

**MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS**

Linda Tabea Streubel

*Mothers and daughters, daughters and mothers, one woman as many women. Women together and women alone.*

I keep a framed picture of my mother on the night stand next to my bed. Surrounded by rocks I've collected over the years and old incense sticks from my travels to Southeast Asia. The nightstand looks like what was supposed to be a shrine but turned into a cluttered mess of talismans and trash. My mother has been living on her own since she was sixteen years old. She never talked much about her upbringing, so I understood early on that she preferred not to be asked about it. And I also understood that it hasn't been an easy one. The little I know about her, not as a mother but a person with a story, is that her mother, a Polish woman, abandoned her and her siblings after re-marrying a German man. She got separated from her siblings after her mother sent her off to a Catholic boarding school. In the summers she stayed at her grandmother's house in the countryside of a small town in West-Germany. I know she hated that place, all the places she had grown up in. The Catholic nuns were mean, *"they used to only let us shower twice a week and braid our hair extra tight if we weren't obedient enough for them"* she mentioned casually, while filling out an application to remove the church tax from her salary. A tax in Germany that gives a certain percentage of your income to the Catholic church. Her grandmother was kind but a woman of little words. And her own mother barely visited. *"That woman might have given birth to me, but she is not my mother."* Whenever she talked about her mother as *'that woman'*, her body would get tense, as if she was trying to keep her blood from boiling over. I've never seen a single picture of my mother as a child, and neither has she. The earliest pictures I have of her are in her mid to late twenties. Those are my favorite. When I look at them, I see a young woman trying to figure out life. Trying to run away from her past. Seeking her own life, a different life. Trying to survive alone. I wonder about all the jobs she's had, for I know she had many – waitress, bartender, painter at construction sites, etc. I am entering, or have entered the age she was in back then, and I find myself seeking this version of my mother. Maybe that's why I keep her picture at my bed site, to feel close to her. To find a friend in her then twenty-something version who, just like me now, was trying to be brave, to be courageous, to strive for an adventurous and full life. I try to find myself in her, and her in me. *"Am I similar to how you were back then? Is part of you also part of me? What parts of you are alive in me?"* I make up stories to answer those questions I don't dare to ask my mother.

The bond and relationship between mother and daughter is a weird one, isn't it? Something so violent, and yet comforting. You had to experience it to understand it; that it is possible to hate someone and still, seek consolation in their arms. I'm sure my mother still loves her mother, that she rejects her only because she loves her, but doesn't feel loved back.

I wonder what it would feel like to be able to meet my maternal grandmother? To see these two women interact with each other, to witness my mother as a daughter.

*"You are mine, you know that? You are my baby"* my mother used to say. She told me all kinds of stories about myself as a child, I remember them like a kind of folklore, something mystic and maybe, untrue, but the believe in it alone was the foundation of our relationship. She used to tell me how I rarely cried as a newborn, only when someone other than her tried to hold me. *"Oh, you were such an angel, everyone in the hospital loved you, but you wouldn't let anyone pick you up, only me."* I don't remember that version of myself, obviously. The nature of the human brain doesn't allow me to have any recollection of that time. But I do remember crying frequently as a child over strangers and other people's hurt. When I saw people miss their bus, I would cry. When someone's bag ripped open on their way home, I would cry. *"Oh, you were such a sensitive kid, I didn't know what to do with you"* my mother says every time she reminisces about my childhood. She seemed annoyed when I would greet people on the street, *"You can't say hello to everyone, you don't know them."* She didn't like being in public with me. Now we laugh about it, *"Hi hello, how are you today? I like riding the tram, do you?"* she imitates me in a high pitch voice, she does so every time we drive to the city together. It has become somewhat of a ritual, a religious act of remembrance. If one day we would take the tram and she would not mention this story, it would feel as if she had abandoned her faith, and with it, me.

I wonder about the people she hung out with back then and what happened to them that she never speaks of them as her 'friends' but *'those people'*. I wonder if she felt lonely and scared, and if she ever had anyone to comfort her during all these years.

She calls me on the phone to tell me about the new furniture in her living room and that she started to renovate the apartment now that my brother and I had moved out. *"Look, I bought this the other day at the flea market"* she holds up a brown flowerpot, it has a yellow sun carved into it, with orange rays that resemble flames. She paces around the apartment to the balcony *"See, this is where I keep it. Next to your plants you used to have in your room, I'm taking good care of them, look how they are blooming, they are doing alright. I water them carefully, well I try to at least, you never know with plants, oh and here..."* I sit and watch her show me everything, even the things she has shown me last week already. *"How have you been lately, are you doing okay?"* I ask as she finishes her tour and turns the camera around to her face. *"Oh yes yes, I'm good. I've been cleaning out the cellar and found a lot of you and your brother's old toys to give away, do you want to have a look at them before?"*

I didn't ask her *what* she had been doing, but *how* she had been doing. *"Oh, that's good, don't overdo it, you know, you should rest a little too, now that you have the apartment to yourself..."* I said. It was quiet for a bit, then her voice softens, the excitement, or rather anxiety, in her disappears. *"Do you need anything? Are you doing okay, baby? If there is anything I can do for you just let me know okay, I'm your mom you can ask for anything."* And there it is, there is the wound. She wants to remain a mother, but her daughter is not only a daughter anymore. There is a woman emerging, and she is far away from her. *"Will you need me, still? Will you call me, sometime? Can I be part of your life, now that you have your own?"* She doesn't say it, she would never, and she doesn't have to. I see a version of my mother

as a daughter, a daughter that has been abandoned once. And then became a mother of her own to build a family for herself, to have something of her own. “*You’re mine. You are my baby.*” I recall again. My mother has never said the words “sorry” to me. Instead, she used to cut an apple into slices, and bring them into my room. This is how she apologizes. I wash the dishes before she gets home from work. This is how I forgive her. And I understand, now I understand. *Mothers and daughters, and daughters and mothers, and the inheritance of women.*