

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

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My Inheritance

As I stare out the window at my large backyard covered in a crust of ice, I notice the bird feeder is nearly empty. I know I must replenish it, but I can't command my body to move.

My mother is dying. There are shuffling noises overhead coming from her bedroom. She has cancer and her death is imminent. I am her only child. We never really liked each other.

Before she moved in, I thought I'd continue working and hire a nurse to care for her. I wavered. In the back of my head, I wondered if we might find an emotional connection before it was too late. In the end, I convinced the senior partners at my law firm that it would be better to work at home for a while and take care of her myself.

Now I see my wish to wring more from our relationship as foolhardy. It's like an important thought I can't recall that hovers in the back of my mind. Now I just want to get through this miserable time and have it end. I'm so tired my teeth ache.

I climb the stairs and enter her bedroom. My mother is packing, her open suitcase stuffed with clothes and her silver tea set. Glints of light ping off the gleaming surface.

"Just where do you think you're going?" I ask her.

Without a word, she places her underwear beside the tea set, overlapping each piece two inches apart.

"I'm still alive. I'm going home."

Her words bounce in the air and their meaning nearly slips out of my reach. We have only talked around her impending death. When she chooses, she blocks out what the doctors told her. "You can't go home. You're not well."

"I'm better. I want my salad bowl back, too."

My mother barely stands upright. Her handwriting is no longer legible. "We sublet your apartment and put your things in storage. Remember? You're staying with me for a while."

She glares at me. Although she's shriveled four inches from her original height and lost a lot of weight, her presence fills the room.

Her attention focuses on a nightgown slung over a chair. It's one that she brought from home. I grab it, crumpling it under my arm. Three weeks ago, when my mother first arrived, I bought her a batch of better fitting clothes so that her weight loss wouldn't be so apparent.

Each lost pound seems to represent one less breath left in her limited allotment. I've tried to count the numbers of breaths she takes in an hour. Then I multiply it over a day, a week, a month, figuring how many are left within a two-month time span. It's a senseless activity that fills long voids in our conversations.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

She stares at the floor. "I'm real sick, aren't I?" Her voice is a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, but I'm taking care of you."

She looks pathetic. Then her expression hardens, and she narrows her eyes.

"You want me dead so you can get all my things."

Her belongings are like her emotions; sparse and held tight to her body, like the empty pocketbook she takes to bed each night. Neither one of us can love freely. That became only too clear to me after my two marriages failed. Still, I've decided that we will have some kind of resolution before she goes even if it kills me, too. It looks like it might.

Seating her warped body into a wicker chair she frowns. She shakes her finger at me. "My miserable life gave me this cancer."

The implied message is that in some way I'm responsible for her death. It reminds me of when I was eighteen preparing to leave for college. I had a full scholarship. My mother, full-bodied and powerful in those days, stood in the doorway blocking my way. In my pocket I had a one-way ticket which I bought with money earned working in fast food restaurants.

Eyes hooded, she looked at me accusingly.

"So, Little Miss Hot Pants has gone through all the boys in town and wants fresh blood."

I twisted my lips into a malicious grin, and pushed her aside. I tumbled to the outside. Dear old Mom was half right. The other half was I needed to put as much distance between us as possible.

"You only think about yourself," she had screamed. "I'm alone. First your father deserts me and now you."

I found that quite funny since she had kicked my father out on my seventh birthday because he had bought me a doll we couldn't afford.

"All right," she had shouted at my retreating back. "Go, but by Christmas I'll be dead. It'll be your fault."

Her threats sent barbed hooks into my gut for she'd already made a few weak attempts at suicide. I hesitated. What if she succeeded next time? Then I realized it was her life or mine. I left.

I plugged through college and law school. To avoid ever going back home, I worked as a waitress part-time all year round.

Now I glance over at my mother. For an instant I want to slap her, shout obscenities, tell her I'm glad she'll be dead soon. I want her to siphon off my ugly childhood memories so that she can take them to her grave and leave me in peace.

I take a deep breath. "Let's just try to be nice to each other." I put my hand on her shoulder. It frightens me to feel her protruding brittle bones under parchment skin. It's as though her chicken bones were connected with thumbtacks. My mother jerks her shoulder loose from my grip.

"I hate to be touched," she says. "You know that."

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Despite her fragility, her stubbornness thrives. It's as though all the sinews and muscles in her body decided to prop up her feisty personality until the bitter end.

I always make a big dinner of her favorite foods like meatloaf, roast beef, mashed potatoes and peas. She seems pleased when the plates are set out but eats little as do I. "I'll make your tea." Without my mother knowing, I fix us marijuana-laced tea every night. It helps her sleep, eases nausea and calms *my* nerves.

She brightens. "That's really good tea."

I tell her I add special herbs to fight her cancer. Obviously, she likes the way it makes her feel. Although my mother is silent during our *tea* parties, her eyes always flit back and forth as though alert to an ever-present danger. The hush between us at those times feels like the aftermath of a vicious quarrel.

As I help her down the stairs, her sharp elbows dig into the palm of my hand. Her eyes clamp on the items that came from her house; a chipped porcelain ballerina, a worn footstool and a tired wing chair. I brought a few of her belongings to make her more comfortable. Instead, she treats them as bleak reminders of her demise.

"I'm leaving my things to Goodwill, and that goes for the silver tea service."

Hearing my mother's sarcasm reminds me that I'm still angry that she doesn't want to leave me even the flimsiest part of herself. "I don't want anything of yours." I feel spiteful.

"Listen to Miss Snot Nose who buys all those expensive furnishings."

I look about at my leather furniture; solid teak tables, burnished bookshelves, crystal accessories and I remember her ramshackle house with the worn meager furnishings. My eyes feel singed.

"You wouldn't have any of this if I hadn't encouraged you to go to college," she says. "If it wasn't for me you wouldn't have your big-shot job."

I don't know whether to laugh or shout. I let go of her arm. She nearly falls. I catch her, and practically drag her into the kitchen. I prepare the tea and it can't come fast enough.

Finally, we sit and sip the hot, soothing liquid. My frozen nerve endings begin to thaw. Time stretches before me like Dali's painting of a melting watch. My mother drinks slowly. Soon, her darting, black eyes slow their pace. The tea seems to veer her away from constant complaining, pain and fear.

Unanswered questions rattle in my mind like bingo balls whirling in mesh cages. I picture the cage stopping and the winning ball rolling into the cup. It has my father's name on it. I only saw him three times since he left.

I don't kid myself. This ritual with my mother is about exorcising my own demons before I inherit her legacy of emotional failure. The marijuana helps me to think that we can still work out a way to communicate. But it only cloaks me in a false sense of hope.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

"How about we talk to each other instead of staring at the walls?" I ask.

"Talk about what?"

She looks at me as though I asked her to go out and commit murder.

"Are you afraid of dying?" Putting the words out there gives me a sense of relief.

She glares at me, and I have an urge to duck.

"I hate God."

I almost giggle at the totally unexpected answer. Then I remember she hates laughter, too. "I'm afraid."

"You're afraid? I'm the one dying." She tries to straighten her back. "I know what you have up your sleeve. You want to tell me I raised you bad. It's not my fault if you can't keep a husband."

I gnash my teeth and take a deep breath. "I just want to understand what went wrong between us, the good and the bad." I hear desperation in my voice, and rummage around for a nice memory. "Remember when you used to walk me to school because I was afraid to leave you?"

"No."

I can't keep quiet any longer. "Tell me about my father." All that I remember about my father is that he worked all day, came home and went to sleep. Once in a while he took me for a walk in the park and pointed out the species of trees. He seemed distracted but kindly.

"It wasn't my fault he never visited you."

I get up and spoon more cannabis into the steaming pot. "I'm not blaming you."

She glares at me as I return with a fresh cup.

"I don't see any use in rehashing old stuff. What good is it going to do me?" she says.

I wonder if I'm pressing her so that she'll be forced to reach out and hug me, say she loves me and always has. I feel like a starving person trying to break into a locked cabinet stocked with food.

She hands me her empty teacup. I refill it, recalling that nearly every day after elementary school she made me sit across from her in the kitchen. She'd prepare tea in her precious silver teapot and then drink cup after cup. I was forbidden to speak. Silent gloom saturated the air between us. By high school, I didn't go home until late, hanging with the boys who gave me false momentary feelings of being wanted, desired and loved.

"Please," I beg her. "Talk to me."

She stirs her tea and doesn't answer.

I'd heard how hard chemotherapy can be. It is. I find balls of white hair like puffs of floor dust on her pillow. When the anti-nausea pills don't work I hold her head throughout the vicious vomiting. My stomach curdles. The marijuana tea only helps so much.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

We have returned from her sixth treatment. Once again, I find myself sitting across from her, drinking tea. I've always resented my mother for the loss of my father. Maybe my perceptions of what happened are distorted. Did my father's emotional distance cause her to crack? He could have tried to visit more over the years. But that's over. I have one last chance to connect with my mother. It's a tiny window.

"What were your parents like?" I ask, pouring her a fresh cup of special brew.

I flinch since she always warned me never to broach that subject.

"I didn't leave home at sixteen for nothing." She turns icy eyes on me.

"I'm trying to understand you."

"For an educated woman you don't know much." The pale blue glacier eyes melt a bit and she huddles in her chair.

"Do you want chocolate chip cookies or ginger snaps?"

"Give me poison. I can't take anymore."

I want to snatch that wasted body into my arms and rock her like a baby. "Don't talk like that, Mamma."

She looks up and stares at me for a long time. "You haven't called me that since you were a little girl."

"Do you want me to call you Mamma?" We lock eyes for a moment then she rests her head on the table. "Yes," she whispers.

Her answer, simple and affirmative, conveys more feeling than I have ever felt from her. "Do you want to talk some more?"

"No."

I rattle my cup in my saucer. We've just started and she cuts me off. I know I'm being unreasonable, but we have so little time.

"I don't know what you want from me," she says.

"I'm trying to find peace of mind for both of us."

She screws up her face till she resembles that mean, cold-faced bitch that I remember too well. It is the face that terrified me as a child.

"Find your own piece of mind. I can't give it to you." Her hard expression suddenly cracks. "I've never had it myself."

The raw fear in her eyes rakes my skin. "Why are you always angry with me?" I put our teacups in the sink and turn to look at her. I'm not expecting an answer because the fighting is too familiar and comfortable for both of us.

She curls her lips. "I'm angry because you remind me of your father. No backbone to either one of you. And your face is his. It's like looking at those indifferent green eyes. And, oh my God, when I see your full mouth, always pouting, I only see him. Just looking at you makes my bones hurt."

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

It shocks me that the answer comes so easily for her. Was that my crime? I can't deal with that so I think of another direction to take the conversation. "Why don't we tell each other nice stories from now on?" I don't know where that idea came from. Desperation invents its own logic. I reach for her hand. She doesn't move away. I'm digging to come up with the next step.

"I don't know how to start," she says meekly.

Afraid any movement might alter the mood, I sit frozen, clinging to my mother's stringy hand. Again she tries to straighten her back and I worry she might break a bone.

"I want to go to bed," she says.

In the bathroom, I lift her like a baby into the tub. I smell the faint odor of decay. She is decomposing before my eyes. I squeeze the sponge over the road map of tortured scars on her chest, over wrinkled hanging skin. She shivers even though the heater is on full blast, and I am sweating. When we finish I dust her with lilac scented powder, covering the smell of death. Getting her into a nightgown is a struggle since it's hard for her to raise her arms.

I tuck her into bed, lean over and kiss her cheek. It feels like disintegrating old newspaper.

She looks at me wistfully. "If we tell stories will I live longer?"

It's as though she's a child who just lost a tooth, and wants to know if the tooth fairy will really appear.

"I love you, Mamma." The words tumble out surprisingly easily.

She stares at the ceiling. "You can have my tea service and the other things."

I inhale sharply. "Thanks."

"And," she continues staring at the ceiling, "I remember walking you to school."

At four in the morning I finally fall into a fitful slumber and wake at eight. My mother always awakens noisily at six-thirty wanting to be helped to the bathroom. The house is filled with a chilling stillness. I throw the covers off and hurry to her room. Before I get there, the tomb-like silence stops me. I know the answer as I picture her sitting in bed waiting for death to be postponed. I decide to have a lone magical brew from the teapot that is now mine.

Downstairs I take a handful of birdseed and open the back door. A bracing surge of cold air smacks me in the face as I scatter seeds over the hard crunchy ground. Suddenly, birds dive from the trees leaving tiny feathers floating in the air. They peck frantically as though having their last meal.

Inside the house, I pour myself a cup of tea and walk to the window. I savor the flavor, curious as to how long the taste will last.