

Momma

Maria Guardino Schreiner

I never liked Tom Petty, but he always makes an appearance on the mother-daughter road trip my mom and I take every summer. My mom loves a sporadic Tom Petty binge. She hums and zips down highways surrounded by trees; she listens like all his slurry words of love and animals and wildflowers are only for her ears. Though she can only understand a phrase here and there, she listens the whole car-ride.

As we drive from day into sunset into darkness, the wind howls and rips at the countryside flowers. The highway is breathing hard, and with Tom Petty silenced, I listen to the roadside song. The notes are high whistle tones. Soon we notice cars slowing into start-and-stop traffic. Warmth comes trickling in slowly, so slow I barely notice it. I feel a warm, steady drip into my veins that starts to get hot. Weirdly hot. My mom shrugs off her jacket and I slip off my socks. The AC dialed all the way up isn't cold enough, and we have no idea why until one moment later.

There's a Jeep, maybe a Range Rover, parked on the far right edge of the road, near the steel railing, completely engulfed in flames. Fire is burning holes through the dashboard, the roof, the windows have completely melted away. It burns so brightly, its heat has reached our car on the opposite side of the highway. Flames stretch towards the sky, doors hang open, parts fall off, and the scariest part, there are no people in sight.

"I hope they made it out okay."

It reminds me of the looks you get in a conversation when something grave is mentioned indirectly. The flicker of eyelashes, the dull glare of the eyes, the tight shift in body language.

"Yeah. Me too."

Later, April: My mom and I speed downtown for a master class and we pray the car's clock is five minutes fast. She zooms into a parking lot, pays the woman in the yellow vest, and we start doing this weird bouncing-run-walk toward the IDEA Center before it's too late. In broad daylight, I stride briskly down Euclid Avenue until I realize my mom is not next to me anymore. I turn around and see her walking, still at a steady pace, but slower. I hang back and walk with her, but my eyes are fixated on the door just at the end of the crosswalk. Mom closes her eyes, her feet start to drag, and she slowly leans up against the brick walls of the IDEA Center and slides down until her forehead touches the ground. Her knees give way and smack the pavement at almost the exact at the same time.

People passing by are staring. My limbs buzz as I try to help her up. As I grasp her forearm and hold her steady, I feel her body pulsing with a hard *thunk thunk thunk*. A woman and her daughter call an ambulance, which my mom begs them to cancel when she regains consciousness. She's fine, she insists. She's fine!

We slowly work our way down two flights of steps, inching and inching along. My eyes keep fixating on her face, her feet, the floor, her face, her feet, the floor. We get to the classroom and I sit her down at a table in an open area. I go to class. She calls my dad. As I take my seat in the classroom, I suddenly notice my blurry vision and the tears streaming down my face, wetting the collar of my shirt. I swipe at my tears, desperately trying to erase any trace of emotion. I don't remember breathing until this moment when I'm trying to hide my chest, rapidly rising and falling. I try to calm down and listen to a lesson that's so pathetically meaningless.

That evening, I sit in a different car on my way home from Playhouse Square. A friend's dad picks me up. He and I talk about school, college, sports, plays, sea turtles, anything other than my mother. It feels like my whole chest is being eaten slowly, achingly. We arrive at my door and he says,

"I'm sorry. She'll be fine."

There it is. The flicker of eyelashes, the dull glare of the eyes, the tight shift in body language.

I smile. I thank him.

Come May: I learn the function of an aortic valve (it pumps blood out of the heart and into the body, located near the left ventricle). Her aortic valve is defective. Her operation has a long scary name and my dad and I bounce our legs in the Clinic's waiting room at 3:45pm. A nurse comes out and shows us to her room. He's re-explaining the procedure to my dad, stating that we should give her time because, y'know, she was dead for a while. I walk in and her eyes are shut. She seems polished, sterilized, and invaded.

I spend my last week of school at the pullout desk next to her bed doing homework every night. I make cafeteria runs and bring back soup, mac & cheese, sandwiches, wraps. She always seems off, always speaks and blinks slowly. Every now and again, she winces in pain and not long after, I hear a *beep beep*. Her eyes close as fentanyl drips into her veins.

One night while I lay next to her, she giggles. "*I'm going crazy.*"

"*What do you mean?*"

She gazes over at me, her heart full and her eyes dark with knowledge and love. She smiles.

"I'm seeing animals. Lots of them."

She softly shows me each spritely animal that slides in and out of the room, where they sleep, their favorite places to hide. She points to the corners, to the ceiling, to the bathroom connected to her cell. She's slurring her words as she gently tells me that her whole chest feels infected. That her new scar is ripping open repeatedly by the weight of breasts. That some demon is impaling her all the way through her body with a hot poker. Her breathing is shallow. Everything stings, and if you catch her on a bad day, it still does.

Now, mom's scar protrudes as if it hasn't even begun to heal. She still laughs and smiles, and gets up my ass about homework, but I rarely hear her sing anymore. It's been quite a long time not hearing the slippery, sweet songs of Tom Petty, reminding you that life, albeit fleeting, does not blow away with a singed car part or a highway flower, but rather sustains the damage done until there is nothing left to burn.