

When the World Breathes Again

Caesura: A pause or interruption. In music, it means total silence, but not for long.

My mother died last week. "Peacefully," the nurse said, and that was it. She died with the nurse by her side, her last words being a plea not to disturb me from sleep. It was early morning for me, across the country. I was fast asleep, blind as to what would greet me in the morning.

I am at the funeral now, and my heart has not beaten since the nurse had called to tell me. Around me is a whirlwind of sobs, sympathetic pats on the back, hugs from people I barely know, and all I am focused on is the quartet music playing in the corner of the lobby. The violin is aching over the solemn cellos, melancholy melody itching my ears. The music feels wrong for a celebration of my mother's life, like forcing an incorrect puzzle piece into submission.

This was not my mother's music.

My mother was a dish-washer in the back of a Chinese restaurant. She used to call herself "the mother of all plates" with a smile. She would then promptly assure me, saying, "*Don't worry, you're still my favorite.*"

Forced to watch her work, I would get restless as all young boys do. I would whine and mutter to myself of all the better things to be doing. "Sit still and listen." She would tell me. In the cramped, hot space, I would spend my days on a small stool, my bare feet on the cool relief of tile. The plastic stool would scratch my legs as the mingling smell of fish oil and soy sauce coated my nostrils. And in the solemn heat of the restaurant, I indulged in someone else's music for the first time.

My mother would twitter around the small space for no particular reason, everything within arms reach. As she scrubbed the cutlery, she tapped her foot on the ground, and this was the beat to her music. She clinked the cups as she went along, the percussion. In the background, the loud clamor of the kitchen almost drowned out my mother's music. Yet day after day she went on. And after a long day, she would hold my hand as we walked home, and she would sigh to herself, not knowing I heard. I was old enough to remember but too young to understand.

People are speaking to me now and I don't hear a word. They are speaking of the woman she was and how loved she was. My mind is blank, and I cannot think.

The dark, to a child, is an orchestra with no composer, a piece of music with no key signature. I struggled in the dark, my imagination my own predator. With the setting of the sun came the dark, and the small room became an eternity of unknown. The dark would clutch at me until I thought it was too much to bear. Then, I would hear my mother's steps down the hall. Comforting and light, this was her melody telling me she was home. She would tiptoe into the room with a soft "tap-tap-tap", and crawl into bed next to me. In the arms of my mother, I knew that I was safe from all the darkness in the world.

The service is over and I am saying goodbye to the people that knew my mother. Too many goodbyes are being said today.

I remember a time when my mother and I said goodbye to all we knew and greeted a strange land, far, far, away. I was holding a teddy bear, and my mother a small suitcase. This was all we had,

bundled into a container of unspoken dreams and hopes. We were in a strange, unfamiliar place. The crowds made me small and vulnerable, but when my mother smiled at me, I became the big boy she told me I was. She held my hand, and we made our way through the airport. She took in a deep breath and whistled a few bars of an old Chinese ballad. This was her song of courage, her armor into unknown territory. She squeezed my hand again. Now, I no longer know if this is for me or for her.

As a child, I didn't know that I would be made to feel ashamed of my mother who had a "funny" accent when she spoke, nor would I know that I would have to hide my food away from my classmates because it was different than the others. I didn't understand yet that my mom and I were strangers to this new world.

What I did understand was the familiar twitter of my mother's work; the beat from her foot, the percussion of the cups. I knew the sound of my mother coming home, the "tap-tap-tap" of her shoes. I knew her song of courage and even the tired sighs.

This was my mother's music.

It is over. I stumble outside of the funeral home, my dress shoes smudging the freshly damp grass into the dirt. To my right are stones upon stones. I wonder how many are mothers with sons now drifting. To my left are maple trees, winged seeds fluttering to the ground. There is a bench facing the stones. It is dedicated to someone, from a daughter. I sit, the icy bench scratching my legs.

"Sit still and listen." My mother would say, and I am back in the old heat of the restaurant, spice burning my lungs. I wait for a familiar hand squeezing mine because this time I know I need it.

The world becomes quiet, for a moment. The birds have stopped, the breeze slowed. The world holds their breath for a child

without their mother, a child who is in the dark again, who is waiting for their mother's footsteps to tell him that she's home.

A lone loon cries in the distance, a somber call, beckoning the world to breathe again.

The footsteps never come.