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My Mother and the Sea

Annie Marhefka

My father and I were thirteen days into our fourteen day beach getaway—I won't call it a vacation; we were there to spread my mother's ashes. It had been several years since she had passed, and still, we had put it off. We had not finished what we came here for on day one, or day two, or day eleven.

It wasn't just that she had requested to have her ashes spread at the beach, but that she had requested to have her ashes spread at this beach, while we stayed in this house. And actually, she hadn't requested it at all—her last will and testament mentioned no details of her cremation or the spreading of her ashes. We just knew what she wanted. Because she had spread my brother's ashes here. She had stood in the water just footsteps from this house we visited every summer, and let him go. After she died, we had continued to come back to this house every summer, without her, and each time we brought our pieces of her in our little urns. But we didn't speak of it, we just moved through the days with it hovering over us, never resolving the tension. But this year, the family who owned the house let us know they would be tearing it down. This was our last chance.

So it was our final night, and we sensed a storm was coming in. We could smell the electric charge in the salty air, could taste its tingle on our tongues. We had put off our deed for too long; it was now or never. I retrieved my small urn from my suitcase and my dad went to fetch his from wherever he had been stowing it—I imagined he kept it under his pillow, or atop the nightstand next to his glasses.

He summoned me into the kitchen and pulled a bowl from the cabinet, saying that he thought we could combine our ashes in this bowl, carry it down to the beach and pour it in the ocean together. I nodded in agreement. (I later stole the bowl from the house because it didn't feel right to leave it there, even after it was thoroughly cleaned, for people to scoop their milk-soaked cereal bites out of, after it had carried Mom's ashes).

I had never opened my little urn with its smooth black exterior, speckled with cobalt blue flakes. I had never wanted to look inside at its contents, and now that I tried to twist its lid, it refused my prodding. Just as when I was a small girl unable to open the jar of strawberry jam, I held it out in my palm to my father, asking with my big brown eyes for his help, his strength. When the lid popped loose, he handed it back to me, held out the bowl, and I slowly poured.

As the contents tilted out of the lip of the urn, I thought: these aren't my mother's ashes. They were too white, too pure, too beautiful, to have come from death, from fire, from remains. I had imagined a cremated body's ashes to be black and gray and tarred and sticky and unsightly. But what poured out of the container were glistening fragments that appeared like fragile edges of seashells chipped off by the undertow, swirled together with soft white sand. I glanced up at my father, perplexed, and he seemed confused by my confusion. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Is this - is this how it's supposed to look?" I asked. "It's so pretty." He nodded, said yes, that is how ashes look. We could hear a distant crack of thunder outside. He added his share to the bowl and handed it to me. "Let's go," he urged, and we left the house, didn't bother to lock the door.

I was careful to hold the bowl steady as we traipsed barefoot across the uneven sand towards the water. We could see skinny threads of lightning stretching down the coastline, the storm's needle weaving them down and up, connecting water to sky, to the north of us. It would be upon us soon, and if the private beach's security guards spotted us, they'd whistle us away before we could do what we came here for. When we were younger, carefree of death and grief, we would be chased away from lightning

fireworks by these same guards, lighting the wick and taking off running to the dunes. But this business we have is more urgent, more necessary.

When we approached the place where the edges of waves flattened out onto hard, sloped inclines of sand, we stopped, and I steadied the bowl in my hands. "It's getting windy," dad warned, watching as my hair whipped across my face. I nodded, held out the bowl for him, and he squeezed a small portion between his hardened machinist fingers, lifted it up over the water's edge and let go. The tiny particles drifted off in the wind, ushered away from the water like a breezy wisp of fabric.

I could see my mother standing here on this beach on a windy day, my view as a young girl from beside her, looking up, as her willowy, sheer beach wrap whirled up into the wind.

The wind was strengthening, I could see we would not be able to just easily drizzle the ashes along the water as we had imagined. I had pictured myself gracefully waving my arm side to side, sprinkling the ash to the saltwater like sifting flour into my mixing bowl, the ash cooperating and falling right into place. I looked to dad, uncertain.

"You'll have to go in," he said. Up to this point, he has been soft, gentle, protective. And he still is, in his tone, but in his direction, he is pushing me. He knows my deepest fears as only a father of a daddy's girl could—he recalls the way I would dart away from the water at the slightest sign of an incoming storm cloud as a child, the time that I army-crawled across the sand dunes when the lightning came more quickly than I had expected. I feared the lightning the way others feared dizzying heights, or leggy tarantulas, or drowning in the dark. He was pushing me, but he was doing it to save me—he knew it was I who needed to perform this act, more than him. He had slept next to her mattress imprint every night, the soft dip in her pillow; I had not had the closure, had not run my fingers over the physical gap she had left beside me night after night.

I stepped tentatively into the shallow water where the ocean licked the shore. It had been a calm day on the water, which felt warmer when you were submerged in it than the air in the sunlight of day, but was cold and uninviting as night crept over the horizon. The water had also lost its murky translucency at this hour, I could not see my toes nor the crabs and sand sharks that I knew lay in waiting. We had often fished in the evening hours and I recoiled at the catch we reeled in from so close offshore—the skates and rays, the snarly-shelled horseshoe crabs with spidery legs. But the water was opaque, dark, impenetrable at this hour—and further in I waded. My jeans clung to my thighs like heavy jellyfish as I went deeper, and when a loud clap of thunder struck, I turned back to look at my father. He was looking to the north, watched as the lightning streaked down a few miles north, nodded to me. I was far enough.

I had been clutching the bowl to my chest, curled tight within my left arm as I held my right arm out for balance, the waves fighting my entrance into their body. Now I held it out in front of me, reached down with my right hand and lifted my mother up out of that bowl, freed from her claustrophobic little urn, her tiny bones and shell fragments sparkling as softly as the ripples on the water. It occurred to me that the ashes in my hand were indistinguishable from the tiny crystals of sand and shell below my feet, except those I held were dry and those I stood on were soaked with ocean. I returned my mother's body to the sea, to the earth, letting the pieces of her slip between my fingers. It felt right, it felt that I was returning her body to whence it came from. It was all the same—the sand, the ash. It was all her. It was all me.

Annie Marhefka is a writer, HR consultant, and mama residing in Baltimore, Maryland with her husband John and their daughter Elena. She is fond of traveling, building puzzles, boating, and hiking with her toddler. Her work has been featured on Coffee + Crumbs. Annie is working on a memoir about mother/daughter relationships; you can find her writing on Instagram and at anniemarhefka.com.

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