

Sailor Mom

I swore at my babies. Like a sailor-mom. It is not the parenting behavior I am proudest of, but my sisters will tell you if I don't. I walked them in the middle of the night, teething or fevering with earaches and in the sweetest most nurturing voice you could imagine I swore at my babies. It helped me and they were pre-language, aware only of tone and touch. I was gentle at both and profane. Even after his diagnosis, I didn't stop though I tried then, because I was ashamed and thought his illness might even be the result of such harsh words in his tender membrane ears. If in the new age I am responsible for my reality, then surely my foul mouth could have grown black tumor cells in his brain. At four in the morning, this made sense and I swore anyway. Too tired to censor, craving sleep more than long life for either of us. Medicine to give every two hours, portable IV hydration, a grotesque backpack for toddlers needing round-the-clock chemotherapy drugs, new obscenities every day. Swearing helped: red wine and a pinch or two of his medical marijuana over my oatmeal. I don't apologize. Fuck the new age.

Sing Along

I push my two-year-old in his stroller,
His head smooth from the chemotherapy,
Over the broken sidewalk on Front Street.
My grandpa's childhood home stood here
Before they tore it down to put up the new fire hall.
As we pass the tall steel doors and red "No Parking" signs,
We listen for the tinkling keys, a xylophone cord,
A melody from Frank Sinatra, the perfect interior rhyme
Of Mahalia Jackson or Hank Williams.

Music like cancer runs in our family.
Deep and random.

I tell my son that his great-grandpa loved the snare drum
Post-war American dance halls, unfiltered Camels and
The soft, moist red hair on the back of my grandma's neck.
I teach him to listen closely to his history, and mine.
Every note, every word is still here somewhere, I assure him.
This was the kind of three-generational household
We can be romantic about, far as we are
From the bitter disputes around kitchen rituals and spices,
And the high tax familiarity takes on respect.

My mother was proud to take my Aunt Gerdie's place at the piano
After leukemia took her life at twenty-two.

My son will never know my mother.
She is dead decades before his birth.
My sister Melanie the only piano player he has ever known.
He loves to count the frets on my mandolin and his daddy's guitar,
Run his tongue along the smooth strings when he thinks we're not looking.
He has a basket of maracas, bells, cymbals, and mallets
That Melanie brought to the hospital soon after his diagnosis.
He played them all shamelessly loud until the nurses complained
And I took all but one yarned mallet home.

Back in his own bed, between treatments and infections,
He sleeps with that basket of noise.

Rattle, boom, chime at four in the morning.
If he's still playing, then he's still breathing.
Later we will take our morning walk. Stop at the Dairy Queen
For breakfast, hot chocolate malted milks.
We'll sit on the city park bench where his daddy first kissed me.
It was the spring of 1976, the country a big birthday party
And us ready to graduate high school, leave home, change everything.
My son will not drink much of his slippery treat so I finish it for him.
A soupy reminder of sweetness that becomes something else.

His feet stomping on the stroller footrest, we'll sing
"I'm so lonesome I could cry," fierce and off-key all the way home.

Raffle Ticket

He was beautiful. And tall and well dressed. Lovely shoes. But all this isn't why I trusted him with my son's life, twice. Said yes, do surgery. Remove the tumor that makes him fall over when he tries to walk, that makes him tilt his head to the left. No one would notice, not even a mother, but always just a bit off center. His name was Dr. Corey Raffle. Like the way you buy a ticket for cheap and hope for the big prize. His beauty made me feel lucky, a good sign, a pediatric neurosurgeon who looks like Jesus at the end of the twentieth century. I said yes and waited for him to come tell me that it was over, Kevin was okay. They may have gotten it all. It's reasonable to hope for that. Remembering that cancer is like ink in sand, not a beach ball buried and just waiting to pop out wholly released and intact. Uncontainable sticky liquid death. And he had worse news for me. Neuroblastoma, under five percent survival, stage four. My son was two years old, and two days earlier I thought he was a healthy, normal-growing child with a lingering flu bug. Now I had a ticket to another planet and this modern-day Jesus to teach me a language I didn't want to learn. Whole-brain radiation therapy. It could save him but leave him a permanent toddler. His body might grow, but his brain wouldn't develop any further than this lovely trusting place. Lovely because it doesn't last but passes into concrete operations and teenage angst and young adulthood, middle age, and if we're lucky, gentle late life. Stronger people than me, says Jesus, do this. I wouldn't sentence my son to terminal toddlerhood. Or I wouldn't sentence myself to care of a disabled son, no empty nest for me ever, only caretaking ahead. If Jesus couldn't do it how could I, a good enough mother before and after work, which took me away to days of stimulating adult conversation while other women watched Sesame Street and ate macaroni and cheese with my sons. Marys all of them. Stronger than Jesus, so much less fame, so much more godlike. Over the nine months that my son's cancer gestated, Dr. Jesus said many things to me: Get some sleep. Don't use the internet to try to understand this. I went to medical school for both of us. But his most important gospel, spoken weeks before this mothering planet opened up to hold my son forever, death isn't the enemy, cancer is the enemy, and cancer never wins.

Rivers and Light

I recommend nephrologists. Get one if you can. Take one for a lover, a friend, a husband. Angels and saints disguised as kidney doctors. The hidden eighth sacrament. With knee-length white to cover wings and magic called dialysis for communion. Of all the professionals who studied my son, his chart, his blood, his PET scans and reflexes, only these chanted love verses, held his mere twenty pounds on their own laps, kissed his scarred head with their eyes closed, prayed and called at three in the morning, knowing we would be awake for blood draws, called because there's a barge on the river. Look out to the east. Goddamn lights on it like a gypsy Christmas tree. Tell Kevin it's for him. Tell him God's cramming heaven into His earth everywhere. Just for him.