My Glamorous Mother
by
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My mother is the most glamorous woman in the cancer ward; her star quality is startling. The nurses gather around gaping, mouths open, unashamedly ignoring the other women. One-nurse gushes, "Look at those cheekbones! You must have been somebody!" The other highly trained professionals nod in agreement.

My mother absorbs the attention as her right; she doesn't care what happens to the other rich ladies with cancer. She doesn't even care that she's already spoken of in the past tense-- as an actress perhaps who had made a splash before getting married. No, all that matters to my glamorous mother is the attention. She sits up a little straighter, she smiles a little wider, and she licks her paw before smoothing back her turban.

We're sitting in a private doctor's office in Manhattan surrounded by women in recliners. Aside from the IV's full of chemicals we could be at a spa. One woman, with shopping bags from Barney's, in fact, calls this, "The full day treatment." Another woman just sent her maid across the street for shrimp, "And make sure they're jumbo this time." I expect to see a manicurist pop in any second.

The women chat about the price of wigs; "Insane!" says one, whose new hair hangs down her back as Cher's did in the mid-seventies. Rosie O'Donnell is on TV, eating a twinkie. These women, accustomed to comfort, recline, chemicals drip discretely into their veins. I sit in a spare recliner and flip through magazines, not making any connection between the chair and my eventual fate. (I don't know my eventual fate, no one does, but I'm not superior to anyone else in the denial department, I just wanted you to know that.)

"No," my mother answers, glowing, "I was just a mother." She says it as if she actually liked being a mother; this had never been my impression. What I remember was a thin, glamorous mother zip, zip, zipping around on diet pills. Oh, the fun we had!

Finally the poison drip is finished and we have a short chat with the doctor, the only man that we've seen all day. He asks how she feels. "Just fabulous." I would like more information, and good luck to me, with a glamorous mother you never get more information.

"Will he (meaning me) be coming with you again?" the doctor asks.

"No." My mother answers quickly. "He won't."

"There you have it." I say to the doctor, "No."
I would like my glamorous, thin, cancerous mother to open her fucking mouth and say something coherent. I'd like her to say, "No, I don't want him to come again because he's a writer. He's probably going to write about this and who needs that?" Or she could say, "He's not coming again because I've never really liked him. He gets on my nerves."

But she says nothing; this, of course, is her right and her privilege; pretty girls are allowed, encouraged even, to be withholding.

The doctor asks, "Is there anything you want to say about your treatment?"

My mother pauses, looks down and squeaks out a voice I have never heard before. Before I tell you what she says, you should know my life in observation started with this woman—it had to—she was so vacant. I can tell microclimates of her emotions based on nothing more than the click of a heel against a floor, by an eyebrow raised for a split second, and yet-- I had never heard this voice before. She sounds small, three perhaps four, and lost. She was telling a police officer in a greatcoat, "I don't want to die."

The doctor says nothing, he leans back in his recliner and says, finally, "Well, no." The pause, the leaning back, these can't be good signs. Good manners stop us from saying anything of importance. We thank him and leave.

I wrap her up in her mink coat, it's enormous and getting larger by the minute; and I trundle her out through several sets of heavy doors. My stepfather is idling in front in the Mercedes, the larger one; it's her car. They have many things in common she and he. I knew they were serious about each other when they started having plastic surgery together, their eyes: his upper, hers lower. They also have cars in common, both Mercedes: his small and sporty, hers stately-- with doors that close with a vault-like solemnity. Now this is a canny bit of marketing. Mercedes Benz, maker of the gas showers, supplier to the Third Reich, has its product plunked down in front of most of the Jewish homes in our neighborhood; there's a genius in that.

My mother is covered in love tokens from Cartier (panthers climb her lapel), but those French people were probably all in the Resistance.

Her bag is sent directly from the kind people at Fendi (well, they did seem awfully happy to be liberated—all that jumping up and down.) My mother couldn't care less about any of that; she carries around what she sees in magazines.

My earliest memory is the Gucci doctors bag at the crook of her arm. It was the seventies and she had a Dorothy Hamill severe, wedge like flip. Later, when I was in high school she had longer, curled hair, a halo of henna and the horsey feed bag of a bag slung on her back. Sparkly Judith Lieber clutches (but, thank god, never in the shape of an animal) were for evening. Then she got into the Gangster Moll period because her life had been so hard. She read Jackie Collins for spiritual advice. So, I have no idea what she wore for most of the nineties, but I'm sure it was lovely, just lovely. Now she carries an ugly Fendi tote, and, of course, she's bald.
I've been home for a month now. At first she looked as if she'd had the flu, tired but not seriously sick. Now, it's more than that. You have to remember, when your mother is as dedicated to youth as mine is-- you never see signs of aging. I'd come home from college and she would look me over for signs of aging, which would reflect badly upon her. A few hours later I would counter strike.

"Mom," I'd say, "Your eyes, again?"

"You're insane." She'd block.

"Mom, they turn up at the edges, like Barbara Eden's." She'd examine her nails, so I would add. "Did you hear that Dad had his neck done?"

"No, I hadn't," Perking up, "What else?"

I am thirty-three, my parents fifty-four but in a science fiction kind of way. I get older; they got re-modeled; the first sign of aging was this cancer which will kill her.

My mother hates when I look at her now, she barks at me to stop, but I'm powerless to resist, it's like looking at the sun, literally. She has chunks of diamonds in her ears the size of gumdrops. Without turning her neck she growls at me, "They're not real."

"Mom, Nana's engagement ring isn't real? Did she know?"

Still looking straight ahead she says, "Don't be fresh."

My step-father, concurs, "Don't aggravate your mother. It looks like snow." I look out the window, it does.

A light snow leads us back to Long Island.

We're dropped off; he changes cars and is off again. My mother digs out a pack of cigarettes from behind the unused pots and pans, then lights up. She catches my eye, says, "What harm is it going to do now?"

"Are you hungry?" I ask, "I'll make you something."

She takes a puff, "You" She says, "Cook? What for?" She takes another puff, "You want one?"

I say, "Sure." And I sit down and smoke with her. We don't talk because we have absolutely nothing in common. If it's logistically possible, we have even less than nothing in common. We have so little in common that I started smoking, at sixteen, so that we could do something together; so far it has been a bang up success.

It's mid January now. Her birthday is in a month, she'll be dead a month after that. My glamorous mother and I smoke and watch television in my old room, which she annexed in a bloodless coup.
I'm getting strangely attached to Lifetime, The Channel for Women; I am especially addicted to the biographies of important women. If you're expecting to learn about Madame Curie or Abigail Adams forget it, they didn't make the cut, these are of really important women.

We've seen one on Michele Lee (from Knots Landing). Apparently she sings also. I tell me mother that in real life her husband is a Rappaport, a TV executive. I think his first name is Fred, I don't remember. So she is Michelle Rappaport, which sounds like a tennis friend; this seems to briefly please my mother.

Heather Locklear (Sammy Jo from Dynasty) seems to have a nice mother. (She has a passing resemblance to Laura Bush, who is nothing if not soothing). Heather and her mother call nude scenes, 'friendly scenes' and they laugh and laugh.

Valerie Bertinelli (from One day at a Time) didn't, in fact, have trouble getting pregnant, she just didn't want to have a child with a practicing alcoholic. We sit hour after hour hearing personal conversations with strangers who had hit shows decades ago and say absolutely nothing to each other.

A few weeks before my mother falls into a coma we watch an epic biography of Diana, Princess of Wales, that seems to go on for days. My mother can barely lift her head. She eats ice chips mostly. Her liver is so full of cancer that she looks pregnant. She's spending her last reserves of energy on Diana and her boys. She turns her head to me and says, "That poor thing. Those poor boys."

That is too much, "Christ, Mom. You feel sorry for them?"

"You missed the point, all she wanted was to be happy, to have a happy marriage, children who liked her. That's not too much to ask, is it? But it didn't work out for her. She was just an unhappy girl with nice clothes."

A month before the end, my young, glamorous mother is upstairs, in my old room, dying. She points to her lighter, theoretically hidden in the drawer. I light her cigarette as she remains motionless.

Strangely she doesn't seem to mind complete inactivity. This is a person who could work herself up over guest towels and napkin rings, a woman so nervous that she never took any form of public transportation-- because it would end in dismemberment, or at the very least with a nasty infection. Yet here she is facing down death like General Patton.

Or maybe she doesn't like me well enough to tell me the truth. Or maybe it's the medicine. Or, maybe it's something else. Maybe I've done something wrong. I did leave
her, after all, like everyone else; her life is such a tragedy. But if all you look for is abandonment and betrayal, then what else can you find?

Barely turning her head she says, "Hurry back."

"You mean you want another cigarette before he comes home?"

"I think I deserve it."

After she died, her people came. They came in four groups: the family, the neighbors, the friends and the support staff, who announce themselves, at the door, by title. "The Nail ladies are here! " "The bikini waxer! " "The colorist has arrived." On and on, day after day they show up, far outlasting the family and the neighbors. The health and beauty ladies gossip relentlessly with the friends, most of whom they already know. They tell me, over and over again. "We're in shock! Shock! We can't believe it! Your mother was so beautiful." The dog groomers are so devastated they couldn't even come.

Just before my glamorous mother died, I stood in the doorway of her room and asked, "Did you ever like me, at all?" I try to ask casually, but she doesn't seem to mind, she answers unusually quickly, "Who ever says they like me?"

Then, I went downstairs and made myself a tuna fish sandwich. I chopped vegetables (celery, red pepper), made dressing (mustard, olive oil, and vinegar, beaten with a fork). I make these things myself. Later that afternoon my mother went into a coma and slipped away from me, again. There was nothing to be done but wait for her to stop breathing (two days as it turns out), and then, afterwards, to recover from the rest.

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