big yellow sign in the night: Garage Sale. And with two changes of clothes, his tennis racket in a padded silver case, my violin and the picture of mom in her red scarf we’d rolled dad’s manila-yellow (not mustard) Mercedes down the drive in the pink light of dawn. We stopped at the Grab ‘N’ Go for a box of doughnuts, an atlas and a six-pack, and we didn’t stop again until we hit state lines.

Southwest, he told me. In the dryness of the desert wounds do not fester and weep, bread does not mold. We need dryness, girl. Aridity will air out the soul.

Dad gave me the map and pronounced me navigator. I sat cross-legged in the bucket seat and laid the wide book across my lap.

“It looks like Hwy 36 will take us to the edge of Illinois.” I flipped the

when there is no port  
with untied rope  
somewhere, waiting.  
It becomes difficult  
to sustain a family,  
to understand the  
meaning of that  
word, when you are  
motherless. A  
motherless mother is  
an empty womb  
leading back to the  
beginning, the alpha  
the omega which  
is—mother. Your  
son, or your half of  
him nonetheless,  
was created within  
your own mother’s  
womb and at one  
point —was it nine  
months or one—  
you, all three of you,  
existed inside one  
enclosed space, as  
you existed in your  
grandmother and as  
a smaller particle, in  
your grandmother’s  
mother as all women  
do. After existing

pages on my legs to M27. “To... Missouri.” I studied the squiggly lines before me. “To the Mississippi River?”

“That’s right, the Grand Ol’ Miss. And from there, onward west. Manifest Destiny!”

I squinted again at the snaking blue line.

“I’ve never seen the Mississippi,” I said.

He wrenched to look at me. “Never?” he asked. “I thought on one of those summer road trips with your mom...”

“We mostly went up north, to the lakes, or east” I answered, hoping he’d return his eyes to the road. He was quiet.

“How old are you now, Dani?”

“Just turned eleven.”

“Eleven years, and never crossed the Mississippi. Never laid eyes on the muddy waters.”

He was still shaking his head.

“Well, doll, we’ll have to do this in style.”

And at last he looked at the pavement spreading out before us.

I fell asleep and my dad shook me awake as we approached East St. Louis city limits. “She’s coming up now. You can smell her.”

We rolled down our windows but it smelled like Ottawa. After a rain. But dirtier and full of cars. It was beautiful and noises were everywhere. We twisted and spun through cars and trucks that seemed to come from

together, wrapped in  
tendon and skin it is  
a disorienting,  
backward sort of  
feeling to continue  
to exist when that  
solidity burns to ash.  
It is a topsy-turvy  
sensation to throw  
bits of ash and  
pebble into a windy  
February air and  
watch them settle  
into a name carved  
in a gravestone, not  
the name of Mother,  
but a baby’s name,  
your nephew,  
stillborn, the  
grandchild that lived  
in her womb at your  
sister’s conception,  
before you were  
born. Something in  
the air becomes  
fuzzy in the act of  
becoming  
motherless.  
Something in the  
soil becomes  
familiar.

every direction. With a squeal of brakes we lurched right, then again, and then I felt gravel crumbling under the tires as he stopped on the shoulder.

“Out,” he said, get out.” And he threw open his door in the wind of passing traffic.

I opened mine and saw that we sat perched at the edge of a steep wall of earth dropping down to a bank, and beyond that a spreading sheet of water.

Mississippi—the word, the string of s’s fluttered across my chest. It was wide and it was brown and it was laced across the surface with currents wrestling over each other in a mass confusion that looked also like a dance.

My father took my hand and he led me to the place where the shoulder fell away to only air over water below. We stood, leaning tight against the rail as traffic buzzed behind us.

“Let’s walk it,” he said.

I looked ahead. There was no sidewalk, just a thin concrete shoulder pressed tightly between the bridge rail and white line of the eight-lane highway beside it. But he was already pushing me gently from behind, and I found myself shuffling forward. I couldn’t look at the water. I wasn’t even looking at the traffic really, not at my feet either. When we were back on shore, after I had dropped to my knees and clung in a ball shape to the bottom of my shoes, not yet half way across, I couldn’t remember anything I’d seen, as if I hadn’t been looking anywhere, except the thick gray sky,

You’re forever a  
vagabond; a child  
without a mother  
becomes a nomad. It

hanging like more of a weight than a color on my moist, sweaty skin.

I'm sorry, my dad said in my ear as we hunched together on the bridge and the cars whizzed past. I'm sorry, I didn't know it would scare you so much.

I dreamt of her, most nights, but I didn't tell Dad. She was stuck, that was the problem. She kept trying to open the windows but she couldn't. The first time, the first dream, I said something, I can't remember what, about her being dead, something about why was she here. And when I did she started to cry. She cried hard and I wrapped myself around her and tried to wipe the tears away but my hands slid right through her face. I never said anything to her in the dreams after that. I just followed her from room to room, trying to help her open the windows. She always started out young and healthy and solid looking but before I would wake I'd notice how thin and blue she'd become. We never got the windows open.

Sometimes I dreamt of a figure in my room. Standing in the corner mostly. More shadow than shape. He would reach his arm out to point toward me, and I couldn't move or I didn't want to but I felt a pressure on my belly, and between my legs and I'd squeeze tight to keep something in that I felt like he was trying with his raised arm, to take.

We followed I-70 as it snaked from M27 through A13 to F6 and outside my window everything turned from the dusty green end of summer

becomes strange,  
seeing families,  
seeing mothers  
intact. You  
remember your own  
mother, certainly,  
though not her smell  
or her laugh, those  
things cling to the  
sharp black edges of  
your memory,  
forever flitting into  
darkness when you  
reach out to hold  
their legs. But you  
remember her, and  
you remember her  
being mom. But the  
spinning upside  
down sensation  
surfaces when you  
remember, because  
after a time it seems  
less strange that she  
is gone and more  
that she was ever  
there at all.  
Motherless becomes  
your nation. The  
only place you're  
sure you know. You

to the yellowbrown of field after field of corn. At one point, somewhere between Missouri and Kansas and Colorado, somewhere between the Motel 6 with the indoor putt-putt course and a diner dinner of fried chicken and french fries with a coke, Dad pulled the car to the side of the road and climbed onto the hood without a word. After a minute I released my seat belt and came out and stood next to him.

“Climb up here,” he said.

We sat on top of the car, my legs dangling against the windshield and looked out at nothing, all the way to the sky. We came from farm towns in Illinois, but I had never seen flat like this. It was a swaying golden carpet, stretching out to the end of earth, straight out to where it met heaven, at the crack where it finally hit the white empty sky. I don’t know how long we sat there, but the sun was high overhead and it wasn’t moving, and at last Dad hugged me to his chest and we got back in the car.

Dad had asked me in St. Louis, when we were back in the car, my tears dry, my face still splotchy purple, which way I wanted to go. I could choose anywhere, he said. I wanted to go through the Rocky Mountains I said, because Mom had once told me about the leaves in the fall in the Rockies.

I didn’t tell him, either, about Jackson Sawyer. Jackson Sawyer with the soft eyes and the breath that whispered, just a little in his nose as he sat behind me in Language Arts. Didn’t tell him about the day I came up

become a  
moonwalker. The  
gravity that kept you  
pinned to the ground  
is gone. The  
umbilical cord that  
connected you, in  
cartilage covered  
fascia, severed. You  
float.

behind Jackson Roberts in the row, the day I went to sharpen my pencil in the back of the class and how when I came back to my seat I saw, doodled in the corner of his notebook, Danielle Winters, and a tiny flower. And how when he'd seen me looking, he quickly flipped the page and turned red. And how he didn't talk to me after that, but I still heard the whistle of air from behind me sometimes and sometimes I would swallow deep and pretend.

You are always  
alone.

The flat started to heave and lift. It stretched its back and carried us at the sky. It was like the ground exploded up in cliffs and pine trees around me and my dad drove. I thought sometimes that we might have skidded off the tar into the clouds, but Dad fixed his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road and he drove.

"If you could go anywhere," he asked, "where would it be?"

I thought about it. I looked out at the clouds. "Mars," I said.

"Mars." He rotated his jaw.

"That's a good choice," he said.

We went through a tunnel. The lights were eerie gray and it went on for miles. When we popped out I looked back at the mass of rock cutting into the deep blue sky. The tunnel at the bottom, this tiny mouth spitting out cars.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Me what?"

“Where would you go?”

He rubbed his thumbs against the steering wheel.

“Vietnam,” he said at last.

He looked like my grandpa, before he had died.

“Mom said she would take me here,” I said.

We passed through an arch of yellow leaves. At the top of the peaks surrounding us snow clung in blue drifts, iced reflections of the sky.

He didn’t say anything.

“She sang me a song, at night, about her heart lying beneath the Aspen trees,” I said.

I thought then, for the first time, about her underground. About the coffin they threw dirt over. About the treeless corner of the cemetery. About her heart, as I lay my head on it, about the beat, becoming quieter like it was walking away, the spaces between steadily marching longer and longer.

I felt myself get smaller, curl into some part of myself, like my ribcage turned inside out and inside again, two sizes smaller. My lungs tightened and started taking on water. The sky was yellowed and blurred. My eyes closed.

I woke the next morning in a nest of pillows in an empty motel room.

I wandered the parking lot and peered through the glass into the lobby and restaurant. I didn’t see him. I didn’t see his car. I went back to the room and put on cartoons. I opened the blinds and watched out the window. The

There comes a time  
when you  
understand she was  
always leaving you.  
Like she knew from  
your birth that you  
were a stunted baby  
bird with crooked  
wings and she’d  
have to teach you  
how to fly. This is

mountains had turned into high walls of sandcastle cliffs. Trees had fallen away while I slept and only pale green brush lined the highway.

I saw the yellow Mercedes turn off into the parking lot and watched him unload two plastic bags of groceries.

“How you doin, kiddo?” he asked as he came through the door. “You hungry?”

We ate Fruit Loops in the plastic cups from the bathroom while we watched Thundercats from the bed.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Eating like that. Why are you eating one loop at a time?”

“I like to eat all the green ones first, I said. They just added the green ones. It used to be just red, yellow and orange.”

“What do you do when all the green ones are gone?”

“I eat the yellow ones.”

“Always the yellow ones next?”

“Yes.”

“Why yellow?”

“It comes after green, in the rainbow I guess.”

“So then orange?”

“Yes.”

“And red.”

“Yes.”

the moment that you  
realize that  
motherless is not  
something you  
became but a state  
you were always in.  
The condition of  
your birth. Whether  
she loved you or  
didn't becomes  
irrelevant. She was  
never actually there.  
You are defined by  
absence. Absence is  
a very pervasive  
substance. It can  
erase memory. It can  
chew through flesh.

“So then you have a bowlful of red loops. Do they taste the same?”

“The red?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, they taste the same. All the colors.”

“So why eat them one at a time?”

“It’s fun I guess.”

“Fun?”

I thought about it.

“It makes me feel calm.”

He looked at me for a long time.

“Mom used to save all of her red Skittles for last,” he said. “She didn’t even like the other flavors, but she’d eat them, just to save the red for last.”

“I remember,” I said.

He went outside and smoked a cigarette.

“Swim,” he commanded. “Kick, kid.”

Then the noise of him and the blowing air of the hotel poolroom thickened into the sound of water. Water covered my eyes, poured under my skin as his shorts, tied tight around my waist heavied and pulled me down to the grate. I swung my arms and legs and then I stopped. I sunk to the bottom. I could see him leaning over the edge, make out his mouth moving. Everything thick and slow. I felt my neck pull apart, felt the water slide behind my ears and pass into my chest, felt the blood pumping

You carry around a small hollow place, a little porcelain vase painted with birds—and no one can reach inside it, not even your son. But he can run around it, he can rub his back against it, and when you put your hand on the ceramic, it feels warm to the touch.

oxygen to my brain. The skin flapped open and closed, open and closed. I breathed.

“This is it,” he said, “the Southwest.”

He pointed out the windows at the red rocks breaking away from the dusty pale surface. Everything monochrome, striated shades of red and pink and brown. Sprinkled with sagebrush.

It was beautiful. It was quiet and very very lonely.

Plateaus and canyons and hills of red rock rose up through the windshield and my dad drove towards the Grand Canyon. It was something he'd never seen and I think we were both nervous. We sat quietly through most of Utah. When we passed the sign welcoming us to Arizona, he began to talk.

“Did I ever tell you about Mexico?” he asked. I told him that he hadn't.

“It was just after I left the army. Me and Nate Mattheson took our pensions and bought a VW bus and drove it across the border. We spent four months, just putzing around that country and believe me, you've never seen anything like it. Oceans and cities and ancient ruins, forests that make these ones seem dim in comparison. We'd go to the universities and follow the kids around. Ate where they ate, drank where they drank. It was the freest I've ever been in my life.”

Desert passed.

“But your mom called, sent me a telegraph actually, said she was

calling off the engagement. I took the next bus to Mexico City and flew to Chicago. Nate stayed on, kept heading south. Settled in Guatemala eventually. Think he owns a coffee plantation or something there.”

The sandy hills were swallowed suddenly by a large pine forest, strangling up in thin patches at first, then ripping away at the blue sky outside my window.

“Do you ever wish you’d stayed?” I said.

A lake broke in slivers between the green.

“No,” he said.

We sat in the car for at least ten minutes in the parking lot of the visitor’s center. We didn’t say anything, just looked out the windshield ahead to where the ground seemed to fall away. We couldn’t really see the cliff edge, we weren’t at an angle to see in, but we could just tell the point where the earth was suddenly gone. Finally he got out. He came around and opened my door.

He kept his arm around my shoulder as we walked to the edge. As we approached I could see the other side and I could hear a wind blowing between the two. Lost, like it fell off the earth and couldn’t find its way back.

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**They got Skype in Heaven.**

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For the first few years or so the lines were blocked, as you can imagine, because millions of people have loved ones to contact in Heaven. But I tried, every day, I would sit listening to the droning ring with its otherworldly quality, which I think it took on only because I was calling Heaven, since, after all, it was the same ring I heard when I called my aunt in Kansas City or Mrs. Deeter down the street who could never figure out a cell phone but somehow mastered Skype when the landlines were dismantled. I walked Mrs. Deeter's dog. But at last after years of calling, the video-loading icon started spinning its doughnut circles and I scooted up my chair and stared into the screen and suddenly there she was. I don't know if the video system works differently in Heaven, but when my dad asked what she had looked like, old or young, sick or well, I had a really hard time explaining. She was all of them. It was like the video was on a really slow time lapse (either that or really fast) and I watched her change from a young mother at my birthday parties, to a bag of loose skin dangling over tiny chalky bones which couldn't have been more than 39 since that's as far as she made it, back to almost a child. I even saw her mouth, wide and gasping like it was, like always was in its funny way when she slept, once she started chemo; though it was not so funny because she was sick, and it was not so funny when she was dying, and it was not so funny as she lay in her casket with puffy chipmunk cheeks and you knew they must've had to crack it shut. So I saw it hanging open like it was in its funny/not so funny way, with the row of small bottom teeth standing guard before the bottomless chasm. I saw her mouth gaped open like it was as I tried to peer into the infinite that was trying to escape in strangled breaths. Until it did. Until the last short shot of air whimpered out and all that was left was a carcass. And as I sat on her bird bones on the tiny cot, still staring into the cavern

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that once led to her I shook my head violently back and forth because it's a very difficult thing for a mind to wrap itself around—a mother becoming a carcass, just like that. Now it seems to me that it may sound very creepy, and grotesque, this shiny, somewhat see-through video projection of my mother, morphing from child to chemo-victim to gaping hole while she asked me about school and my father, but I think it's just that it's difficult to describe. And also she was very pixelated. I asked her to tell me about Heaven and she said the weather was cold that day but she had a sweater. Why didn't you ask her if they had seasons, my dad later asked, but I hadn't thought of it at the time. She blew me a kiss and I told her I'd call tomorrow, but I didn't.