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When I was ten, my mother took me to see my first grown-up play, a small local production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. I was so excited I had a hard time staying in my seat. At that age, I could still half believe that the actors were the characters they played, and not just a bunch of local teenagers dressed up in Puritan costumes with fake beards and heavy rouge.

Miller wrote *The Crucible* as a commentary on the infamous Communist witch hunts of the 1950s. I was too young to understand the allegory, but it didn't matter. The play was about treachery and courage, lies and truth — in other words, the sort of thing I saw every day on the playground at elementary school.

I could hardly breathe during the second act, as the awful net of deceit, fear, and malice drew tight around the doomed characters. I listened raptly as the hero vowed to the jury that his wife was a paragon of Puritan virtue. ("There are some who cannot sing — my wife cannot lie.") Then I wept as she did lie in a vain attempt to save him from the gallows. Thirty-five years later, I can still recall some of the characters' lines. Each of their words and gestures seemed surrounded by flames.

By the time the play was over, I was exhausted, exhilarated, and ruined for life. Nothing I had seen on TV or experienced in reality had provided the same extremes of pleasure and agony, beauty and terror.

My mother seemed pleased and a little bemused by my passionate response to the play. She was young then, tall and slender, with short, dark, curly hair and the profile of a Roman boy. She had acted in plays in school and had even been on the radio in college, but shyness had prevented her from pursuing theater as a career.

My mother drove me crazy with desire and frustration. I wanted to *know* her, but she wouldn't let me past her brusque, efficient exterior. She accomplished endless tasks involving four children, a house, and a job, and she rarely let down her guard. She was stubborn and willful, and so was I. No incident was too petty for us to make war over. We fought about the correct way to set a table and whether I had thrown my underwear in the hamper as she wanted me to, or hidden it behind my bed in order to defy her. While she demanded a neat, orderly environment, I seemed to have been made out of curlicues and spilled milk.

Plays and poems and stories gave my mother and me something in common. She had grown up in New York City, after all, going to the best museums in the world and attending hootenannies in Washington Square. Despite my angry and rebellious feelings toward her, I also found my mother impossibly glamorous. Her life in the city had been infinitely more interesting than our routine existence in New England. Though she wore no makeup and dressed in old clothes — we lived fru-

gally in an affluent suburb — I always thought she outclassed the pastel, soft-spoken mothers who surrounded her.

My mother worked furiously to make her family happy but was unhappy herself. Motherhood had been her childhood dream, nurtured through long, lonely years of reading *Little Women* and fantasizing about the large family she would have when she grew up. She baked birthday cakes for us and sewed our buttons back on when they fell off, but we never ended up looking or sounding or feeling like those cheerful families in books. And she never stopped trying to make us that way.

When I was eleven, my mother and I took a train into Boston to see *Hair*. When the young actors emerged naked from under a parachute and sang an anthem of peace and love, I stifled my nervous giggles and grew up a notch.

Several years later, my mother and I went to see a matinee performance of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. That afternoon, we'd had a fight: typical. I was in my teens then, the nadir of our relationship, when every interaction was fraught with conflict. But once the play began, we found ourselves absorbed in Ntozake Shange's exquisite choreopoem, so much more brutal and beautiful than our petty squabbles. When the show ended, we were both crying and unable to speak.

I showed up at high school only in order to go to drama-club rehearsals, which were led by a dynamic woman named Lucy McCaffrey. Lucy really cared about kids, and about theater. I specialized in playing Tennessee Williams heroines who were dying of unnamable venereal diseases. In my senior year, I was elected president of the drama club. I produced a festival of one-act plays and even wrote one myself, with the deathless title *Farewell to Snow White*.

The year I left home for college, my mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She had been having troubling neurological symptoms for years: blurred vision, dizziness. But being sick didn't fit with her Wonder Woman persona. The summer after her diagnosis, we both ran in a 10K race. She crossed the finish line half an hour before I did.

The college I attended was known for its theater department. I went to the drama office and stood outside the door to read the audition list, surrounded by what seemed to me very glamorous girls — with lots of makeup, eyelashes out to here, shiny hair, designer clothes, high heels. These girls seemed so confident. I was wearing overalls, waffle-knit long underwear, and hiking boots — my uniform in those days. My hair was cut — or rather pruned — in a short, unflattering style that resembled a frizzy dandelion. How could I compete? I turned around and slunk out.

For the rest of my undergraduate career, I buried myself in the library, writing lengthy, single-spaced papers on contemporary American poets. I eventually graduated a very successful, and very depressed, scholar.

The logical thing would have been to continue my education and earn a master's degree in English, but I didn't want the ivory-tower life. I already blamed poetry and drama for my awkwardness at managing in the real world: here I was, twenty-two years old, unable to drive, and crippled by a lack

of self-confidence, with an inner critic who could have been employed by the Spanish Inquisition.

Instead I went to Miami to teach English as a second language, leaving books, poetry, theater, and family behind. Actually I took two books of poetry with me. I'd intended to quit cold turkey, like an alcoholic pouring her bottles of vodka down the drain, but I couldn't.

Within a month, I had phoned home in desperation and asked my mother to rummage in the basement for the boxes of books I couldn't live without. A year later, I moved back within the family circle and joined a theater group, rehearsing five rigorous and blissful nights a week to put together a theatrical production based on Shakespeare's sonnets.

The sonnets are obsessed with mortality: "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, / But sad mortality o'ersways their power, / How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" They taught me that most of the things I think I possess are really on loan. I wouldn't get to keep my hair color, or my waistline, or all of the friendships I thought were forever, or the hours I spent working for money, or the money itself, which was always gone by month's end.

The sonnets are in perpetual mourning for the gorgeous world of Eros, which disappears as soon as we touch it. But — here's the amazing thing — even as they mourn the vanishing world, they create a container so exquisite that they capture just a little bit of it. They are like nets thrown into the ocean that come up dripping and empty, yet impregnated with the shimmer of the waves.

I wouldn't know all of this if I had only studied the sonnets on the printed page. To learn to give life to the poems with my voice and body, I had to climb the stairs of a drafty church, night after night in the freezing New England winter, and rehearse for hours with a dedicated band of players. We worked to find the comedy or tragedy in each poem. We crashed into them and failed joyously, over and over again, to grasp the ineffable. Because I memorized those poems, I still have them, even after I've lost the hair color, the waistline, and all those old friends.

For the next twenty years, my family was completely caught up in my mother's long, losing battle with ms. She fought relentlessly, with her typical warrior's stubbornness. She defiantly refused help until she absolutely had to accept it, and then she gave in with total exasperation. Her body, that strong, graceful instrument, had betrayed her. We could only stand by and watch as she wobbled and fell. Still, she'd inch her way down to the basement to do the laundry, clinging to the walls, struggling to accomplish the physical tasks she used to breeze through. Unable to *do* things all day long, she hardly knew who she was.

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