

A vintage, sepia-toned photograph of a woman and three children in a garden. The woman, with dark hair styled in a bun, stands in the center, holding a young child on her left hip. To her right, another child sits on a wooden bench, and a third child stands in front of her. They are all dressed in light-colored, mid-20th-century clothing. The background is filled with dense foliage and a house with a porch is visible in the upper right.

# A Woman of Her Time

— Memories of My Mother —

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translated by LIEDEWY HAWKE

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# The Fragrance of Chrysanthemums

I look at my mother in her bed. She is white, as white as the sheet. She has just died, and I don't believe it. The nurse beside me doesn't either. Only an hour ago he told me about a protocol to be followed soon, during the stage of respiratory distress. "Distress," the word hit me like a punch. She may have heard while she slept, she may have decided to leave us before. I am relieved. That is how I feel while I look at my mother, her face peaceful now, still warm, as though she were lost in a happy dream.

In the evening, pain pounced on her like an animal. It began to devour her insides. I asked the nurse to call the doctor. He agreed to increase the dose of morphine—one doesn't let a ninety-seven-year-old woman die in agony. She finally dozed off. Standing at her bedside, I wept over her, I wept over the billions of living beings, humans of all races, animals of all species, who have died, since the beginning of time, after much suffering. Who is this God who is supposed to be infinitely good and kind?

I stroke my mother's face. You should talk to someone who has just died, I have heard. Consciousness isn't like the heart, which stops all at once. It slowly fades. I don't know if there is any foundation to this belief, but I talk to my mother, I tell her I love her. It's easier for me than when she was alive, she never liked great emotional outpourings. Except these past weeks. She couldn't control her feelings as well, she smiled when I hugged her, she let herself be tucked in at night, at bedtime.

I am waiting for my two brothers. They shouldn't be long. I woke them up a few minutes ago. I didn't need to explain. The ringing of the telephone was enough. The nurse asks me if he should rearrange my mother in the bed. No, no staging. She should remain just as she is. My brothers should see her as I saw her. He leaves, and the room is silent again. I can finally think about my mother, think about her death. For a long time, I imagined a theatrical scenario: she looks at me, I hold her hand, and she is fully conscious when she takes her last breath. I would never have thought death could be so ordinary. You get a morphine injection and you fall asleep, as after a hard day.

Afterwards, who are you? A soul, a ghost, a dispossessed body, a shadow, a portrait gradually blurring, a memory, a name on a gravestone? I cannot take my eyes off my mother's now unwrinkled face. The marks of living have been erased. Under cover of icy darkness, I let myself slip with her into a time that is perfectly smooth. Forever still.

I keep vigil over my dead mother. Am I alone keeping vigil here? A few minutes ago, for the morphine, I walked up the dark corridor to the nursing station, and through a half-open door I caught a glimpse of a young woman. She was writing in her bed. So, you could write here, in the oppressive silence of this post-operative department. I brought that image with me, as if it could give me courage.

I don't need courage anymore. No longer seeing my mother suffer the way she suffered this evening is the only reality that allows me to accept her death. It is my consolation. In the late afternoon, the doctor predicted the onset of peritonitis. That's what must have happened. But we won't be sure, there will be no autopsy. Her body will decompose in peace at the cemetery, near that of my father. Our whole childhood under one gravestone.

I think of us, my mother's children, as a unit. "The children,"

she used to say even when we were grown-up, grouping us in a single picture. She loved us with the love of a woman who had passionately wanted children. And we loved our mother deeply. This is what matters in the pale light of our last moments alone with her. The flashes of irritation, of impatience, of anger, and the misunderstandings I may have had with her over the years, have vanished like the wrinkles in her face. A perfect mother slowly grows cold in the white bed.

I wish my brothers would not come. I wish no one would come to get my mother. I would like to remain alone with her, for all eternity. I don't cry anymore, I am dazed. She isn't gone, my mother is there, very much present in death, the death I asked for all evening. Her absence will slyly creep up on me when her body will be taken away. That's what I expect. I have been preparing myself for it since November, to spare myself the worst. Illness, for example. So many women fall ill after their mother's death. Will my body be able to cope with the grief?

A sudden creaking noise, the door is pushed open. My brothers. The room is alive again. We are together once more, as we were fifty years ago, my mother in our midst. Perhaps she can hear us, perhaps our voices reach her from a great distance, through a fog. We will keep vigil over her until they come and take her away from us. Bodies must be left in the room for two hours after death has been pronounced. That is the law. In case they weren't really dead? In case they came back to life? The doctor hasn't been yet. I'm glad. We will have our mother to ourselves till dawn.

Not a sound on the floor. The patients all appear to be asleep. We talk about her in hushed voices, we reminisce. Then we start discussing the funeral. A church service or a secular ceremony? Did she want to be buried? Cremated? We don't know her last wishes. During the long days I spent with her these past weeks, I tried to find out. I didn't succeed. I must have been too vague. But

can you ask direct questions of someone who is already no more than a shadow? Not me, not to *that* mother.

As if she had read my mind, she said while having her tea, “in less than three years, I’ll be a hundred years old.” I nodded, trying to believe it too. But my faith soon gave way to doubt. Since the summer, she had been deteriorating rapidly. How would she be in a few months? Would she live to be a hundred, like those living dead on the front page of newspapers?

My brothers seem relieved as well. There are times when wishing for death is an act of love. We tell stories from the long-ago days when she was our all-powerful mother. We take turns going up to the bed, we caress her, kiss her. We have become her brood again, her nestlings waiting for the daily feeding. Not for long. The doctor’s arrival tears us away from our childhood. He asks us to leave. He wants to proceed with the pronouncement of death.

Our mother is well and truly dead. The doctor confirms what we already know. He gives her wedding-ring to one of my brothers, who holds it out to me. I slip it on my finger and clench my hand. It’s as if another life has just entered my veins. I feel ready to face reality on my own. For the first time, I glimpse my own death in a hospital bed on an icy December night. But there is no fear rushing through me, no sadness. All I ask for is strength, the strength needed to cope with fractured time.

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I got up this morning feeling as though I had lived beside my mother without knowing her, without an awareness of who she was before she became my mother. *Before*, as a child, a teenager, a student with the Sisters of the Congrégation Notre-Dame, her first loves, her job in an office, her years in Toronto, her going out with my father, the early days of her marriage. All the times in a life that exist side by side and complete one another can turn