To Recover Mother

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Félix Édouard Vallotton: The Ball (Corner of the park with child playing with a ball)*, 1899*

“We do not live alone,” Proust wrote in a favorite passage of mine, “but are chained to a being from a different realm, from whom we are worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body.”

The year my son turned seven, this snippet from *In Search of Lost Time* was often in my thoughts. Proust was writing of illness, but I was thinking of love, mother love, the fierce physicality of it. My mother died when I was seven, yet I retained only a handful of memories of her. Now, I realized that she and I must have spent tens of thousands of hours together. How could it be that I barely remembered her? Barely remembered but never forgot; I’d been haunted by her all my life.

My memories of her were sparse and mostly unremarkable: walking together in a neighbor's garden, telling her I'd dreamt that bears invaded our house. An afternoon when, weakened by illness, she asked me to fetch her a pair of scissors. I delivered them with a pleasing sense of self-importance, thinking, "I am her little knight!" By then, I knew she was sick and often tired, though never that she was dying.

These few vignettes and a thin clutch of others were the only one-to-one experiences I could conjure of her. Not only were they few, I had reviewed them so often that they weren't truly memories anymore. They were memories of memories. Science teaches us now that each time we visit a memory, we are liable to change it. Mine were like a deck of cards used over and over, faded, dog-eared, greasy with decades of handling. I didn't remember her voice at all, or the play of features in her face, couldn't summon to mind the way she moved or held herself, her touch, her laugh, her smell, the feel of her skin. All I really had was my own longing.

I was the baby of my family, six years younger than my brother, Billy, and nine years junior to Steffi, my sister. Our father was a scientist, our mother a painter and illustrator. When she was forty-three, she developed aplastic anemia. Two years later, she died.

It was my father who informed me of this event. The phone rang in his study and he left the living room, where we'd been sitting, to answer it. A minute later, he called me in to join him.

"That was the hospital," he said, when I'd sat down beside him. "Your mother is dead." He didn't hug me, or take my hand, or even turn to look at me. He didn't cry, and I didn't cry.

Instead, I began to panic about what would happen to me. Without my mother, I felt sure that our family would break up, each going his own way, like a circus act that loses its star performer. Eventually, I got up and ran to my room. There I sat alone, terrified, trying to think how I would manage. I had no money. How would I take care of myself in the world? I imagined walking away from our house, a hobo's stick-and-bundle over my shoulder.

I don't know how many minutes passed before Steffi came in. Though she'd never been a motherly sort—on the contrary, she was spiky and brainy, sarcastic and aloof—she put her arms around me and assured me that she and I and our brother and father would stay together.

And this proved true, at least for a while. Our father remarried six months later. His new wife, Helen, was a divorcée with two daughters: Abigail, two years younger than me; Jane sixteen, the same age as Steffi. I needed my stepmother and, in some ways, came to love her, but I did not like her very much, and a lot of the time, I hated her. Our modest tract house in a New York suburb was too small for a family of seven; Helen found and moved us into a much bigger, far more elegant one. During the move, she discarded almost every object I'd known, including the dresses my mother had made for me. All that survived from the house I'd lived in was our piano, an Irish harp, a box of photographs, eight or ten paintings my mother had done, and a carton of her papers that Steffi saved from the trash.

For a long time, even after we moved, I believed that if I was good enough, my mother might come back. I knew she was dead, but I thought that if I stayed loyal to her, remembered her, pleaded with her, she might come back.

She did not. Instead, the culture of my stepfamily steadily snuffed out the culture of the family I'd been born into. The photographs of my old world stayed in their box, in a cabinet hidden behind a couch, where I would find them many years later. My maternal relatives were treated as comic characters, Dickensian in their eccentricities. To speak of my rather bohemian mother or of the life we Palls had lived pre-Helen was simply not done. My father seemed to consider such reminiscence disrespectful to his new wife, whether she was present or not; even among ourselves, my blood siblings and I seldom discussed our mother. So what additional memories I might have had were never reinforced by the retelling of family stories. Nor did I have a photo of her; every last snapshot remained in the hidden trove. Steffi soon married and escaped the house, and within a year, Jane did the same. Billy—our mother's favorite, according to my aunt—developed serious emotional problems. By his second year of college, he was using heroin. Abigail was branded rebellious and sent to

a far-off boarding school.

As for me, at seventeen I went to the University of Michigan. Before my first semester had ended, I began to neglect my studies and obsess about death. At the time—I had just read Sartre's *Nausea* for a class—I talked about death as a general sentence for all living things. In retrospect, it's clear to me that the death at the heart of my turmoil was my mother's. I fell into a sort of frenzied depression, dropped out, and went back to live with my folks. For a while, I saw a very inept psychiatrist, but I soon ran away from home. I lived briefly with one boyfriend, then followed another to California.

There, I did manage to finish college. Soon, under a penname, I became a working novelist, writing the curious genre novels known as Regency Romances. But in my mid-twenties, I had a second, much worse breakdown. Severely agoraphobic, on the verge of psychosis, this time I underwent four years of Freudian analysis. Naturally, I spent a great deal of that time talking about my mother. A few years later, I moved back to New York and, entirely by chance, into the tiny Greenwich Village building where, I learned after moving in, my mother had lived as a young career woman.

In New York, I met my husband to be. Ten years after our wedding, our son Ben was born.

And now he was seven. Seven years together. I wondered: if I were to die just then, would he retain only a few dozen recollections of me, soon to be as worn and faded as mine were of my mother? What about our endless games of hide-and-seek, Go Fish and Candyland, our giddy visits to fire houses, our solemn contemplation of construction sites? Not to mention the daily business of mothering—the holding and carrying, the putting to bed, the lifting up, the washing, dressing, feeding?

As I brooded on this, it occurred to me that much of the knowledge I'd lost of my mother had nothing to do with any particular excursion we'd had or pastime we'd shared. Instead, it was exactly those myriad daily interactions, all of them physical, many preverbal, that I was missing. The feel of her hands, the scent of her skin, the sound of her laughter were sensations I'd absorbed without words, and they were buried in my body. And so I decided to try to unearth what I could of its secret knowledge.

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But how? Talk therapy was out. "Were we to meet a brigand on the road," Proust goes on, in that same section of *Remembrance*, "we might perhaps succeed in making him sensible of his own personal interest if not of our plight. But to ask pity of our body is like discoursing in front of an octopus, for which our words can have no more meaning than the sound of the tides." What to do? The question revolved in my mind for days, until it struck me that hypnosis, perhaps, might allow me to send a message to my physical self.

Hypnosis! The very word seems cobwebbed with quackery, despite the fact that the efficacy of hypnotherapy in mitigating pain, lessening anxiety, helping to curb insomnia, relieving irritable bowel syndrome, and bettering a host of other troubles is well-documented. Also demonstrable, of course, is that it's a terrible way to try to retrieve buried memories, because of the likelihood that the hypnotherapist's "suggestions" may create them. But I wanted no "suggestions." I wasn't looking for repressed childhood abuse or my past life as a lady-in-waiting to Anne Boleyn. I just wanted to see if I could do an end run around my busy mind. I put my skepticism aside and started looking for a hypnotherapist.

I soon found one. Rita Sherr was a soft-spoken woman whose gentle manner somehow suggested both ethereality and control. At our first meeting, I simply told her about my childhood, a skeletal narrative of traumatic loss. She allowed her face to respond with sympathy, the way most psychotherapists do not. She was sure she could help me, she said, and she looked forward to working together. By the time I left, I was ready to let her try.

That evening, thinking of the story I'd told her, I sat down and wrote my son a letter. Just in case something happened to me, I said, and he had to finish growing up without me, I wanted him to know he'd been the joy of my life. I was sure he would be a kind, good-hearted, thoughtful man. My greatest wish was for him was that he be happy. He should think of me

only if and when he wanted to, I added, because I was fine. I would always be with him.

Of course, this was the letter I wished my mother had left for me. I sealed it, marked it, and put it in the drawer where I keep my will.

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Rita began our work by having me take off my shoes, lie back in the buttery leather chair in a corner of her office, and close my eyes.

“And [you’re] just making yourself very comfortable,” she began, her voice slightly lower than before. “And knowing that you are in a place of safety, a place of comfort, where no one is going to hurt you right now. And just letting your face relax,” she went on, “especially the muscles around your jaw. Your neck and your arms relaxing…” And so on, down to my toes. I struggled not to laugh, not to resist. Not to ponder her choice of words, or notice her deepening voice. It helped, in preventing myself from sabotaging the session, to remember how expensive it was.

Once I was relaxed, Rita mentioned that I might find myself going a bit deeper into relaxation. She counted from one to ten, each count taking me “deeper and deeper.” By now, I was almost afloat in a state between waking and sleep. She told me to see a “private viewing screen” before my closed eyes, and to see on that screen my own life moving backward from the present into the past. Farther and farther back, she coaxed, as I rewound from motherhood to childlessness, marriage to singlehood, New York to California, high school, grade school, new house, old house, mother going out on an errand—

“Where are you?” Rita asked.

Quietly, careful not to wake myself, I told her I was in my first house, the house where I lived as a little girl.

And so began my visits to my past. They were very odd. They always started with this routine—the deep relaxation, the mental hopping back through the past to the house where I’d been a small child. I remembered playing cards with my father, a game he invented called “Pig.” I remembered Steffi’s forbidden closet, full of exotic things—an Olivetti typewriter, a set of bongo drums. I remembered having chicken pox at the same time as Billy, our mother coming into the living room to dab our skin with calamine lotion. All of these were among my conscious, hoarded memories, but I used them now as breadcrumbs that could guide me toward the unknown. Occasionally, Rita would gently interrupt my silent roaming to ask where I was.

“Look around. What do you see?” she would prompt.

And I would tell her. The peachy, chalky blotches of the calamine lotion. The wintry bushes outside. My shimmering, immaterial mother. The fact that this memory was one that I’d retained all along, not a discovery. In truth, I wasn’t very good at “looking around” at whatever happened to be within view in that vanished world. I almost always paved my journeys there quite consciously with cards from my tired deck: the nubby feel of the couch in our living room, the switching tail of the kitty-cat clock in our kitchen.

But there were also discoveries, if not of details, then of the landscape, the geography of my childhood. By the end of the first session, I’d already encountered what I named “the ring of fire,” a circle of years that started somewhere during my mother’s slow decline and ended shortly after my father’s remarriage. Enclosed within that ring, like a glade in a thicket of thorns, were the five unsuspecting years of my earliest childhood, before my mother got sick. I could sense that the glade was there, but because of the fiery ring, I couldn’t get to it. The ring was a zone of pain, I wrote that night in a journal I kept while seeing Rita, pain that would have to be braved if I were to make it back to the innocent part of my childhood, the time when I had no idea of the devastation to come.

It took five or six more sessions for me to get there. During those weeks, I had two dreams in which I returned to the mailbox that had been assigned to me at the University of Michigan. Though my time there was short, I remembered the

pigeonhole vividly: the small glass door with its miniature combination lock, the deep metal recess so narrow I could hardly get my hand inside. In both dreams, I had never emptied this mailbox. In one, I went back to the mailroom to retrieve my forgotten letters but couldn't recall my combination numbers. In the other, I knew the numbers but was told that because I'd dropped out, I wasn't allowed to open the box.

Meanwhile, during each session with Rita, I'd go back to a card in my familiar deck, a memory of my mother I'd never fully lost—watching her paint a self-portrait, for example—and would, as Rita suggested, try to "look around" for forgotten details. Sometimes, I would recall, or imagine I recalled, a few likely ones: the smoothness of the pinewood staircase up to our second floor, the smell of the turpentine my mother used to clean her brushes. Other times, I revisited the years from eight to ten, which I now came to think of as "the lost years," a time of swift and brutal change. I saw that my sister and brother and I lived as refugees in our big new house, a captive people forbidden to speak our own language.

Eventually, I realized during these sessions with Rita that I hadn't merely "forgotten" what my mother was like. By the end of "the lost years," in order to survive, obedient to my father's wishes, I had chosen not to think of her. During the night that followed the session when I acknowledged this, I dreamed once again of going back to my college mailroom. This time, I couldn't remember which mailbox was mine.

Then, some three months after Rita and I first met, came the session during which I finally recovered—or felt I recovered—my mother as a living person. Instead of going backward in time, I had a little brainstorm: I decided to try the other way round: to start at the beginning and enter the "ring of fire" from the center itself. And so I relaxed again, and this time placed myself in a crib in my childhood room.

Minutes later, I opened my infant eyes and—there she was, my mother. Tickling my feet, playing "This Little Piggy," blowing—*wfff!*—on my bare middle. I felt her hands under my arms, the whoosh of her lifting me up, felt myself fly through the air. I smelled the tender skin of her neck, felt its warmth as my face nestled into her. As she came and went, leaving me and returning, I relived the sudden radiance of her entry into my room, the sense that all was right when she was there. I heard the chorus of delight that went up when I—the baby!—was carried in to be shown to guests in the living room, felt the vertiginous altitude at which I was handed from person to person. Later, older, I sat in a kiddie pool in our backyard, dimly registering the babble of conversation between my mother and a friend as they sat watching me.

There was nothing in any of this that I couldn't have made up for myself; I am a novelist, after all. No detail was sufficiently singular or memorable to corroborate with a witness. I could never testify in court that any of these incidents was accurate or had even happened.

Yet there was so much that made sense about what I seemed to remember. Of course, a baby feels it when her arrival is greeted with cries of enchantment! Of course, my mother snuggled my head into the crook of her neck! As the work I had done with Rita spilled over from my hours in her office into my life outside, I felt an unprecedented sense of rootedness—a feeling that I had been nurtured from the very beginning of my life. The feeling that I lost when my mother died.

Around the time of this breakthrough, Ben and I happened to notice on a bus a boy of about his age who appeared to be riding by himself. The two of us spotted him at the same time, then looked at each other.

"Is he alone?" Ben whispered, shocked, bewildered. He could no more imagine boarding a bus on his own than leaving the house without his lungs or heart. I understood then that a seven-year-old and his mother are, in fact, one entity, still attached to each other, albeit invisibly. I had been severed from my other half.

When I think about the memories I found, or dreamed up, through hypnotherapy, I notice a paradoxical aspect of them. Unlike memories I'd discussed many times in talk therapy, what I experienced in hypnotherapy had almost the quality of a home movie. There was no mediating voice, my own, turning over the charred, soggy remains of the past. Instead, on the "viewing screen" Rita had created for me, I saw my history as if through a neutral, dispassionate lens, from a distance.

I saw the life of my whole family, the Pall family, as a story with five characters, all of them going about their business. Then, out of the blue, one of them died. I saw it as if it were unfolding before my eyes. Unlike the way I'd felt discussing my past in talk therapy, there was no emotion attached to these scenes. There was no foreshadowing of the disastrous event. The "I" watching this silent movie had no more, nor less, significant connection to the story than any of the other people in it. The "I" was half-asleep, objective, a mere viewer. And somehow, seeing with this dispassionate eye, I was able to separate "me" from what had happened to me, and "my mother" from what had happened to her.

This neutral story-seeing was immensely, perhaps indescribably, liberating. For the first time, I knew, really knew, that I was not, as I had long believed, the kind of little girl whose mother dies—that tragic kind of girl. There was no such kind of girl. Nor had I somehow been the cause of my mother's death, as I'd also imagined for years. No amount of longing on my part, no faithfulness to her or being "good" could have brought her back. I was a bystander, collateral damage, one of four people whose lives were twisted when the woman upon whom they depended unaccountably got sick, then died.

A few nights after my final session with Rita, I had one last dream about my campus mailbox. This time, I went straight to the box, unlocked the door, and found it full of letters from my mother.

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