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Passings

by Jessica Dainty Johns

When I was five years old, my mother caused a scene in the downtown IGA and threatened to kill herself. I remember this because the outburst was her response when I asked for a pack of candy cigarettes from aisle nine, the "sweets lane," as she called it. Otherwise, I am not sure I would have been able to distinguish this psychotic break from the ones that seemed to come at three or four month increments throughout the rest of my life, at least until I stopped calling and visiting. Two years ago, six years after I stopped speaking to my mother, my brother finally agreed to be the one to take her, screaming, from our childhood home to the most affordable but respectable facility within an hour's drive.

I also remember the spaghetti sauce. Spattered all along aisle thirteen like liquid confetti. The tomato speckled my blue and white jumper and my mother's face. I remember her teeth dotted with red. Even at that age I recognized her weapon of choice's similarity to blood, or maybe just now looking back I see it. Still, on that day I felt dirty, tainted, and began to cry because I didn't want this passing of her to me, these red stains on my favorite dress that no matter how many times my mother washed, would probably still bear the faint suggestion of something not quite meant to be there.

Now at thirty-five those reminders are much more obvious – the hooked nose that makes me look shrewd and aged in photographs no matter at what point they were taken; the green eyes that crescendo into a cat-like yellow in bright light; my incessant clutching of my purse no matter how tightly I already hold it to my body. All of these are inescapable and hereditary pieces of my mother. Why some stuck and others didn't, I always wonder that. Like why I haven't entered a church in fifteen years when my mother went to Mass daily, sometimes twice on Holy days; why I can't stand the smell of a cigarette before 2:00 pm or the taste of bologna and cheese sandwiches. And why even something as mild as a beer taints my mouth like an intruder. These things I always thought would reach me somehow. But here I am. An atheistic vegan who doesn't even own a bottle opener.

And my mother talked to her mother until the day she died. She was there holding my grandmother's hand as she struggled for air. That didn't pass to me either. I haven't talked to my mother since the day I helped her shave her head after she ripped out a chunk too big to camouflage. At the time we laughed, hers a hollow, rattling cough, like an oversized pebble caught in a grating, mine too high pitched and airy to be sincere. I said it was bound to be the newest fad, that shiny scalp of hers, but when I walked out the door that day, I thought, I am not strong enough for this, I cannot climb these steps again.

And I didn't. Hadn't. Never planned to. Until today when the facility called me to tell me my mother had died. Natural causes, old age even – she was only sixty-five. So my mother failed at the only consistent activity of her life – killing herself. Instead she died looking peaceful and at rest, her face so serene, the attendant calling asked how it was they lost such a happy woman.

The lobby of the assisted living center smells like a hospital trying to be something else. The space looks like the living room of my grandparents' house. Doilies cover scratched end tables and the upholstered chairs are flowered and faded. The air is the same, too, the faint smell of stale coffee and moisturizer sifting through the scent of eventual death.

"We use a lot of disinfectant," the plump nurse tells me, too cheerfully for the content of the sentence.

I smile and nod but do not care.

She continues anyway. "Your mother was such a sweet lady, always praying for everyone, especially those children of hers," (she winks here) "carrying around those rosary beads in her bathrobe pocket."

She pauses. I think she is waiting for me to speak.

"That reminds me. I thought you might want to have these." She draws out a string of beads from a desk drawer and places them in front of me.

They're a sea-green color, made of something between plastic and glass. I hold them up and they filter the fluorescent lights into tiny rays of aquamarine.

"You know she wasn't even really Catholic. She just went to the church all the time. Even stole communion once, since, you know, you're not supposed to have it unless you actually belong there. She used to bring us home tiny shampoo bottles filled with holy water and Mass cards with pictures of I think saints on them."

I don't know why this is the memory of my mother I choose to tell this still-smiling nurse.

"Well she sure was a treat to us here. She'll most certainly be missed."

And it is this moment that I realize I do not miss my mother. That I have been dreading this day not because of losing her but because of having to claim her all over again.

I slip the rosary beads into my jean pocket and thank the nurse who has someone else lead me to my mother's room to gather the rest of her belongings.

My mother's wishes were to be cremated and we picked a facility that offered to take care of the "details" for us. Sitting there on the bed is a mirrored box filled with her ashes. I open it and look inside. Her ashes are inside a plastic bag. She looks like the bottom of a fireplace, the result of a flame snuffed out and ground away. I see her coming in from church with a charcoal cross smudged across her forehead. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust she said they said. I am tempted to smear her across my own forehead, but I am not sure what this would mean, this contact after so many years. So I close the lid instead and thank the orderly for his time and place my mother in the backseat, the middle safety belt holding her in place so she does not disturb

anything on the way home.

Because my name was on the contact sheet for my mother, I have the job of informing my siblings of the news. The phone call to my sister is easier than I expect. I hear the faint scratching of what I think is the filing of fingernails. There is also the popping of gum.

“Well what do you want me to say, Anna? She had to die at some point.”

I think of all sorts of things to say. *But she wasn't even sick. She was alone. Why weren't we there?*

I did not want to be there, probably wouldn't have been even if I could change it now. But I say none of this and simply tell Rosalea that I'll call her back after I talk to Paul.

To my amazement, my brother has the harder time with the news.

“Dead? Like really dead?” His pause goes on uncomfortably long.

I wonder if I should say something. Is he grieving? Are you supposed to interrupt a silence at a moment like this?

“What are you going to do with the house?” he finally asks.

The house. I hadn't even thought about the house. A lawyer my mother hired years ago to organize her will had left a message on my answering machine to set up a meeting, telling me over the phone that my mother had left the house in my name.

“I don't know. Are you allowed to sell something like that?”

“You're allowed to do whatever you want, Anna. You just have to be okay with it afterward.”

We arrange a reunion for Thursday night, a dinner at the house to discuss possible funeral arrangements and decide what to do with the property. I phone the realty office to outline some options, and the aggressive seller tells me that if I want to market it, she can set up an open house for that following Sunday.

I walk past the mantle and catch my reflection in the box my mother rests in. The angled glass distorts my face, my nose even more prominent than usual, and I think, I do not want this. This box or this nose or this reunion.

My sister shows up with dreadlocked hair down to her waist and wears a paper-thin halter dress with beads that click when she moves. She shows me that she hasn't shaved her armpits in over two weeks.

“I'm trying this new acting method. It's all about opposites. The part I have coming up is this Yuppie housewife who's overly stressed and ends up killing

herself. So I'm encompassing her opposite to study what she would not do or say. Carefree and living life. You know."

I don't know, but I nod in an agreeable way.

Rosalea walks around the kitchen like nothing has changed. I feel uncomfortable in this empty house. Not really empty. All the furniture is as it was. There is even still a water glass by the sink with lipstick on it that I refuse to touch. But empty in an intangible way. I almost want to see my mother railing from room to room, her knotty fingers grabbing at her hair and skin. But she hasn't been here in two years. No one has.

"How's Roger?" I ask Rosalea. Her on again off again boyfriend of just under a decade.

She tells me he's fine, that they're going to Acapulco in the spring, that he's forgiven her for ruining his vinyl collection with a disposable razor blade.

I picture Rosalea as a child, mummying herself in strings of my mother's pearls, clunking around in white heels, her hand to her forehead like in old movies when the starlet is about to faint. One time Rosalea pressed me to stand in for the male lead, draping a necktie over my messy ponytail and tying it loosely over my flat chest. The same type of tie she would later try to hang herself from in the bathroom of her California home.

"Like this," she'd said and swung me around in her arms.

She was bigger, and she'd slipped through my grasp, my arms unable to hold her.

"You're not doing it right. You're fired!" She had shrieked at me, her eyes wet and fierce.

I was unable to dip her properly when she fainted. And my waving of the handkerchief was not quite right, the wrist too limp, too unheroic. Even at seven I couldn't help but think how exhausting she was, how exhausting I imagined womanhood was, even for her then at the age of eleven.

I never thought to think also of my mother.

I stare at Rosalea now as she talks, standing in this kitchen, at her nose, her eyes and cheekbones, amazed my mother is nowhere in her appearance, that I, between the two of us, would be the one to keep her in this world, just by looking.

When Paul shows up, we stand on opposite sides of the kitchen island, shuffling our feet. Paul was already in college, over an hour away, during the early crescendo of my mother's illness. Once she locked herself behind her bedroom door, I'd call him. If we needed him, he'd come, never staying long. Just long enough to make sure we had enough groceries, enough air in our bike tires to get to school.

Paul was always just "checking in," even when we decided to put our mother in a home two years ago. Though he dropped her off, he put my name down as the primary contact at the care center, left his name off the registration

completely.

When I was fourteen, Rosalea and Paul both out of the house, my mother drank herself unconscious. When I called Rosalea at college to tell her our mother was in the hospital for alcohol poisoning, she screamed at me over the phone lines, "God, Anna, can't you show at least a tiny bit of feeling." When she called back an hour later, she explained that I had told her the "heartbreaking" news as though I were reading it off a teleprompter.

I think heartbreaking can only be used for something shocking and unexpected. I'd been waiting to make that phone call my entire life, though I thought it would be to say something a lot more permanent than "Mom's stomach got pumped."

Paul sounded like he'd been sleeping and offered to come home in a way that made me know he hoped I'd tell him he didn't have to.

Neither Rosalea nor Paul made the two-hour trip. The hospital called my father to get permission to send her home with me. He had been on the records because he paid the bills. The clerk hung up without offering me the phone. I signed the release forms myself, my signature remarkably more unruly than my already pathetic fourteen year old penmanship.

A taxi took us home, and I put my mother to bed, thinking, "now, NOW, I lay her down to sleep" But the rest of the prayer escaped me, and I turned the lights out on my mother clutching at the empty air in front of her.

Standing in the kitchen, looking at my brother and sister, I wonder, for the first time, if she, our mother, was ever scared. Scared alone in that hospital room, or alone in her bedroom with the lights out, that black prison, though self-imposed. What about the years she spent with no visitors, in a place that smelled too sterile for actual life? I think of my father leaving when I was six, the only indication of his existence being the bills we never had to pay, and the ever-empty other side of my mother's bed.

My siblings and I have not been together since before we put her in that place, we meeting behind her back to send her away, to lock away safely all the things we no longer wanted to deal with.

While my brother and sister make small talk, I discover there are a few bottles of wine left in the dusty cabinet. Before long we are drunk, elbows and heads crashing down on the table in laughter.

"Remember when she called the fire department to tell them our cat was caught in the tree and then climbed up to the highest branch and waited for them to come get her down."

Rosalea refills our glasses.

"The look on their faces!"

"And when she started meowing and scratched the chief's face."

I cannot distinguish who is saying what. We are all making our offerings,

placing our memories on the table, some horrible, some only funny now because of the absurdity of this reunion and the French Claret wine. When the laughter dwindles, I glance around me.

“God, will you look at this house. So much happened here.”

We all take a moment. Rosalea taps her fingernails. Paul refills his not yet empty wine glass.

“It looks so normal,” I add.

We never mentioned her breakdowns to each other unless we had to. When our mother locked herself in her room with the lights off, we acted as normally as possible. The only hint that things were not as they should be was the smell of tomato soup and burned grilled cheese since those were the only things we knew how to cook on our own and the fading scent of tobacco since my mother never smoked during these times. And the shift from Rosalea and our mother cuddled in bed together giggling, looking at fashion magazines or fast forwarding through black and white movies to my sister reading from the Bible, her head bowed solemnly over the leaf-thin pages, occasionally with one hand placed theatrically somewhere on my mother’s body, her hand or forehead.

“Who’s hungry?” Rosalea says, stumbling toward the fridge. “Ugh!” she gasps as she opens the door.

I had driven by the house occasionally in the past two years, checking the gutters, making sure the roof was not sagging. Inside, though, everything is how our mother left it. Cheese on the third shelf, Chinese take-out on the second. We slam the fridge closed again, hysterical, my sister and I gagging.

My brother heats tomato soup on the stovetop and its familiarity silences us.

“Family ties are the strongest and weakest of all. The strongest because they are unavoidable but the weakest because they are the ones you try to escape your whole life,” Rosalea finally says. “But strongest again because you never can.”

I am about to embrace her, to thank her for understanding.

But Paul begins to laugh, and Rosalea does, too.

“That’s a line from one of your plays, isn’t it?”

Rosalea acts aghast, her hand at her chest, her mouth open, her eyes offended. “But whatever do you mean, my dear Paul. It’s a Rosalea original. Or at least will be on opening night.” She winks and sips her wine.

I smile but do not understand. Do not understand how she isn’t acknowledging how true it really is. I tell them I do not feel well, and we all leave the table and close ourselves in separate rooms. When I turn the lights on in my room, I see that the small space is packed into boxes. The parts of my childhood I could choose to take or leave – the school certificates, the beaded photo albums – are covered in dust.

My brother sleeps on the couch, his bedroom long ago made into an office my mother only used in the manic few days before a breakdown when she would spend hours reorganizing the paper trail of our lives: report cards, medical records, statements from the bank confirming my father's payments on the house.

I enter my mother's room afraid I might be sick. Her bed is unmade, another sure sign for us when we were kids that a break was coming. There is a hair on her pillow. I slide under the covers on the opposite side and face away from where she would be. "Now I lay me down to sleep" – the prayer suddenly floods back to me, but I do not finish it. Instead I lean forward and vomit red onto the beige carpet. I glare at the blurry stain in the light of the bedside lamp. I reach for the switch but do not know if I ever make it.

Aisle thirteen. There's a spill on aisle thirteen.

We divide my mother's ashes equally into fourths. A fourth for each of us to distribute as we wish, and the final fourth to bury in the city cemetery beside our grandparents. While the box is heavy, the plastic bag squeezes the ashes down to a deceptively small block. Yet, I leave the house with a medium sized Tupperware container full of soot.

Rosalea says she wants to spread her ashes here at the house so we stand in the backyard as she sprinkles the gray powder into the overgrown grass, reciting, in a trilled voice, a monologue about rain and the death of a father. She tries to be gentle, letting the ashes flow down like sand caught in a light breeze. But the second half of the ash falls out of the container in one clump. Rosalea spreads it out with her moccasined foot and is done.

My brother plans to let his fly free on the ride home on his motorcycle.

I do not yet know what I am going to do with mine. I leave with my mother's leftovers in a plastic container and a purse full of empty travel-sized liquor bottles I found in her nightstand drawer when I went back upstairs to try to clean the carpet.

At my own home, I spend the rest of the afternoon siphoning ash equally into eleven two-ounce liquor bottles.

I leave them on my mantle, prepared to take them to the funeral on Saturday. As I leave the house this morning, though, I sweep them into my purse, the bottles clinking together every time I pull the bag to my body.

At the grocery store I reach for my list and collide with the bottles of my mother. Aisle thirteen no longer holds the spaghetti sauce but I instinctively walk there, not stopping to shop, but leaving a small bottle on the shelf next to a can of tuna fish.

I leave my cart in the aisle and walk out of the store. I find myself standing in the foyer of the Catholic church my mother used to frequent. I use my hair tie to bind together another bottle and a mass card with a small biography of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini. The card says she is the patron saint of impossible causes and also that she was afraid of water and drowning. I leave

both she and my mother sinking in the fount of holy water.

My mother is left all around this town. In the field where we bought our Christmas tree each year. Outside the dance studio where I took lessons as a child. At the bar of her favorite restaurant. At the gravesite of the only man I am sure she loved beside my father who I am not sure she loved at all, a man that came into our lives briefly via a couple months of Sunday dinners and Saturday matinees, he holding my mother's hand under the table and kissing her temple only when he thought we weren't looking. A man who didn't last through one breakdown and left my mother locked behind her bedroom walls.

She is in the public restroom of the local sports club we were kicked out of after she threatened to hang herself in the locker room. Underneath the jungle gym of my elementary school where she picked me up when I broke my arm and carried me to the car, whispering a lullaby in my ear the whole way. She is in the waiting room of the hospital where I sat alone, secretly hoping she would die. In the arcade where I got lost when I was three, found only by following the piercing shrieks of my panicked mother. In the pond where we used to catch frogs. In a bucket of popcorn at a matinee.

She is everywhere.

When I leave the movie, the sky is getting dark. I only have one bottle left. I plan to keep it, but when I arrive at my mother's house instead of my own, I know I do not want to take it with me.

The tree still bears some of her scratch marks, but is much older and smoother now. I manage to pull myself up onto the lowest branch. From there the climbing is easier. I look down and feel a jump in my stomach. When I reach the tallest branch, I must be at least thirty feet off the ground. I do not know how I am going to get down.

I take the final bottle out of my back pocket and find a crevice deep enough to hold her. I smile thinking she would like this choice, but I do not know if she really would.

The sun is settling in for the night, sinking lower and lower behind the distant rows of trees.

I do not feel any more at ease with my mother. I think of returning to the places and gathering her back up to put somewhere I never have the chance of finding again. To pour her out during a rainstorm or put her in the mail with no return address.

I am suddenly upset with myself for not having cried. I see her there alone, more alone than I have ever been, and I hate myself for ever thinking I was the victim For hating her. For spending my life trying to be anything but like her

I remember watching them when I was a kid, Rosalea and my mother, wondering how she could do it, sit there and press her hand to her skin. I could picture my mother flowing into her veins, as though contact were all it took.

Still, sitting in this tree, I wish, just once, I had thought to be the one to sit

beside her, my hand resting on her arm, my presence completely voluntary.

I pinch myself, scratch at the bark with my fingernails, scream out into the surrounding bustling of leaves.

When that doesn't work, I jump.

I regret it the second after my feet leave the gnarled branch, and I wonder what I think I have left behind. I clutch at the branch but miss. My legs kick as though I expect to run on air. I wonder if my mother would rather have fallen than been carried down that fireman's ladder.

I land facedown, my arms collapsing under me when I try to brace the fall. On the ground, I know my leg is broken and possibly my wrist and left shoulder. A pain sears through my right hand, like someone is rubbing my palm with glass sandpaper. I look to see the liquor bottle broken under my hand. I was unaware I had taken it with me.

My mother cakes to my bleeding hand. I leave a smear of rust on the earth, but cannot clean the sticky clumps from my skin.

I hear my cell phone beep. I am sure it is just Rosalea or Paul letting me know they got home safely, that they enjoyed the visit and that we should do it more often. I lay back knowing that we probably will not talk any more often than we used to, that we will not have another visit until something else comes along that gives us no choice.

The backyard floodlight flickers on. I notice the few shingles overhanging the back entrance, the giant patches of paint missing from the siding, the hint of blue and pink ink left over from a fit Rosalea had involving spray paint. I picture the scratched side tables inside, the legs of the antique dining room table that has my, Rosalea's, and Paul's initials carved into the underside, the new tint of red to my mother's beige bedroom carpet. Of the framed pictures of smiling faces filling empty, stale rooms.

I decide, right then, to keep the house, of mentioning, when the realtor asks, something about a stain that cannot be removed.

Jessica Dainty Johns took her first fiction class in college for the simple reason that the idea terrified her. She now holds an MFA from Lesley University, and her fiction has appeared in the online journals *Fiction Weekly* and *Pinion Journal*. While an undergraduate, she was a recipient of the Margaret Woodruff Award for Creative Writing. She is co-founder of The Kinship Writers Association and lives, writes, and works in the Greater Boston area. .

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