

THE MOTHER CONNECTION

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It rained the day of my grandmother's funeral, a fine drizzle that clung to our dark coats like a silver veil. She died this past December, a few weeks short of her 90th birthday. We buried her in the family plot just behind my mother, who died at 42. The official documents listed my grandmother's cause of death as acute respiratory and coronary failure, backed up by advanced breast cancer—an absolute calamity of the chest—but I believe otherwise: that despite all her ailments, she died of loneliness and quite possibly a broken heart. She kept asking for my mother until the very end.

The bonds between mothers and daughters have always been tight in my family—too tight, most of us have complained. It's as if the women believe that the harder they cling, the more they can protect. If only that were true. Our stories are marked by departure and longings, by frustration and despair. My great-grandmother, Ida, leaving Russia at 36 with three children, saying goodbye to the mother she would never see again. My grandmother, Faye, a stubborn, willful woman with a love so enduring and irrational that it often drove my mother to slam down the telephone or retreat into her bedroom to scream at the walls. My own mother, whose early death from breast cancer left behind two angry teen-age daughters and a mother who walked around for months refusing to accept—was never able to accept—the truth.

In the full Bonwit Teller shopping bags my grandmother used to carry wherever she went, she kept a framed photograph of her mother, a serious woman in a dark print dress who died before I was born. I used to laugh at her for this, teasing her for dragging around a picture of an old woman in the bottom of a tattered paper bag. My mother would hush me, telling me to leave Grandma alone. Only later did I realize the poignancy of this act, how important those bags were to my grandmother's feelings of safety and well-being, and how the image of her mother must have provided the same: how my mother understood this and how by gently quieting her daughter she showed loyalty to an aging mother who at other times nearly drove her mad.

I treasure these memories now, along with the stories these women told me about their lives. As we sat around the kitchen table or took long drives in the car, they handed down women's culture, replete with all its tales of hardship and triumph, loss and rebirth. My grandmother spoke of her mother's ability to stretch a piece of meat far enough to feed seven, and about how she herself studied to become a lawyer only to find she didn't have enough money for the exam fee. My mother told stories about maturing faster than her peers, about how her mother hadn't prepared her for menstruation and how she swore, at age 9, that she would tell her daughter in advance. (She did, when I was 8.)

But now there is no one left who can verify my memories of these women, who heard the exact stories they told me, or can add to them, or tell me which details I've got wrong. At 32, I'm the only woman left in my maternal line, and few things I've encountered have made me feel quite so alone.

I was acutely aware of this as I stood at my grandmother's grave in the gentle rain. Damn it! I wanted to cry out. The last one gone! I understood that I represented a symbolic end point, but I did not yet realize that I could represent a beginning, too. So it is perhaps not all that surprising that when I learned I was pregnant less than two months after the funeral, I received the news with uncharacteristic calm. It was a statistical fluke, one of those birth-control failures that pull effective rates down into the 90-odd percentiles, or so the gynecologist said. I didn't disagree. In the frenzy that followed—planning a wedding, buying a house and all those doctor's visits—there wasn't much time to sit and reflect. Which is probably why I didn't notice for months that this year I'm bridging the gap between death and birth. I've lost all my mothers, but

I'm in the process of becoming one, and it's a sweet and healing continuity that added an unexpectedly profound twist to Mother's Day this year.

I cried when the ultrasound technician told me the baby is a girl. How will I protect her? How will I accept that I can't? Each time I feel one of her kicks, already signaling her independence, I feel a blend of joy and wonder and fear and grief unlike anything I've known before. And this is what I think: that maybe this child wasn't an accident after all. Maybe in a family where the love between mothers and daughters was always so unquestioned and absolute, a vacuum can't exist for long. Maybe, just maybe, when the last mother dies, a new one must be born.