

Undersong

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Shoving aside a pile of flannels and babydoll dresses, I placed the crate on the floor of my closet, *Tea for the Tillerman* facing out. The pocket-sized redbear on the cover (Is he the tillerman? I never learned.) would continue sipping his chamomile for years as my clothes multiplied around him. I left “Hard Headed Woman” and Cat Stevens’s baritone flat and silent, buried in the vinyl.

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Around the time I turned six, my mother began keeping a sea in a pickle jar in the pantry—on the top shelf, behind fat cans of diced tomatoes. The first time I asked her what it was, she said, “It’s an ocean. Just a small one. In case I need it.”

“What’s the name of the ocean?”

“It’s the Ocean of Enirehtac.”

“In-ear-eh-tack?”

“Yes. Enirehtac.”

I didn’t think to ask where the sea got its name. It seemed as futile as asking why the places in books she read me were called Narnia and Esgaroth: they just were.

Sometimes she’d bring the jar down and unscrew the lid, inhaling slowly. With her hand wrapped around it, I could only see the bottom, sand and chunks of purplish rock swaying in the brine. She’d smile for a long moment, then return it to the shelf. This wasn’t unusual for her—she often stood in the pantry with herbs and spices held to her nostrils, making decisions. “Thyme,” she’d murmur, eyes closed, as if breathing in its secrets. “I think we’ll have—” she’d pause for a second, searching for the answer. Her eyes flew open. “Pasta primavera! I’ll make pasta primavera tonight.”

If we needed to go to the Safeway for ingredients—and most weekdays, we did—we’d stop by Catherine’s first. Catherine lived in a one-bedroom condo with exotic features like arched entryways and wrought-iron leaves on the balcony railing. My little brother, Mark, and I would flop on Catherine’s black futon, pop open a can of Planter’s cheese balls, and watch *Magnum, P.I.* reruns on channel 21. “He’s so handsome,” I said once, repeating after Heather Loeffler’s mom, even attempting her mom’s daydreamy sigh at the end.

“Well,” said Catherine. “He certainly has a fine mustache.”

Where our household décor centered on my mother's many "projects" (a half-finished still life in the dining room, the easel and scene still set, gardenias long dead; a macramé owl who would never earn his wings or the lower two-thirds of his body), the contents of Catherine's condo were precise. One iron skillet, a green card table with two ladderback chairs, two of each utensil. She kept only what she needed, which meant her few wild elaborations—the 75-gallon saltwater aquarium, her eight guitars, the dozen milk crates full of vinyl albums lining the living room walls—also ranked as absolute necessities.

I learned at some point that Catherine herself was a result of another of my mother's projects: she'd taken classical guitar from Catherine at the community college, an instrument she'd abandoned thereafter. But Catherine remained.

When we weren't sprawled in front of her 13-inch Sony TV, Mark gazed at the starry blennies and scissortail dartfish while I pulled records from the bins and made requests. Catherine had a rule: If I asked for a song I'd heard before and knew I liked, she played me one I'd never heard first. So, when I wanted to listen to Tina Turner, whose husky alto rode the airwaves because of *Beyond Thunderdome*, she paired her with Nina Simone. Because *An American Tail* had introduced me to Linda Rondstadt, I also encountered EmmyLou Harris. Long before my hipster college friends tried to recruit me into the cult of Nick Drake, I'd been a child convert by way of Van Morrison.

Though I complained that Catherine didn't listen to the *Top Gun* soundtrack on cassettes like everyone else in our small town (or from rainbow-mirrored CDs, like Heather Loeffler's mom did), I secretly appreciated the heft of the records, the album covers large enough to contain all the lyrics. Positioning them on the turntable, finding the exact spot to drop the needle—these trained me for the accuracy music required. And so, after I'd turned eight and summer stretched before me, when Catherine asked if I was ready to learn to play, I was.

I sat on the edge of her waterbed (another extravagance), oversized guitar in hand, and learned E chords while my mother floated in and out with items from the kitchen under her nose:

"Mind if I make something with this garlic powder?"

"You know I don't, Maureen."

Or, "Why do you always buy such shitty coffee?"

"It's cheap, and I can't taste the difference."

"The R.J. Reynolds company has ruined your taste buds."

"My Camels are the one thing I *can* taste."

After the lessons, while my mother and Catherine drank more Folgers, Mark and I would line our bodies up to the edges of the mirrored sliding doors on the closet, watching in wonder as our reflections rode invisible horses and did grotesque leaps, our half-selves as gravity-defiant as we wished our wholes could be.

Somehow, though, despite the fact that the worst thing that ever happened at Catherine's was my mother's occasional cursing, I knew I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about the time we spent there. We went through the arched doorway into a Narnia filled with John Prine and clownfish, and perhaps no one outside the wardrobe would believe us.

As I grew older, I fell in love with other magics: slumber parties and black raspberry lip gloss and origami notes passed in Earth Science. I discovered boys didn't like it when I played acoustic circles around them at parties and learned, instead, to giggle and feign awe that they could pluck out the two-string melody line of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." I swerved past my parents and Mark in the hallways wearing homemade black chokers and knockoff Doc Martens and thought I knew a little something about grit and smoke.

One Saturday, my mother tapped on my bedroom door and asked if I wanted to visit Catherine. It'd been almost a year since I'd last gone over there, and even then, just a quick pop-in. I sat cross-legged on the floor, reading the liner notes of Pearl Jam's *Ten* yet again, and, without looking up, I said, "Thanks, Mom, but I'm good. I hope you guys have fun, though!"

"Elisabeth." Her tone made me turn to face her. "I...I think you should come with me. If not today, very soon."

The aquarium sat scummed over, fishless. Just murky water and purple rocks at the bottom. The air smelled cleaner, but in a counterfeit way, as if someone had worked to tame the perfumes of Catherine's apartment, to confine the stale smoke to the carpet fibers and the whiskey-laced coffee scent to the sheet music.

She looked so thin. And not cool thin, like Michelle Pfeiffer, who'd toppled Heather Loeffler's mom as the bellwether of feminine taste and beauty. A leathery thin that made me both afraid to give her the hug she requested and also ashamed of the repulsion I felt when she squeezed my hand after my awkward side embrace.

We positioned her on the futon and talked idly around her skeleton, probably about why I refused to join the high school band. My mom put on Billie Holliday, and we all closed our eyes and listened, inhaling jazz and exhaling metastases. It was the last time I saw Catherine.

A few weeks later, I rounded the corner into the kitchen but stopped short when I heard my parents' voices. My dad was employing a tone he often used with my mom—gentle, hoping to help, baffled by why she didn't want to accept the help.

"I'm just saying that I can leave work early and pick up dinner and the kids. I'll take care of everything."

"I know, it's just..."

“I get that you think you need to take care of all of us, but we can manage for one afternoon, I promise. There’s no need for them to leave school early and miss classes. Plus, wouldn’t they be uncomfortable? They barely knew her.”

“Okay, I...”

“Take time to mourn your friend, Sweetie. I’ll hold down the fort for you.”

Two days later, my mother came in with a bin of vinyl albums.

“I tried to get you a guitar, but her sister drove in from San Diego just so that she had room to take them all. But I got you these.”

She’d clearly tried to gather my favorites from childhood—*Bridge Over Troubled Water* and *Rumors* nestled next to *John Prine* and *I Put a Spell on You*—but had forgotten a few. *Songs in the Key of Life* was nowhere to be found.

I wish I could say I slid the records from their sleeves and played them one by one that night, but the crate sat there, untouched. It wouldn’t be until my junior year of college that I’d rediscover the *Fruit Tree* box set after my roommate’s boyfriend tried to impress us with a shit rendition of “One of These Things First.” And when he broke up with her for a girl who bought his shit rendition—bought that trust fund baby from Winnetka could have been a signpost, sailor, cook—she joined me in swaying to “Pink Moon” before my closet mirror, our lit cigarettes and pizza buffet cups filled with 7Up and vodka raised to Catherine and Nick Drake, to the ghosts who gifted us the kinds of rhythms that shot through us like charms, like piranha teeth. We periodically tossed up a cheer of “Fuck Tom!” for the ex-boyfriend.

A few weeks after Catherine’s funeral, I stayed home with a cold. I woke at noon, hungry, my head full of twine, and rambled down to the kitchen. I opened the pantry and found my mother huddled on the floor with the pickle jar, a can of Folgers, and a pack of Camels open in front of her. She looked up, eyes red and woolly. The part of me that fancied myself a punk-grunge goddess felt disgusted by her sentimentality. The part of me that fell from her gave a sad smile and closed the door, leaving her to smell her grief in peace.

My parents divorced a couple of years later, and, few years after that, in 2001, my mother met Lucille, with whom she would open a natural foods co-op and spend the last 19 years of her life. They shuffled around their disorganized spaces contentedly together, never finishing one project before they began the next.

Mom died last year. Lucille fell ill, too, but she had a decade’s advantage in age and health and pulled through. My husband, demonstrating the sort of linguistic flourish that has always made

him the superior lyricist between us, told our daughters their grandmother died “of a virus that took her breath away.”

When he said this, it conjured me back to the first time I’d heard that phrase in real life, outside the context of “Lady in Red” or the Berlin song.

It was 1989. My father had a work event, and my mother was shuttling us to my uncle’s for an overnight, but first we had to stop by Catherine’s. My mom had phoned ahead, so when we knocked, Catherine called out from the bedroom, “It’s unlocked!”

I went into the living room to search while my mom headed down the hallway. She wore her perennial party dress, a Kelly green button down with a belted waist that accentuated the thick bottom and heavy thighs she was forever trying to diet away. She often joked she was “smuggling pillows,” a self-jab I’d add to my own repertoire in my 20s when it became clear I couldn’t outwit my pear-shaped genes.

I was embarrassed by her in that moment. How dare she attend an event with her gratuitous body and her dress a decade out of date? How dare she be nothing like Heather Loeffler’s tanned, toned mom with her shoulder-padded ensembles in chic black and magenta?

I could hear Catherine in the bedroom. “What did he leave here, again?”

“It’s his Care Bear. He can’t sleep without it.”

“The yellow thing?”

I was preparing to correct her, to say, “Uh, his name is Funshine Bear” as only a fourth-grader can, when she caught sight of my mother. She’d never been to an event with her, of course, would never have seen the offending dress. I prepared for Catherine to reproach her, but instead, she said:

“Oh, Maureen. You look so beautiful. You take my breath away.”

Her eyes went wide when she looked behind my mother and realized I’d come in, too, leaving Mark alone in the car.

“Cath—”

“You’ll take everyone at the party’s breath away, I mean. Now, let’s find that bear.”

After they cremated my mom—the safest way to handle her, they said—I brought my half of her home in a sustainable tote from the funeral home. Lucille came over and helped me situate her on a dozen different surfaces until we settled on an outsized bookshelf in the basement, which my husband and I converted into a studio.

Stepping back, satisfied with the placement, Lucille said, “Oh! Would you like Catherine’s jar, too?”

I did a double take. “She still has the jar?”

“Of course she does. *Did*. Have you ever met your mother?” And she laughed.

And so Catherine’s sea came to rest next to my mother’s ashes. A foggy, 35-year-old pickle jar next to the stainless steel urn I’d chosen, my own taste suddenly wrong.

I asked Lucille if this arrangement seemed too cheesy, too maudlin, and she said, “No, your mom would have loved it. But do me a favor, will you, and put a little of me in a spice jar next to Maureen when I go, too? Or maybe next to Mark’s half of her. Either way.” And I said I would.

My girls came down a few days later and pointed at the pickle jar, the briny lumps of rock almost invisible, and said, “Ew. What’s that?”

“That’s your grandmas’ ocean,” I told them. And because they are children, more disgusted by milky green water ill-contained beneath a rusted lid than they are concerned with the quiet magic of dead women, they never thought to ask where I put the apostrophe.