

Gleah Powers: Mommy, Mommy

The moment she dies, you're in stirrups having a pap smear. How symbolic is that?

You made the appointment months ago. You were exhausted but didn't cancel. Since she fell eight months ago, went to the hospital, nursing home and finally a group home, you've had a swarm of yeast and bladder infections, vision problems, serious constipation, low back pain, and panic attacks. So that morning when hospice called, you didn't answer the phone. You needed a break from her complete physical incapacitation, her depression, the constant crying, the begging, "Pull the plug, pull the plug, I want to die." No matter how many times you told her, "Mother, you're not hooked up to anything. There's no plug to pull," she didn't stop. She kept asking, "Haven't I always been a nice person, why is this happening to me?" You were at the end of your rope talking with caregivers, doctors, attorneys, the hospital; traveling back and forth from L. A. to Scottsdale; your not so bright step-brother (son of your mother's dead fifth husband) you barely know asking how much money he was going to get; having to put two sick cats to sleep; your disabled sister calling every day with a disaster, the ceiling in her rundown trailer falling, bathroom overflowing, needing meds her disability check didn't cover. She kept calling you "Mother."

The hospice social worker said, "You're in an avalanche." A man at a caregiver support group said, "You have the worst story I've ever heard. The way you told it, you should consider stand up comedy."

You took her to the nicest group home you could find, where she would spend her last days. "This is my room? I don't like that mirror above the bed. It reminds me of Hollywood in the 50s and what's that ugly thing at the end of the dresser? That pink container with some Christmas tree branches? I want that chair angled."

You didn't feel her go. You wanted to be there. For eight months you waited for her unexamined life to crack, for her to tell the truth, apologize, confess, say something cherishing, acknowledge you, at least for taking care of her now, anything would do.

Your heart opened the day she heard the song "Turn Around" and it made her cry.

"Oh, I'm in so much pain." She sang in a cracked, tear filled voice:

Where are you going, my little one, little one

Where are you going, my baby, my own?

Turn around and you're two, turn around and you're four

Turn around and you're a young girl going out of my door...

But wait, this didn't count. She sent you out the door to live with her drunken cheapskate mother, who referred to you as "The Princess" but didn't treat you like one.

You wanted the deathbed fictional crap you'd seen in movies that you told yourself you'd get at the end. Surely, the strong surge of energy before death the hospice caregivers told you about would cut through layers of narcissism. It could have happened with her last breath, but you missed it.

The last time you saw her, she said, "Look how thin I am." She'd finally lost the weight she'd wanted to shed for twenty years. She couldn't stay on any diet except this one. The Death Diet. Raquel, the caregiver, who fed, bathed and wiped her, dyed her hair a garish red and drew matching, badly shaped eyebrows on her face every morning, pulled down the diaper just enough to expose her hipbones.

"They used to look like this when I modeled, remember, honey? When I die, I want you to have my Mexican silk coat. You can make a fabulous entrance. The gay boys love it. Your sister was here on Sunday. She needs to cut her hair an

inch shorter. Tell her to bring my hair color the next time she comes. That's a cute top you have on. How much do you weigh?"

She'd asked you that question for as long as you can remember. It was the first one she asked when you told her your husband wanted a divorce.

Hospice says she died while a volunteer played guitar and sang "Kumbaya" in the doorway of her room. Her last word, "Amen."

The sounds of your sobbing, the words you blurt out scare you, "Mommy, mommy, mommy." You're floating off the planet. You lie on the floor of your apartment, hold onto the legs of the dining table to anchor yourself. Your throat closes up, you can't swallow.

All the women in the bereavement group say they were best friends with their mothers. You tell stories about yours. They say, "You must be exaggerating, you're not seeing the good side." You want to kill them. You stick out the six-week commitment. There's no one else to talk to.

Your best friend of seven years ignores you. She can't deal with your grief.

One woman at the group seems to understand, until she takes you out for coffee and says, "You're lucky, your grief isn't as bad as mine. I was so close to my mother."

You explain your grief might be worse. You never had your mother, so there's that along with her death. You end up saying, "Fuck you," and leaving.

You love saying "fuck" but now you say it more often, with more enunciation, like to the asshole guy at the smog check place who tells you you should live a little, put more miles on your car, take trips to Vegas. You say, "Fuck you, my mother just died."

Your sister tries to attack you with her good arm in the parking lot of your mother's condo, accuses you, though you haven't lived in town for thirty years, of manipulating your mother to love you more than her and to leave you her condo. The truth is, your mother sent you away, not her. You admit now you never liked

her. She and the not too bright stepbrother sue you for spending too much money on your mother's care.

You clear out the condo by yourself, which you'll lose in the lawsuit. In the kitchen, you walk on eggshells, feel her hovering behind you, criticizing, don't use that pan, why are you washing dishes that way? Don't hang your clothes in my closet.

You find hairs on the pillows, stains on her clothes, dust behind everything, bags of chocolate nibs in the freezer, bottles and bottles of stool softeners, Lunesta sleeping pills hidden in the couch she'd wanted to sell to Raquel, who'd become her best friend. "No one is a stranger to me," she used to say.

Her eyeglasses sitting on the desk make you weep. You lie on her bed, look at the rows of hats in all colors for all seasons sitting on shelves above the desk. You count fifty.

You smell cigarette smoke coming through the vents. No one is smoking. She stopped fifteen years ago. Did she start again?

Other nasty smells come out of the vents, from the furniture, the inside of the old formaldehyde cabinets. You give the furniture to St. Vincent DePaul, paint the entire place, but still there's fresh smoke that won't go away. You ask the neighbor, Joan, to check it out. She smells it too and shouts, "Get out of here, Gail."

In a whisper she says, "Your mother was very spoiled, expected everyone to do her bidding."

Other neighbors say, "Your mother was the sweetest woman, everyone just loved her. She was very popular. Such an interesting, unusual woman, married several times. Very lively. The life of the party."

You want to throw up.

Your already strong resemblance to her now morphs into looking spookily identical. You find yourself, without thinking, wearing her clothes and jewelry.

You can't disconnect her phone. Back in L.A., in the middle of the night, you call to hear the ringing.

You see Laurie Anderson's film, "Heart of a Dog." In it, she says her Buddhist teacher suggested she do the Tibetan Book of the Dead's "prayer for the mother" by retrieving a positive memory, just one, where she felt loved and recognized and to focus on that. Laurie said it took a while but a moment came to her. Her mother, who she described as "formal/frosty," once complimented her on her swimming and diving skills.

One day, unpacking boxes, you find a black and white photograph of you and your mother sitting poolside under a turquoise umbrella. She wears fat sunglasses, an Esther Williams style two-piece with a halter-top. You're in a Shirred one piece with tiny flowers. You're both holding an open book. She's bending toward you, mouth open, eyes wide, her finger on a page. You look curious. She was hopeful then, only on her second husband and still had money. She read to you with animated expressions. You smell the books, hear her voice. There's another photograph of you and Kimberly jumping off a diving board together into the pool.

At the gym, in the sauna at four in the morning after swimming, you cry, remembering the day your mother taught you the butterfly stroke. Your arms splashed like windmills through the water.