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Poor Nettie

JANICE, I CAN'T GET MY CLOTHES ON, I need help. Alone in her dim room, Nettie, my Mom, called out for me. Standing with her back to the mirror that sprawled above the French Provincial dresser, she turned around, unhinged by the image that shimmered on the glass in front of her. Shoulders sagging, eyes downcast, Mom tried not to gaze at the reflection of her chest. Raw, concave, a ropelike red scar snaked up from her waist to collar bone. Tears poured out of her eyes.

Three weeks earlier: Daddy, gray pallor and stooped, faced Steven and me with news that would transform our lives forever. *Sit down, I need to talk to you. Your mother is sick; she may not recover.* Mom had just undergone a radical mastectomy. Barely an adolescent, this was the first time I felt terror; tears welling up, head pounding, heart burning. *The cancer was all over, they removed her breast, three ribs, and part of her lungs.*

Opening her eyes after surgery, terrified by what she would soon discover, it took all her willpower and strength to reach over to touch her bandaged right chest. Mom's fingers crawled across the gauze to feel an emptiness; newly deformed, uneven. Her breasts had been huge, DD sized, now out of synch, as if a bomb exploded, hit her right side and left a crater.

From that day forward, when in communal spaces, she changed her clothing privately, in corners or toilet areas. She told me that she would never again be naked in front of anyone but me, including Daddy, and I believe she kept her word, never fully undressing in front of him, even when they were intimate. Daddy died 36 years later without ever seeing her newly unformed torso.

There were many days that I was driven from the Rockaways in Queens, where we lived, to sit alone, outside of Brooklyn Hospital as Aunt Eva visited her, imagining Mom lying helpless and in pain, fearing impending loss. I was not allowed to go up to see her.

With Mom away, I went through the motions of my life; head down, dragging my feet, crying all the time, my heart heavy. No appetite.

Bubby watched us while Mom was in the hospital. I never saw a smile cross her dour, wrinkled face. She sat on our porch, with her legs crossed, bluish with thick varicose veins, one foot swaying to an unknown inner beat. Her words *I should have had dogs* (instead of children) were often uttered. The vomit-inducing odor of cooked tongue, brain or liver emanated from the kitchen. She slept in my bedroom, her teeth floating in a jar of water on the nightstand. Every morning, I tiptoed in to retrieve my clothing, and gagged from the strange odors tinged by flatulence, aging flesh and poor hygiene.

The day Mom came back, I walked home from school, chewing on a honeysuckle blossom, dreading what would greet me. *Do not to expect her to be up and about; she will be lying in bed resting,* Daddy told us. I climbed the steps, tiptoed in, and saw Mom sitting at the kitchen table! She was stooped and weak, and, despite struggling to breathe, to stand, to walk, her will to live prevailed, and pushed her in her fight for recovery. As the

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days passed, my tears began to dry. She was determined to resume her role as nurturer-in-chief in her kitchen, her main headquarters. She refused help. *I will cook for my family.* I was able to smile again, unaware of what was to come. Cancer treatment in the 1960s was harsh and aggressive.

I accompanied Mom to her radiation treatments every week for many months and waited outside in the car. Alone, in the pink Chevy with silver fins, adolescent hormones blossoming, I anxiously waited for her to appear. As I listened to Roy Orbison sing "Crying," I cried, wishing I were anywhere other than the parking lot of Peninsula General Hospital in Rockaway. My friends' moms were driving them to buy clothes at the hip stores on Central Avenue in Cedarhurst, as I sat alone, taking care of my mother. When Mom appeared, ghostly white, limping towards the car after she finished, I was pulled back to the stark reality of our lives. *It's OK Mom, you are getting better,* I eked out, filled with her pain.

At 11 years old, I did what I had to do, unfeeling, unquestioning, and became, for the rest of my adolescence, Mom's cancer caregiver. My heart was never far from her sadness and humiliation. She was my role model for passivity, for not speaking up, for never calling on her three sisters to help her, always dependent on me, the easiest solution, regardless of the marks it was leaving on my young psyche. As a male, the breadwinner, Daddy was seen as exempt from caregiving activities.

Six months later, having gained back some strength, she was finally ready to be fitted for her prosthetic breast. At a salon in Manhattan that specialized in lingerie for mastectomy patients, Mom and I were crammed into a tiny dressing room with barely any breathing space, *Janice, can you unsnap my brassiere, she asked, and pull off my blouse?* The cotton gauze that stuffed her bra fell to the floor as the sudden and shocking realization of Mom's limitations devastated both of us.

An arm belonging to a stranger appeared through the curtain. *Try on this brassiere. Stick this into the pocket* were the commands we heard as Mom waited to be fitted for a soft plastic liquid filled breast (her *Form*) that would be placed into an insert in the custom-made bra, all designed to duplicate the swell of her remaining breast. The image of Mom's scarred and concave chest was never far from my mind, always. At parties, gatherings, the beach, everywhere, I served as the sentinel. *Mom, you're showing, that blouse needs to be buttoned up more, pull up that sweater,* became my mantra as I helped her hide her deformity.

Throughout my adolescent and teen years, I regularly popped my head out of curtained dressing rooms with many demands, *that neckline needs to be raised, can you add extra fabric, more buttons, a collar?* as I inspected clothing to ensure full coverage of Mom's chest, monitoring redesigns of dresses, sweaters, shirts, bras, swimwear. I was forever mortified when a space appeared below the neckline of her clothing to reveal the concave emptiness that was Mom's right chest.

The cancer had spread to her lymph nodes which had also been removed during the big surgery. She developed Lymphedema, and her right arm swelled to twice its original size, as if to compensate for the missing parts on her chest, adding another deformity. She was forced to spend the

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rest of her life in this ravaged, lopsided body, with a weakened lung that never really recovered, and developed COPD (cardio obstructive pulmonary disease).

The Sleeve came next. A form-fitting, flesh colored spandex wrap, it always had to be worn on her arm to prevent further swelling. She tried to get out of it. "I'll wear it later, tomorrow, whenever..." My job was to constantly remind her to put it on, and keep it on, the *Sleeve* police.

After, *The Machine* arrived. For hours each day, Mom sat on the couch with her arm raised, encased in a plastic bubble, first tightening, then pumping air from her wrists to her shoulders, forcing fluids up. The green glow of the TV filled the room, as *The Machine* emitted a loud, rhythmic, breath-like sound, and Mom sat in a trance, eyes half shut. One day she turned to me and mumbled:

I volunteered to comfort recent mastectomy survivors but was turned down because my oversized arm might scare the patients. I am not even good enough to help others.

My heart broke. *If my mother is not good enough, then I must be not good enough too.* I wanted to protect her, always fragile, trying hard to fulfill her role as a mother. I was embarrassed that she didn't do what my friends' moms' did. Janet and Ilene's moms had their hair done weekly at Gary's salon and looked like they had just stepped out of *Glamour* magazine. They were gossip queens at Sylvia Raider's knitting shop, they played scrabble, led girl scouts, wore the latest styles, swam at the beach, knew local gossip and wore size 10 clothing when my mom wore size 16.

Periodically, the arm became hot and infected, as the swelling transformed her hand into a balloon with tiny fingers protruding. There were many rounds of hospitalizations, antibiotics, and ice. I dry shampooed her hair, applied lipstick, and bought her soft, oversized, button-down pajamas. When my teenage years began, I became jealous. I wanted her to be like my friends' fashionable moms with pearls and lipstick, who were, by all appearances, the perfect caregivers to their daughters.

The cancer never did return to her body but lived in her mind forever. After many sleepless nights, fearfully anticipating the six-month, then, annual checkups, Mom proclaimed: *Once you have had cancer, the fear never leaves.* The fear lived within me as well, along with the scars from being an adolescent cancer caregiver; always feeling the need to serve others, to feel less than, unappreciated, fearful of doctors.