

The Place Called Mother

Melanie Unruh

When I was a child, my mother would disappear.

Sometimes she would actually leave, but more often it turned out that she was hiding somewhere at home. The summer I was thirteen, while I was staying with my father, she quietly withdrew from the world yet again. My parents had been divorced for less than a year, and when I spent time with my father, my mother would be alone in her apartment on the other side of town. No matter how many times I called, she wouldn't pick up the phone, so finally I just showed up at her place. When she didn't answer the door, I used my key. All of the lights were on. The apartment smelled like old take-out food: French fry oil, processed meat, and pizza sauce.

"Hello?" I called. No answer.

The bedroom was empty. She was nowhere, but I still felt unsettled, like I could sense her presence. I turned on the light in the bathroom and opened the shower curtain, as though this were a game of hide-and-seek and my mother might actually be standing there. My gaze was downcast and I opened and closed the curtain quickly, so all I saw was a freckled arm and a flash of her worn teal T-shirt. I stared down at the bathroom tile, trying to decide what should come next. What could I say or do in response to finding my mother, a grown woman, fully dressed and hiding from her only daughter inside a bone-dry shower?

But I don't remember what came next. It's startling to realize that such a moment is no longer a part of my memory. Wasn't *everything* riding on what happened next? Did I say her name? Did I just run away? Did she emerge from the shower, her light blue eyes fearful? Maybe we both did nothing. That seems to be something we've grown quite good at. What I do know is that now, every time I enter a bathroom, I'm both compelled and terrified to probe the closed shower curtain. Even if it's not my house. When I peel back the plastic and inevitably discover that the only contents of the shower are bright green bottles of shampoo and sodden loofahs, I breathe a sigh of relief. If they weren't prone to mold, I would never close another shower curtain as long as I live.

When I was five or six, my mother vanished altogether. No one saw her for days and her black hatchback sat in the driveway, untouched. I awoke in the middle of the night after the first day she'd been gone and peered down the blond wooden staircase into the kitchen. My father and my older brother Christopher were still awake, talking. Their expressions were grim when I descended the stairs. My father was on the phone, and he watched me with his dark eyes, as he tried not to say anything that

might alert me that something was actually wrong. I sat at the kitchen table and peered up at them, a pair of tall males who I was beginning to recognize had no idea how to care for me in my mother's absence. Christopher put his hand on my shoulder, which scared me more than anything else. He was eight years older and I was used to him decapitating my Barbies and tricking me into watching scary movies. This quiet comfort implied something much bigger than us.

The following day I went next door to my grandparents' house after school. There was a policeman, tall and foreboding in his dark uniform, standing in the kitchen, questioning people. When was the last time anyone had seen her? Did she have a history of disappearing? Where might she have gone?

When they finally found her, I was confused and horrified. My father told me that she had to go away to a special hospital for awhile. I asked why. He told me that he had uprooted all the shoes and clothes from their closet floor and discovered her hiding in the back. She'd been gone for days; everyone had been searching for her, assuming the worst, and here she was the whole time inside her own bedroom closet. Even as a small child, I knew this wasn't a game. Mothers didn't disappear for days and then re-materialize inside of closets.

My mother was not well. She said that strange men had been trying to hurt her, so she had climbed into the back of the closet, covered herself with whatever she could find, and as a final step, to keep the men away if they should happen to discover her, she ripped out one of her front teeth.

It has taken me twenty years to find the words to express what it felt like, what it still feels like to imagine my mother in such a state. What must have been going through her mind? How does your life ever get to the point where you are curled in a ball in the dark, hiding within reach of your own family?

When she finally came home from the hospital, she told me about her experience.

She said, "I thought those men were coming to get me."

"But why didn't you ask for help if there were men in our house, Mommy?"

"Because they weren't really there."

My mother is bipolar. She is not the caricatured manic-depressive, buying a yacht on her credit card one day and slashing her wrists the next. She's what doctors refer to as a "slow cyler," meaning that she can be in a deep depression for four or five years before the mania, which usually only lasts a few months, sets in. Although the highs are brief, they are startling. I won't have talked to her in months, and she won't have done a single proactive thing in years, when suddenly my phone begins to ring nonstop.

The fall of my junior year in college was my busiest semester ever: I was working two on-campus jobs, doing a full course load, taking the train from Rider University in New Jersey into New York City every week for an internship, planning my best friend's bridal shower, preparing to leave for a semester abroad in Spain, and trying to end a four and a half year relationship with my boyfriend, Mark.

Out of the blue, my mother called me. She never initiated contact. It was always me reaching out, and most times, these attempts went without acknowledgment. I'm sure if there were a collection of all the unanswered messages that I've left for my mother over the years, they would range anywhere from outraged to hysterical to stoic in tone.

"I'm feeling great," she told me.

"Really?" I tried to contain my shock. The last time I remembered my mother being well was my junior year in high school. I knew she had slipped under the radar again when she failed to come see me before I left for my first prom. The pictures from both proms are of me standing between my father and my stepfather, Bob. The first year, my best friend Laurel's mother helped us get ready, fussing with the camera, with the coordinated placement of our dates' boutonnieres. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw us descend the stairs together, our feet loud and unsteady in our high heels. Laurel's mother was in the video; she was in the pictures. She was there.

My mother took a deep breath on the other end of the phone. "I'm seeing a psychiatrist and I'm taking medication again and I've been out walking every day on the road—and I've been talking to my sisters and my mom and I'm looking for a job—I might start working at the Y—and I've been cleaning the house and I want to come see you at school—I'm sorry I've never been to your school—and I can't reach your brother—not that I'm surprised or blame him—and I think Bob doesn't know what to do now that I won't stop talking—I put a sign on the bedroom door to remind me not to start talking his ear off as soon as he wakes up at five and just wants to write in his journal—"

A week later she called to tell me that it was almost Grandparents Day and she thought I should let my grandparents know that I remembered, so she'd bought me a card and taken it to Mark's house, so I could mail it that weekend when I went to see him.

After this high, my mother leveled out and was doing well for a little over a year before she crashed again.

Sometimes, the only way I can find out about my mother is by calling my father. I'm forced to go this route because my father and my stepfather, Bob work together as general contractors and because Bob doesn't know how to check the voicemail at home, to see whose calls they've been missing because my mother has turned the ringer off.

Most times, my father will just give Bob the phone and I can bypass having to talk with my father about my mother's condition. But recently, I hadn't heard from either my mother or stepfather in months, so I called my father. Bob wasn't with him.

"How's she doing?" I asked, cringing at the idea that he was my conduit to this information.

"I think she's the same. She hasn't worked or left the house much in a year."

I knew this, but somehow I expected to hear something different.

"She needs to go back on medication, but she has to be the one who wants it."

I bit my lip, as a familiar tightness seized my chest. If I spoke then, I knew I'd start crying, so I let him continue, repeating the words that have become a well-worn script throughout the course of my life.

Memories of her hospitalizations crept back into my consciousness and before I could stop myself, I said, "But what about before when she used to go to the hospital? I mean, that hasn't happened in a long time. Would something like that even help?"

He sighed. "Well, I don't know if you ever knew this, but your mother tried to commit suicide a few times. Those were the times she went to the hospital."

Of course, I knew this. I knew she went to the hospital and I knew that she tried to commit suicide, but somehow I never put together the fact that they were so intertwined. My mind was flooded. I struggled to recall exactly how many times she was institutionalized when I was a child. If I could remember this number, then I would know exactly how many times she had tried to kill herself and I could draw a more concrete map of our past, of all the times she almost disappeared from the story. I was glad to finally have this piece of my mother's puzzle. But at the same time, I was angry at him for telling me in such a patronizing tone. Why was *he* the keeper of this information?

As my father went on, I thought of a time years ago when he and I were driving somewhere on Route 202 just outside West Chester, Pennsylvania. I think the road remains so vivid to me because I had to stare out the window to keep from screaming at him. We were coming off an overpass, and as the ramp uncoiled before us, my father opened a wound inside me that I didn't even realize existed: "You know, if your mother hadn't gotten sick, we would probably still be married."

I can't begin to understand what my father went through being married to my mother for almost twenty-five years. I do know that while she struggled with her illness, he found comfort in the arms of other women, and that her inability to stay well ultimately ended their marriage. Or did it? Sometimes I wonder if all of us, my father included, have used my mother's illness as a scapegoat for our own weaknesses.

There are days when I want to shake my mother and demand to know how she can keep doing this to herself and her family. I still have to remind myself not to look at her condition as something black and white. No one would bat an eyelash if I said she was diabetic or had Parkinson's. But as soon as I say she's bipolar, people act strangely. Some tell me that they also know someone who's bipolar—a neighbor or a cousin—and I want to hit them. My mother raised me to be a pacifist, but sometimes I tremble with rage at people who don't understand that when your mother is the one with a mental illness, it's not something you can just talk about offhand or use to one-up the other person. Most people get extremely awkward. A pained expression crosses their faces and they grow quiet, unsure of what to say to the daughter of a crazy person.

I briefly dated a guy who wanted to know all about my mother and her illness. His morbid curiosity was tedious, to say the least.

"So where is your mother now?" he asked, as we lay in bed one night.

"Delaware," I said, turning to face the wall.

"Okay, so what's she doing?"

"Nothing," I said.

He laughed. "She can't be doing nothing. She has to be—"

"She's not."

I'm haunted by a question that most people say in jest: *Will I become my mother?*

Everyone has their highs and lows, but I scrutinize mine, looking for clues that I might be going too far one way or the other. My mind often feels as though it operates like tabbed internet browsing; if I don't do everything all at once, I feel unproductive. I have a hard time prioritizing and not jumping from task to task. As I write this, I'm also doing laundry, listening to music and singing along, checking two of my email accounts, researching, examining the clothes I'm wearing for stains, thinking about texting a friend and needing to feed my cat, writing a blog, and deciding what to pack for my lunch tomorrow. Is this just low-level mania? Sometimes I function well doing many things at once, but do I have the self-awareness to know if it got to be too much?

My depression scares me more. It can be much more tangible, and since that's the way my mother's illness works, I worry that could be an indicator that I'm just as ill. In college, I was once clinically depressed for months. I was twenty and had just transferred to my third new school in three years. I felt as though if I didn't make it work there, I was doomed to never finish. Everything felt wrong: my sleep was erratic, I could barely eat, and I started having panic attacks.

Was my depression just situational? I don't know. What I do know is that in the midst of it, I devised a plan. If I got to the point where I couldn't handle it anymore, I was going to take a bottle of pills and climb into the

trunk of my car. No take backs.

I never did buy pills or test the limits of my trunk. Instead, I thought of my mother, who at one point had seemed hard-wired for suicide attempts but who had transformed her desire to die into a general, fearful malaise when she realized what her death would have meant for her children. So I gritted my teeth and pushed through it.

But that nagging voice doesn't go away so easily: what if I *do* become her? The chances are high. Scientists believe that of all the psychiatric illnesses, bipolar disorder may be the one that is most closely tied to genetics. Some studies say that I have a 1 in 5 chance. Others say it's 15-30%. The thing is, *no one really knows*. I'd like to hope that regardless of what the odds actually are, I've beaten them by now. But will the children I want to have someday be so lucky? I could just end up being a carrier, a woman book-ended by her ill mother and child. Unless I outlive everyone, my entire life will have been spent steeped in their illnesses. It's not fair to say that I've paid my dues, but I feel like I deserve a mother-child relationship that doesn't get put on hold for years at a time.

I know I'm not immune to depression. There's no way to know for sure why it manifested itself in me how and when it did. Maybe there's a marker imprinted in my blood and that was just my year to hemorrhage. Maybe it's out of my system now and I'll never go there again. Or maybe twenty was the onset of my disease, whereas my mother's came sooner and louder when, at sixteen, she swallowed enough aspirin to make her violently ill, but not enough to take her before her lifelong battle would begin.

I'm forced to cycle with my mother, living hand-to-mouth on despair and hope. When she relapses into depression, the harrowing deflation of the hope I've allowed myself to feel is shocking, yet inevitable. A year and a half ago, when she lost all stability once again, I was crushed. Four and a half years of illness versus less than two years of wellness is a cruel trade-off.

But my mother is better than the person her illness makes her out to be. The disease degrades her. When she is well, she is someone who I can tell anything to. The summer before my junior year in college, I broke up with Mark for the penultimate time and without knowing where else to go, I drove to her house. She'd been exhibiting signs of a possible return—answering the phone and even calling me back—so I took a chance that she might be there for me.

When I got to her house, she was already dressed and had even combed her short white-blond hair. She made me a glass of chocolate milk and hugged me as I cried.

"I can't believe I just did that," I said, sitting back in my chair.

She said, "I'm not surprised."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I can't believe you stayed together this long," she said. "You were so young when you started dating and I never thought it was healthy for you to just be with him."

"How so?"

"Look at you. You keep trying to get out of here, but you always end up coming back because of him. He has no intention of going anywhere."

"I know," I said, turning my glass in my hands.

"What ever happened to your plan to live alone in an apartment with your cat before you got married?" she asked, smiling.

I rolled my eyes. "I was like ten when I said that."

"So?" she said, hands on her chubby hips. "It still sounds like a good idea."

"I guess. But I'm scared."

She frowned at me. "When did you get like this? When did you become a shrinking violet?"

I gave her a quizzical look. "A what?"

She sighed. "It's an expression. It just means that you're afraid of things."

I shrugged.

"You can do anything you want." She squeezed my hand. "Don't limit yourself."

The irony of her words was not lost on me.

When my mother stops taking medication, which she always does, everything crumbles. She doesn't forget to take it; she keeps a pill container labeled with the days of the week in her kitchen. She knows the consequences of missing her meds. But she is like clockwork. Every time a medication keeps her from gravitating towards either pole, she develops an invincibility complex. It's not the medication that's making her well, it's her willpower. She's a modern medical marvel! She alone must be the one bipolar person who has been able to conquer her disease all on her own.

It's fucking bullshit.

But whom do I blame? Is it the doctors who can't really force her to do anything? My mother and Bob hover just above the poverty level, so the doctors she does see are often state-appointed, and I suspect, somewhat inept. Without healthcare, she doesn't get treatment that promotes a consistent relationship with a doctor for any length of time.

Is Bob the culpable one then? He's lived alone with my mother and her disease for close to a decade. If it weren't for him, she would probably be living on the street somewhere. I don't know anyone else in my family as patient as him, myself included. It's not like he wants his wife to be sick. So how can I hold him accountable for not watching her every second,

for not making her want a healthy life that at the end of the day, is maybe just too much for her to know what to do with?

I want to blame *her*, but how can I?

It was my mother's birthday this week. I went to the store to buy her a card, something I dread doing every year. Hallmark doesn't make cards for people who have strained relationships with their mothers. Their cards say things like, "For all that you've done and continue to do," or, "You are a shining example to all of us." I can't sign a lie and put it in the mail without feeling like a total phony. And so I began my usual search, trying to find that elusive, generic card that said little more than "Happy Birthday."

I cried in the middle of the grocery store, looking through these cards, not because the messages were so meaningful to me, but because I felt so disconnected from these mothers who were lovingly addressed in pink and yellow verses. Other people bought these cards every day without a second thought.

I finally selected a card and took it home, which was half the battle. Now I had to convince myself to send it. My brother told me that she forgot his birthday this year. Our birthdays are a straight shot: Christopher's in August, hers in September, and mine in October. Should I ignore hers because she'd blown off his and was likely to do the same with mine anyway? My twentieth birthday came and went without a word from her. It took me years to let that go, but I eventually did. But now that she had done it to Christopher, my anger rose again. She never even acknowledged my cards, so why bother? Why did I feel obligated to do something for her birthday anyway?

I mailed the card, but decided against calling. There was nothing to say.

I thought that would be the end of it. Another birthday, come and gone. The funny thing is that she ended up calling me. I couldn't even remember the last time we'd spoken on the phone. It had to have been months before. So on her son's birthday, she didn't call him, but on her own goddamned birthday *she called me*. We spoke for a minute, but I was in a meeting and said I'd have to call her back. She consented, but as I'd predicted, when I called back at the exact time that I said I would, she didn't answer.

Bob called several days later, to ask if I'd spoken to her on her birthday.

"Briefly," I said.

"Good," he said. "No one else even acknowledged it."

"Oh."

"It seemed like she might be thinking about hurting herself, but I think we're past that now."

I felt heartsick. Did my mother think that I was the only person on

her side? What would she do if she knew what I thought, what I wrote about her?

I used to see a counselor who told me, "You need to be willing to accept the possibility that your mother may never be well again."

When my mother eventually climbed out of that particular depression, once again revealing the lovely person hiding beneath all that fear, I wanted to go back and find that counselor. I wanted to run up to her and tell her how wrong she'd been, that her fancy degree meant jack. My mother was just fine. She wanted to leave the house, to find a job, to exercise and eat healthy food, to call me several times a week so that she could once again be a part of my life. She was just like anyone else's mother. She was not the living dead: that was only a mask she wore sometimes, when the world became too much for her. Here was my *real* mother, who had finally freed herself and who was going to stay well because we had finally arrived at *THE LAST TIME*.

But it wasn't the last time. It's frightening to acknowledge the truth in those words: *Your mother may never be well again*. As in, even when she appears to be functional and engaged, it is only a matter of time before once again she is overcome.

My mother turned fifty-eight this year. As far as I know, she no longer climbs into closets and showers, in the hope that no one will see her. Regardless, she remains largely unseen. But for people like me, whether she is hiding or standing right out in the open, her presence is like a phantom limb. There are days when I have to remind myself that she is still alive. Sometimes I feel as though I could just reach out and touch her, but when my hands press for that space, for that place called mother, they rediscover the emptiness that is her void. ~

SANCTUARY by William Faulkner

James Boice

Sanctuary is William Faulkner's whorish dalliance in genre, the Faulkner novel they won't teach you in school, the one no academic has made a career talking about at symposiums. It's about bootleggers, murder, set-ups, bizarre sexual proclivities, grotesquery, evil. It starts off with a college girl named Temple Drake, the daughter of a judge, in a car with a frat boy-type in the middle of nowhere Mississippi. He's drunk. They wreck. They go up to a big dark creepy house for help. Bootleggers are squatting there. The one in charge is named Popeye. He is an evil scary little man, to say the least. There is also a half-wit, a blind, deaf, and dumb old man, a hardboiled sometimes-prostitute. It's a horrifying little band of rednecks. Very *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. A creepy baby is kept in a drawer. Meat cooks on the stove. They don't let the pretty college girl leave. Things only get weirder from there. And it's all portrayed with an unnerving level of sustained emotional intensity and effortlessly transcendent lyricism and wonderfully demented characterization all of which only Faulkner could have created. *Sanctuary* is an insanely good novel that was ahead of its time in its own day, and in our day blows anything Elnore Leonard or Cormac McCarthy has written way, way out of the water. If it were to come out this year, it would win every prestigious literature award there is.

It was 1929 and Bill from Oxford, Mississippi was a loser. Okay, he'd published some books. One was called *Sound and the Fury*, one was called *As I Lay Dying*, and there were a few more. But no one had ever heard of any of them. He felt like he knew what he was doing and that it was important and relevant, but he was the only one. His work was not only failing to win awards and pay his mortgage—it was failing to connect with *anybody*, to make *anyone* give half a shit. But Bill was a writer, unfortunately for him. He loved it and had no other employable skills. So he had little choice but to keep writing. But as he started to think about writing his next novel, he was feeling desperate, cynical. He thought, I'm thirty-one and about to get married, and she has kids and she used to be married to a lawyer and so is accustomed to a certain standard of living, and I'm tired of everyone calling me a fuck-up—I need a plan. In Bill's hometown, even though he had published a few things, he was known only as the pretentious wannabe writer who was always in debt, drank too much, and could not hold a job. They called him "Count No-Account." He was obscure. In 1929 in Mississippi, literary obscurity meant utter oblivion. And existential crisis meant *existential fucking crisis*. He