

Coming Through the Rye

by Teri Pastore

The world of 2011 clearly seems to be in unraveling. Unrest, unemployment, and the under-represented occupy our daily lives to the point of being inescapable. What's it all mean? I dunno. It could be a profound cleansing on a global scale; the tipping points that have held for so long are giving away. One thing is sure; a time for change is upon us, and like others, I am not immune to the forces working to create balance. It scares me. I don't know what I am supposed to do, only that I cannot escape an unfocused urgency to *pay attention*.

My mom and dad, Cookie & Bernie have been married for over 50 years, and have been declining for some time. They are currently in separate rehab facilities, separated by illnesses and injury. This is the first time in their 50 years together that they have been separated for more than a week. While I have brothers in Chicago, no one takes care of their parents better than a daughter. The truth is my mom needs me, and as hard as it is to leave my beloved City of Roses, to witness and share in the ending of her life will likely be the single most meaningful ritual of life.

These last three months have been among the most stressful of my life. An entire world collapsed, relationships were tested, a bridge mended, and betrayals and bullies surfaced. The debris field goes on for miles in the hearts and minds of all 7 of Cookie and Bernie's kids, a tattered quilt of his, hers and ours.

For the last three years, I've been travelling back and forth to Chicago, coordinating doctor visits, supplying Ensure, Boost and cigarettes, driving the route to the local ER in my sleep, cleaning, shopping, cooking dinner, doing the dishes, tucking both of them in bed, cleaning up messes not of my doing, and now, giving away my mom's treasures, my dad's sport coats, ice buckets, crystal do-dads,

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and family photos. An era has ended. Lights out. The party is over.

My mom and I were never close in that traditional Hallmark card kind of way. In fact, Hallmark never made a card for the brand of motherhood practiced by my mother, one that said, "Surprise! Tread lightly. If you piss me off, you won't want to meet me in a dark alley."

Just last week, she was yet again in another ER, by herself, confused, yelling, blind in her right eye and unable to speak clearly. 2500 miles away, I felt her every breath, her every unspilled tear, her blind rage. Listening to her over the phone, knowing she was alone, my body shook like a hammer meeting glass. I can't leave my mom untended, frail, terrified, and unable to speak. I knew then I had leave Portland and return to Chicago. The next morning I started to plan for Bella and I to travel home.

Unfortunately, not being one to enjoy hard drugs, I am aware that I am in a landscape of familial darkness, unable to see beyond my nose, crowded by one difficult and desperate event after another, lost, and yet somehow, just now, coming through the rye.

Despite my high dose of Lexapro, I have the same fears others would facing the same circumstances, that I will be swallowed up by jabs and blows, and circumstances over which I have absolutely no control, that I will be ground into paste from the pressures and personalities of a dysfunctional family, that I will have to battle with officious and vicious dogmas attached to medicine, institutions, real estate, insurance, policy, ignorance, and my ultimate destination will be grief.

Yet all of that is trumped by love for my parents, and especially my mother. Despite her failings in the maternal realm, I love my mother more than I love anyone else on this earth. Despite her never knowing what to make of a daughter who was a puzzlement of a

creative creature, who went to college and never married, I know my mother loved me so.

Cleaning out my mother's closet on a recent trip home, my niece Chloe was going through one of her grandmother's many purses and found a letter I had written to my mother right after I had left Chicago 20 years earlier. Due to a serious rift between my older brother, Joe, and myself, (part of the bridge mending I mentioned earlier), I left Chicago to move to Portland.

As I stood in my mother's closet with my niece Chloe, and read the letter aloud, I was shocked to discover I had shared with my mother details about my love life. Good lord! If someone had asked me if I had ever had that kind of relationship with my mother, I'd have sworn up and down no way. But they say memory is selective. Perhaps memory, like a lazy old dog laying in front of a vast vault, needs a nudge every now and again to remember the good stuff, the joy, happiness, fun, laughter, love, dancing, the food, the gatherings, and generosity of family and friends, and the power of beauty and grace to heal.

In the letter to my mother, I talked about my feelings I had for this guy, Cole, and how I had decided to take a pass since "neither of us were in a good place for a relationship." Again, who was that, and where was the insecure, troubled, doubting Teri I always felt myself to be?

I described my reasons for leaving home, bits of broken heart scattered in every sentence. To discover that my mother carried my letter around with her in her purse to, I dunno, read it to others, remind herself of her daughter so far away, to feel closer to me, was to discover a tender side of my mom that rarely made an appearance when we were in the same room. As I read the letter aloud, I wept from the first line to the last:

*Dear Mama,
03/14/1994*

I am retired for the evening in my own little cozy, warm cabin; the Breitenbush River is right behind me and I can hear the waters rushing downstream to the Pacific Ocean. It is very relaxing, a big change from the sirens, ambulances, boom boxes, (and loud TV's) of Chicago.

The situation with that guy I told you about is much better. I like him, but we're very different. He's ½ Native American Indian, and ½ 10 other nationalities. He has blonde hair and blue eyes and his name is Cole. He's a recovering alcoholic, and this is no time for him to go from one addiction to another, and this is no time for me to get in over my head-So we're just friends. And that's fine.

I'm going to Portland tomorrow to get my acupuncture treatment and visit friends, and do a little shopping for my new home! It's so cute! When I step outside in the morning to go to work I see beautiful, enormous, fir trees that stand tall, waiting to greet me. A few days a week I drive into "Town" and work at the Breitenbush office. I drive 10 miles of one of the most beautiful, scenic roads you'll ever see. These are small mountains, not like Colorado at all. They're very gentle.

I love it here. Especially since it is my home now. I feel personally involved in the land. It has strong healing powers. The Indians used this land for healing rituals years ago; they considered it a sacred place. The natural hot springs are one reason.

I know it's hard for you to understand why I moved out here. It's such a different thing for a family member to do. But I felt like in Chicago that TERI had died, that I had no life in me, especially with being cut off from Joe & the kids, and I knew sticking around wasn't

gonna make me feel whole or alive, or I don't know what. I just felt like my world, who I was, ended.

Being out here, on this beautiful land fills me up again-helps me to heal. That's the best explanation I can give you, plus I have an adventurous spirit, (so does Chloe), we're both Aries. Now, on to more important stuff.

The remaining pages of my letter were not in my mom's purse, and have yet to be found.

