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Julie P. Center
College of DuPage

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My Mother's Thunderstorm

“We’re going to Ma’s special place.” When I am afraid of forgetting, I decide the cemetery will remind me of my mom. It’s been a month since we’ve been there—a long time to hold in grief.

When my mom was alive, my daughter Zoey was just shy of two years old, with light golden wisps of hair and a gap in her front teeth. She couldn’t say much, but she called my mom what I called her—simply “Ma.” I am double that—Ma Ma. “Is she home?” my daughter asks. She confuses Ma with her other grandmother, living in Nevada and on screen when we Skype every week. Now at four years old, her hair has become dark honey colored, and her teeth have narrowed, her speech still with a little-kid lisp.

“No, sweetie, remember? Ma, who used to live with Papa?” Zoey still calls my childhood home “PapaMa house,” though only one occupant is there now. “Oh,” Zoey seems to recall. “She’s up in the stars.” I sigh in relief. “That’s right.” Our version of heaven is different from my mother’s. Catholicism with all its controversies was defined for my mom when she was born Irish. For me, though, the religion’s trinity intertwines in my mind until it makes knots. A four year old can understand the sky and stars much better.

“But why? It’s so ba ba ba boring,” she moans. Zoey used to like going to the cemetery with me, back when she was free to run through the empty grass near my mother’s plot. Now, with her baby sister tagging along, she has to stand still to prevent a game of chase over the bumpy grass and into the road.

“Well, because we need to go to her special place. I need to go, ok?” She blinks twice, unsure of the urgency in my voice. “Can we get her flowers?” Zoey picks out a fall collection of Spider mums, their burnt orange petals like tendrils. I don’t have the heart to tell her Ma despised these flowers, enraged when her own mother’s casket was blanketed with them despite the orders for small yellow Pompom mums, the kind that grew in her old backyard. I recall this memory fuzzy like a daydream.

As we round the corner to the cemetery, I notice the girls have fallen asleep. I sit idle for a while, staring at my late aunt's towering Celtic cross, the only landmark for Mom's flat marker. I am reminded how she was to be buried at Mount Carmel, hugged by her grandparents and surrounded by Al Capone and Cardinal Bernardin. Two days after my mom died, my dad was forced to buy a plot from my uncle at All Saints Cemetery because my mom's casket simply would not fit in her original choice. She had wanted to rest under the shady tree with her grandma. Now, she burns in full sunshine with no one else around except my aunt. Not too far away from this spot, Haray Caray's grave is littered with a stream of Cubs pennants. She'd like that too, I assure myself, and turn off the engine.

I place Zoey, eyes still closed and arms clenched to her periwinkle blanket, gently on the ground. I pick up Jovie, and she slowly nuzzles her head into my neck, still asleep. We stagger over to the gravesite. I pour water into the plastic vase that's staked into the earth. I wake Jovie by having us all sit on the ground while I prune the chrysanthemums. Jovie, my mom's last grandchild whom she never met, hops up and down on the marker. I ceremoniously place the flowers into the vase.

Zoey talks to the ground. "Hi, Ma. I miss you." Her greeting prompts Jovie to wave at the embedded stone. My father's name is etched to the left of my mother's, birth date complete, followed by a dash, then blank—still room. My children are unaware of their ancestor underneath, bones buried by soil.

As a child, I dreaded the days my mom would drag me to the cemetery, thinking each step above would hurt those below. When I was five, my mom received the same call I had two years ago. Her face whitened like the ghost her mother was soon to become. I recall no dialogue. My memories include getting to skip school and receiving my first Rainbow Bright doll as a gift.

On the drive home from All Saints, the clouds descend and combine to form a black roof over our car. As we veer into the driveway, it starts to rain. All night, the storm is heavy, laden and loud. Zoey sleeps with my husband and me while Jovie snores soundly in her crib, not quite ready for a big girl bed.

“What was that?” Zoey questions the first bomb-like boom. She jumps up and pulls the blinds apart, peering outside as the wind smacks the trees.

“Well, Ma used to tell me it’s those up in the stars bowling. So...maybe it’s Ma.” Another clap of thunder. I hold her tighter in my arms. “See, she knocked all the pins down.” As if strings are attached to the sides of my mouth, I puppet a smile.

“Well actually, Zo, the sounds come from the air expanding from pressure,” my husband corrects me.

“Aaron, she’s four.”

“Never too early!” He winks at me. When Aaron looks up to the sky, he doesn’t think of my mother. He sees spheres of plasma and gaseous clouds of dust.

“No, Daddy!” Zoey insists. “It’s Ma bowling.”

I look at my husband with narrowed eyes, but he doesn’t notice. “For now, let’s leave science out of it,” I plead with him. “She’s scared.”

“Well, she needs to know,” he says.

“And she will. Just not tonight.”

My daughter turns to me. “But why is Ma bowling?”

I laugh at the absurdity now. As a child, I’d sneak into my parents’ bed during a thunderstorm, the idea of my dead grandmother bowling never seeming to calm my nerves. But the warmth of my mother’s hand in mine allowed me to sleep through the rain. “Well, it’s fun! And, plus, it’s her way of telling us she’s up there watching over us.” I smile the tears away and swallow hard.

Zoey loosens her grip and places her head on the chest she once nursed from. At last, she falls asleep. The rain has quieted down, drops falling like down feathers. Ma’s not bowling anymore.

Grief is like a rainstorm. Memories are cloudy at first, and then they pound in your brain so hard and fast it hurts just to think about them. Eventually, over time, they ease and become melodic dreams. Then another storm crashes in.

Until then, thanks for the strikes, Ma.

JULIE P. CENTER