

OUR *days*

THE RHYTHM
OF OUR LIVES



Almost Touching

Every night I go to bed early, hoping to see my mother in a dream

By Faiga Brant

Mommy I hope you don't mind me emptying out your freezer. It's just that if I don't, its contents will get too comfortable in there. Dusty blankets of ice will form on your packages of meat and pastry dough and peas, and they'll be stuck in there forever, a backup plan for a supper you'll never have a chance to make. That's actually not a terrible thought, your groceries staying put like that. But never mind, I'd better clear them out. Tatty is going to need the extra space now for all that takeout.

Oddly enough, this is not as dismal as I imagined it would be, cleaning out your pantry of all the foods you filled it with, like some kind of culinary estate sale (half a container of consommé, a quarter-box of fettuccine). I know you wouldn't have wanted anything to go to waste, and besides, sharing has always been our language of love. And what a lucky arrangement we had to send each other our little gifts! With Tatty and Pinny working in the same office building, they became our daily postmen for direct delivery. I'd send you some salted dark chocolate truffles you just had to try, or a few fresh challah rolls for Shabbos; you'd send over a mini-bottle of vanilla extract decanted from a giant one, or a Crock-Pot when mine had broken the day before.

"Wait!" I'd say to Pinny as he rushed out the door in the morning. "Can you take this container of minestrone and remind my father to bring it home with him? I want my mother to try it."

"Aren't you seeing Mommy on Thursday?" he'd ask.

"Well, yeah. But this is way more fun."

Do you remember the cookbook you compiled as a way to organize that chaotic pile of magazine clippings that always spilled out of your kitchen cabinets? You typed up all your favorite recipes, printed out an extra copy for me and sent it via Husband Express.

I think that maybe I'll find comfort in the wrinkled, sauce-stained pages, or that I'll hear your voice or taste your cooking. But one of the first recipes I read is so exquisitely painful that I have to put it back on the shelf: *Fried Mozzerella Salad with Balsamic Vinaigrette*, a frilly little salad I don't remember you ever making. It's the way you mistyped it that does me in: "Mozzerella," with an "e" instead of an "a." It makes you all too human again, and at this moment my heart grows arms and wraps them around my throat like some vicious, carnivorous plant and I simply cannot breathe. You know that feeling, when you smell the perfume of someone you love, and although she isn't really there, your senses are shouting and it feels like she's standing in front of you, all blood and beating heart.

That's how it is with everything you left behind. Your jewelry box, for instance, tucked away in your vanity drawer. I think of that wooden box and all that rests quietly in its cushioned compartments and I want to wear everything at the same time, pile them up. A jangle of precious metals and gemstones, it will bring you close. But then I wonder, *Do I dare open it? Will it shred me into pieces? Is it even mine to hold?*

"Welcome to the club no one wants to be a part of," my friend says. The club of young *aveilim*, I suppose she means. She lost her father last year and still tears up at the mention of him. Yet she smiles through her grief, like it's a pesky old friend she has learned to live with. "They're here," she says. "Speak to them and they'll answer you."

With nothing to lose, I surrender my disbelief and talk to you over a sink of dirty dishes. "Please, Mommy. If you're here, show me." And like every other night before that, I go to bed early and hope to catch a glimpse of you in a dream.

Today I wake up to a call from Libby.

Tatty and I marvel over what a devoted friend she was to you, both in health and in its brutal absence. "I wasn't sure when the right time would come for me to tell you this," she says, and begins describing a scene that took place a few months back, when we all thought that death was only for other people. She told me that one Shabbos afternoon, you and your friends were chatting over tea when one of you casually wondered who would inherit her jewelry collection when the time came. Libby tells me, "Your mother chimed in right away and said, 'When my time comes, I want my Faiga to have everything.'"

I was told that honoring one's parents is still a mitzvah, perhaps even a greater one, when the parent is no longer alive. That I, still encaged in this mortal body, can somehow dispatch honor to you through a delivery system far more mysterious than our former United Postal Service of Husbands. Any light I shine upon this world is credited to you, by simple merit of being your daughter. Death cannot break a spiritual connection. Is it possible that in some whispered way we can still share?

It sometimes feels like down here on Earth we are all blind, as if there is so much to see in existence but our physical form lacks the right senses to perceive all of it. When I think of you, I am like a blind woman walking through a lush garden. You are there amongst the radiant flowers, but my shrouded eyes don't show me a thing. If I am lucky, I might feel a gentle breeze or catch the passing scent of lilac. *It must be my imagination*, I think. Nothing can smell so deep and clean and honeyed, so otherworldly. But these blooms, sending out their heavenly fragrance and blushing purple under the warm sun, are so very close to me. Just a breath away, you see. Almost touching, yet so far away. ■