

Fog

Lois Leardi

In the elegance of a surprise moment, the fog opens to reveal, first, the glint of a golden earring, then, that instant, a face, pushing through the curled back mist, parting the vapors, across the expanse of wet sidewalk, a face, almost unfamiliar, yet very much known to her, pale, almost geisha pale, pinkish about the lips, from which dangle a cigarette with an orange tip, a narrow and starkly white nose, and the eyes in deep receded shadow, almondine about the lids, in a Mediterranean way, a fine boned face, not at all thick like the peasant stock from which it has come, as if to defy ancestry, origins, as if to say, I am not of them, I am yet very much of them, I am very much of you, woman, I am your mother.

The younger woman's breath draws inward, and then there is the great generosity of tears pooling in her own eyes, this moment, this stunning moment, in the mist, on a wet street, in a small river town on the shore of the immensity of the great Hudson River, as she beholds this white and almost ghost-like face that she has not seen in some time, too long a time, her mother, now, coming up and out of the fog like a treasure, like a memory become real, again, and again, and over again.

The heart cries, in a clinging tone of emotion, down through layers of time, the heart cries Mother, Mom, Mommy. It is the last phrasing of it that catches in the throat, that quiet little Mommy, bringing to the entire system of the younger woman an ache, a foggy and blurred old ache, a wound, so subtle and randomly imagaic that it can only form a collage of impressions, scraps plastered over old scars, the wonderment of how very urgent and yet how very numbed over are these

memories, this very old drama, of Mommy and her child, the delicate balance of a dance that could topple into awkwardness at any moment in a child's needy and inarticulate life.

Will they hug? The younger woman hangs in a fretful balance on the balls of her feet, remembering the last time they hugged, that tense gesture, how wiry and bony and cage-like, like a pair of coat hangers clanging, like a set of skeletons rattling, awkward, pathetic, gruesome, so much emotion, so much inability to express it. It had left her dry mouthed, cottony, her ears ringing with the import of it, unfulfilled, with the longing of it, hanging there in the air, the space between the embrace far too much air, a void, a chasm. Nothing but a gangle of limbs, of stiff arms, of some sort of air kiss, something unreal, loaded with undertones, loaded with impotency. The sad clashing of incapacity. Could she bear to repeat that? Could she so much as entertain the hope of a difference now, some miraculous hug, like the healings that took place at tent meetings? The quivering, the motion sickness of traveling but a few feet on a wet sidewalk, will they? Will they hug?

Smoke is exhaled. The cigarette is flung to the gutter. The mother goes still, stands stiffly and yet ever so tenderly before her grown daughter. She is taut with duality. She clearly does not know how to proceed. It is up to the younger. Perhaps it always was so, just in this way, the roles come to reverse from the beginning of it all, the child mother, cutting papers dolls, sailing down the dirt road on skates, their leather straps flapping, the mother absorbed, the mother smoking dully behind a chipped tea cup. The younger woman bled. The mother said simply, in a hushed tone, 'it's what we have to do. It comes to all of us.' The matter was closed over like a great wound.

How could this yearning still be? Here, in the drizzle of the street, the young woman feels her heart knock like the pounding on a heavy wood door, on a cathedral door, on the wood of Calvary, and yet there she stands, unmoved, and wanting so badly to be moved. Fog, the wretched fog, rolling, over her mother's face, rolling again, dimming something vital, something needed, for survival's sake, needed like air, needed like food. How could it be? We bang on unavailable doors until the knuckles run with blood. Why? Because we love. We believe the love is there. We know the love is there. We know with a cunning knowing that all children witness, believing, though it be but a glance, the cock of an eyebrow, the acknowledgment on some startling afternoon of the child's existence that comes to mean all the world.

She was always so gorgeous. To the barely ripening child, there was already the bitter realization that, no matter how she would eventually grow, she would never be able to hold a candle to the gazelle-like looks of the mother, the long legged small hipped lope of the mother, like a sleek and gracefully gliding river sloop, pushed along by the breezes of life, long black hair flowing in the wind, like an unconscious dancer, lush and engorged with beauty, utterly unaware in her self effacing humility, in her set apart and otherworldly way of navigating a sidewalk, a room, a dirt road. The long fingers, turning the pages of some cheap dimestore romance, the angular shoulders in a raggedy flannel shirt gleaned from the father's laundry, the mother, flapping her way through the world without a clue of the eloquence with which her body spoke, the shy mother, the girl mother, rarely a word came from her, only those slanted brown-black eyes, the slender model's body that the Parisian fashion scene would have wept for, only she had no knowledge

of anything beyond, out there, way out there beyond the riverbank. The mother was a celebration for the eyes, the eyes of her child, as well as the dismay of those eyes, for her own growing seemed to be threatened by so very much beauty in the house. So very much beauty, so very little emotionality. The mother was warm, the mother was ice. The mother was too hot to be so very cold. Something had gone wrong, somewhere, and the child was left out in the cold of it all. The mother held the handle of the mop, as she dragged it over the floor, more tenderly than she ever held the hand of the small girl. Stuck. The emotional ability of the mother was stuck under some weight that could handle the objects, but not the child, who needed handling, who needed touch, word, assurance.

The child languished. The child fell behind.

The child numbed over and the lights went out of her.

The fog pounds in her ears. It is the hour of forgiveness, as surely as the church bell is intoning at this very moment, it is the hour of, for, forgiveness. The younger woman does all she can to close her eyes, but they will blink, as if to refuse her will, her desire, to make this go away. She must stand. She must continue to behold her mother. She is in a lather of dis-ease, hands still at her sides, as if to say do it, bring it on, the body blow, the final wound that will leave her to annihilation, impaled at long last by life in the land, gone now, gone to some higher realm, some unknown reality far and above this slicked sidewalk, removed like a stain on the pavement, scrubbed out, snuffed out.

Forgive, or die. The violence of it. The brutal choices life throws, hurls, the weapons broken, the tensions snapped, you go or you don't, the younger woman thinks. You go into it, or you don't.

She puts one foot forward, like an invalid, like a cripple, her leg feeling suddenly palsied and inept. I can't do this. She feels the onrush of rage, of frustration, of the bewilderment of a crucial crossroads. Mommy, you were so—, but the words fall down.

Mommy simply was. Here is the real deal: Mommy was who she was. There on the street, Mommy is who Mommy is.

And you come to accept. And you come to accept. And you come to accept Mommy as Mommy, in her Mommy-ness, in her being who she is, in the body of her, in the way of her, in the life of her life, separating yourself out now, realizing, feeling the great tug of the umbilical, the ooze of the ripping, the release of the wet rope of it; she is she and you are you, can that be it, at last, can that be the truth now, the truth you come to live by? Yes. It is enough.

She crashes to her knees, at the exact moment that the mother does, there on the sidewalk, several feet apart from each other, the two of them, on their knees. The bells are ringing, all is in a mist.

"When you were born," the mother says. "When you were born, it was stark noon. The bells at the convent were ringing the hour of noon. The bells were ringing noon at the convent when I gave birth to you."

The younger woman nods, surrounded by the fog. They are on their knees still. All is still. All is wrapped in fog.

And all over the world little girls are running down dirt roads, running barefoot, trailing ribbons, ragged, free, the winds causing their eyes to pool with tears, their frail arms reaching ahead, as if beseeching, but they are free, running, running into womanhood, small girls, trailing ribbons.