

Word Count: 2,500

## Casseroles

"I've got a song stuck in my head. Don't you hate it when that happens? It just plays over, and over, and over again."

Kind of like what you're doing to me right now. "It's called an earworm," I say into the darkness. The taupe silk curtains are open just a couple of inches, and the morning light sneaks into our mother's bedroom through the closed slats of the white wooden blinds. My sister sits in silhouette against the faded yellow wall, rocking back and forth on the hind legs of her chair. She's undoubtedly making little divots in the dark oak floor. Her once long, honey-brown hair our mom loved to brush is gone, probably hacked away during one of her dark days. I think she looks like Pat Benatar now, but Mom said she looked like that scary Dragon Tattoo girl from the movie. She said it was odd that such a beautiful girl had been given such a masculine name. She wondered what kind of mother would name her daughter Rooney, but after I looked it up, I told her the actress that played Lisbeth Salander in the movie's real name is Patricia, which seemed to calm her down. That was around the first time I noticed mom wasn't really acting like herself

anymore. It's been such a slow slide into the abyss for her, but maybe today's the day she decides to blow this Popsicle stand.

"A what?" she asks.

"An earworm," I say. "We use it all the time in advertising. It's a simple tune without an ending."

"Oh, thanks," she says, "figures you'd know that."

"Yeah, I've sold a lot of cereal that way."

"Hey, Jude," says Liz.

I close my eyes and let myself drift away to my Saturday morning yoga class. I visualize myself lying flat on my back on my green mat, arms by my side, feet falling outward, Savasana. It's the Corpse Pose, coffin-ready, but it's actually one of the hardest poses to master, just to lie motionless on the floor, as if the command to relax is easy. This is as close as I'll get to let it all go. I've been on high alert with Mom for so long I don't know how to let go, not really. Yoga is about finding balance, not balancing it all.

Heather, my yoga instructor, closes her studio door, dims the lights and turns up the music. This is our cue to surrender ourselves entirely to her. She's in charge, and we're her disciplined disciples. Sometimes it works, but lately - the click of the latch, the flick of the switch, the bubbling brook

of the water music - triggers my mind to race. They say yoga is better than any therapy or meds. I think maybe my sister should give it a try sometime.

"Jude, are you asleep?"

The hard wooden chair creaks as I shift. My ass is killing me. This sitting, this waiting, this deathwatch, this is not good for my body. I take a deep cleansing breath and try to channel Heather. "No Liz, I'm just listening to Mom."

Mom is practising Savasana too. Soon she will be Savasana. This body is not my mother, this is someone robbed of her dignity, diapered and drooling, but holding on just in case, but I know miracles only happen in Hallmark movies and Harlequin novels. They say the soul weighs 21 grams. Maybe Mom's soul will pass through me on her way to heaven. What if it passes through Liz instead? My sister was always her favourite. Liz got first pick for everything just because she was younger. She always got to lick the bowl when Mom made a chocolate cake while I was left with the spoon.

I hear a blue-assed housefly buzzing against the blinds, desperately trying to reach the outside world before a flyswatter comes down hard and finishes it off. It sounds again, and I realize it's my iPhone, shuddering on the nightstand next to my mother's head. At this hour, it must be my daughter.

"Give Nana a kiss from me," says her text. It's 6:04 am, and she must have an early band practice over at the school. I lean in. I put Mom's warm, frail hand in mine. I press her fingers against my cheek, breathe deeply and then kiss her palm gently. I place her arm back by her side and tuck her in. I swab a little water onto her lips with a small sponge. I wipe her forehead with a damp facecloth, and then lightly kiss her pale, sunken cheek.

"That one's from Tessa," I whisper. The chair creaks again as I sit back down. I ache, I need to stretch, and I need a dose of Heather.

"Is she still with us?"

"She'll always be with us," I say. "Do you remember the song she used to sing to us when we were little? I think it was called 'All Through the Night.'"

"Yeah, I love that song. 'All through the night, I'll be awake with you, all through the night, this precious time when time is new.'" Liz's bracelets cascade down her forearm as she runs her fingers through her spiky black hair.

"God Liz, not the Cyndi Lauper version," I say. "I'm thinking about the lullaby she used to sing all the time in her sweet soprano voice. It goes something like this... 'Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee, all through the night, guardian

angels God will send me,' only Mom sang it much better than that."

"Oh, so that's where that's from," she says. "Mom sang that to me last time she visited me in hospital."

"I've lost track, do you mean when you OD'ed?"

"That was an accident," she says. "I got all mixed up. Those doctors make things so confusing for me."

"Maybe it's time for another 28-day vacation."

"It won't happen again, I promise," says Liz.

"Don't promise me, promise Mom."

Liz scratches at her arms like a stray dog trying to rid itself of fleas. She should really lose those bracelets.

"I like the Ella Fitzgerald version," I say. "The day is my enemy, the night my friend, for I'm always so alone, 'till the day draws to an end."

"Oh, I like that one too."

"Mmmm, to meet again in dreams."

"I had such a weird dream last night," says Liz. "Do you believe the dead meet the dying?"

"You mean like in 'The Five People You Meet in Heaven?' He just published another book about people you meet in heaven," I say.

"No, the first one you said. Who do you think Mom will meet?"

"Dad, well, maybe."

"Fifty years of marriage, he'll be waiting for her."

"Maybe he'll be waiting for her to cook him dinner," I say. "I can't believe she didn't leave him."

"I don't think she had a choice, not the way you do, I mean, if you ever wanted to leave Paul. Don't you think your corporate job gives you the freedom to walk away if you want to?"

"I suppose so, or she could have chosen more wisely to begin with."

"But then we wouldn't be sisters. Do you remember the time we had chocolate cake for dinner?"

I smile at the memory. "I think we were celebrating because Dad was away for a whole week. God, he had a temper."

"What about the time he refused to eat the pot roast because he said it tasted like a tire?"

"The dog didn't seem to mind."

"I call dibs on Mom's cookbooks," says Liz.

"Shut up Liz, Mom's not even dead yet," I snap at her.

"If we were at the hospital one of the nurses would have taped a picture of a white rose to the door by now so everyone else would know there's someone dying in here."

"You're confusing that with the vet clinic. Honestly, I think we're more humane to our animals than to the people we love the most. Mom wanted to die at home, in her own bed. I think it's the least we can do for her, considering everything she's done for us over the years."

"And other people too," Liz offers.

"Yeah, lots of other people."

"How do the words to that lullaby go? The real one, the one Mom sang to us. Will you teach me?"

"Let me see if I can remember them, it's been such a long time." I touch my mom's hand. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly.

"Liz, I think she's gone."

"Gone? You said she'd always be with us." Liz clunks her chair back down on the floor and scrapes it across the wooden

planks as she gets to her feet. Where the hell is she going? Good, I'm glad she's leaving the room. I lean over my mom's body and wait for her soul to pass through me. I loved her chocolate cake.

Loved. Past tense. My mother has passed. I take a deep breath, but it doesn't hold back my grief in the form of jagged sobs.

Liz leaves the bedroom door wide open when she returns, and she's holding something against her chest. Morning light floods through the upper staircase window. The railing spindles cast uniform shadows against the polished hardwood floor. Liz and I used to love running down the hallway in our stocking feet, slide, and then sail over the three stairs to the first landing.

I hear the morning newspaper, rolled tightly and wrapped with an elastic band, thud against the front door. Mom never even opened the iPad I gave her for Christmas last year. "I don't mind inky fingers," she'd said. "Besides, how would I do my crosswords?"

Liz gives me a little bump with her hip. I scooch over. She places Mom's faded yellow, dog-eared notebook with all our favourite recipes in it on my lap. I press it against my face and inhale my mom's world. My salty tears mix with the grease stains on the cover. Mom always said, "The secret to a flaky pie

crust is to use real butter and keep everything colder than the arctic air." Mom fancied herself as the Julia Child of our neighbourhood.

"Do you realize Mom's Cuisinart is thirty-seven years old?"

"Really? It's almost as old as me," says Liz.

"She just had to have one," I say. "We took the GO Train into Toronto and then the subway up to Simpsons. Mom said Julia Child helped design it, and that's what made it worth every penny. It cost \$259.99 back in '75, but Dad insisted she has one."

"Where was I?"

"With us, don't you remember? You would have been four years old. Mom was the first of her friends to get one. She was absolutely beaming when she took it out of the box and placed it on her kitchen counter. She said it was better than having a Caddie in the driveway. Dad met us after work and took 'his girls' to a fancy French restaurant for dinner. After we had eaten, we walked along Queen Street and looked at all the Simpsons' Christmas window displays before driving home with him."

"I remember the windows," says Liz. "Why don't they do them anymore?"

"Because they got bought out." I open Mom's notebook to the first page. In her perfect script, she'd written November 27, 1962, our wedding day. "I thought you wanted this?"

"I do, but you're the oldest, you should have it. Do you know what this means?"

"That I'll be hosting Christmas dinner from now on?" Mom was the perfect hostess. She cooked like Julia Child and looked like Jackie O.

"Yeah, that too. But I was thinking about all the casseroles people will make us."

"Liz, people don't bring women in their forties casseroles."

"Mom sure would, she'd be in that kitchen so fast." Liz's bracelets jangle down her arm as she points towards Mom's domain: the kitchen.

"You're right," I say. "Mom never went anywhere empty-handed." Until now.

"So, what kind of casseroles do you think people will make us?"

I press the open notebook against my face and inhale the memories. It would be so easy to walk away. Mom just gave me a

way out. I can cut Liz loose, and she'd just drift away. I've got my own family, my own problems to worry about.

"Hell-o, earth to Jude," says Liz. She wiggles in the chair to get my attention. "Where'd you just go?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about how awful all those casseroles will taste."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Mom was the best cook in the whole wide world. Heaven's gain."

"No, not that. It's just... how good can a mourning casserole taste?"

"Oh, I never thought about it like that," says Liz. "Sorry." She swings her feet forward, and one of her slippers drops to the floor.

I look at my bare feet. They're a mess. When was the last time I had a pedicure? And my roots. I need to get my hair done before the funeral. And a dress. Do the boys' suits still fit them? I spin the Trinity ring Paul gave me for our tenth, three gold bands, - yellow, white and pink - one for each of our children. Adam grew two inches this summer. His pants are going to be way too short. Maybe he can wear Jake's old suit. I should start calling people, or emailing them because that would be quicker and less painful, but Mom would hate that. I better

call. I can't remember, did we decide on the same funeral home as Dad? I think Mom said she didn't like the way they handled the visitation or did she tell me she did like it? It's been twelve years, I can't remember. Mom's obituary should mention something about what a great cook she was. I better write that down before I forget. I bury my face in the pages and know that's impossible because I'll never forget.

"I think I need a drink," I say.

"Good idea Jude, me too."

"I thought you weren't supposed to drink on your meds?"

"I stopped taking them."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I ask. Mom would be so disappointed if I walked away. Even though she's gone, she'll know.

"I'll skip the drink if you do," I say. "Besides, she probably only has cooking sherry."

"She's got five different bottles."

I put my arm around Liz. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I tuck her phantom hair behind her ear. Now that Mom's gone I'm all the family she's got.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"Yeah, are you?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"Oh, nothing. Everything."

Liz starts humming the melody of the lullaby. The words come to me, slowly unfolding in my mind, washing over me in our mom's sweet soprano voice.