

All There Was Was Silence. (Fiction)



And then the nurse left the darkened hospital room again and the only sound was the rhythmic beeping of the machines. Alone, Emma sat cross-legged in the vinyl-upholstered visitor's chair, her arms crossed tightly across her chest, her face rigid and her jaw clenched silently staring into space. At once she

was zoning, her eyes slightly out of focus but vigilantly aware of her surroundings. Her mother lay flat on the hospital telemetry bed, wired, like the Borg, to the machines that monitored her blood pressure and the second by second pulsating contractions of her heart.

Emma was pulled out of the room, lulled back into her trance by the regular, hypnotizing rhythm of the beep, beep, beep of the machines, over the asynchronous rhythm of her mother's heart like the ticking of seconds on a clock. As she lost herself in thoughts and floods of memories, suddenly the pace of the rhythm decreased by what seemed like half. The new speed, which seemed like the opposite of speed, indicated for Emma that her mother's heart was slogging away in its meager attempt to continue its mission despite the overdose that brought them both here on this rainy Tuesday. The new pace of her heart was so painstakingly slow that it seemed like hours between each beat, hours between each blood coursing pulse. The numbers on the machine read painfully low as Emma forced herself into focus, trying to remain in the present and resist the nagging pull of the past. She caught herself holding her breath and waiting, deathly silent. Then, after a while, her mother's heart rate increased to a more normal pace and Emma exhaled.

She continued to sit like this for hours: clenched, tight, waiting, remembering, thinking, and trying not to think. Her mother looked like she was asleep. How many times had she joked about sleeping like a coma patient, when asked casually in the morning, "How did you sleep?" Now, it had new

meaning. Would her mother wake from this coma that she begged for for so long? Emma wasn't sure. Somehow, she thought that surely her mother would pull through and make it, but there was that nagging whisper deep, down low. She didn't know how to feel. In some weird way she was kind of glad that this happened – but how could she ever say that aloud? Glad was too strong of a word. Relieved was more like it. *Maybe now she will get the help she desperately needs*, Emma thought to herself.

As she shifted in the uncomfortable, vinyl chair in the darkness of the room that was only lit by the glow on the machines and the shaft of light from behind the mostly closed bathroom door, Emma remembered. The sweet, loving, and nostalgic mixed together with arguments and anguish, as life blended itself together so completely, so that no one memory was completely good or bad. Images of their relationship played in her mind. The fading and dying embers of memories, flashed across her vision like a haunted slide show: birthdays, Passover holidays, childhood friends and games, her parents' faces as they fought. Emma, at three, posing for pictures by the big oak tree; Emma, at four, in her favorite white and green gingham dress with the blue fabric flower on the waistband running down the sidewalk into her mother's waiting arms, her mother holding her tightly in a comforting *mommy hug*. The memory held an overwhelming feeling of safety, but now Emma wasn't sure if this was a memory of an actual moment or a recollection from a photograph. It's hard to tell after so many years.

Do we remember events, or slivers of events, by themselves or do we need catalysts, like scents or photographs to trigger the memories? What causes some things to remain vivid and others to blur and die?

Emma and her mother used to love their shopping trips for clothes, shoes, or gifts. They used to delight in eating chocolate truffles out of their waxy paper bag from the ritzy chocolatier in the mall. They held the luxurious chocolate between their tongues and the roofs of their mouths, relishing every bit of the creamy goodness. Some things were clear like the shared pleasures: eating ice cream at the local Friendly's, planting wildflowers in the backyard garden and watching endless hours of their favorite shows on television. But suddenly not much else, was clear and good, not much that wasn't also laced with guilt, anger, fear, yelling, tension, pain and awkwardness.

Her parents fought incessantly when she was little. It was hard to get away from the yelling. She remembered the pillows piled on top of her head to block out all the noise as she desperately tried to hide in her bed and retreat into a safer place. She heard them yelling in another strange room many times while

she sat idly coloring in coloring books with her Crayola 64-count crayons. She waited patiently for them to come out. Only years later did she realize that these were marriage counselors' and psychologists' offices. Many offices. All the same. All fruitless.

Emma was startled and abruptly released from the memories when the nurse came in again to check on her mother. Rosa tiptoed into the room as she slowly opened the door. She was an average sized Latina with short, dark hair. She had warm, friendly brown eyes and spoke in a soft, reassuring voice. They spoke in hushed tones in the corner of the dimly lit room after Rosa had inspected her mother's sleeping body as it lay inert on the beeping bed. She was easy to talk to and Emma had no problem telling her all about her mother's decades-long battles with depression as a self-medicated bi-polar and increasingly frequent anger and outbursts. Rosa listened intently for a few minutes as details of her mother's behavior poured forth: depression, manic episodes, threats to commit suicide along with promises *that she had the means to do it*. Rosa looked at Emma with her warm, brown eyes that were the color of milk chocolate, and sympathetically offered Emma some silent reassurance. Emma said that she wanted to talk to the doctors and definitely wanted to talk to the psychiatrist on duty. "I have to make sure that if my mother wakes up... when my mother wakes up," she corrected as her voice broke, choking back an avalanche of tears, that she gets the care she needs." Emma whispered, "I have to talk to the psychiatrist before she wakes up and *snows* him."

She explained that her mother was the consummate liar, as most addicts were. She had perfected, over the years, ways of convincing almost anyone that she had a firm handle on the Vicodin and really needed it for the constant, excruciating pain. There was an excuse for everything. She had an uncanny way of making the totally illogical and ridiculous seem completely plausible. She could turn the world upside down and make almost anyone second-guess herself until she was unsure of reality. Or was that just what she could do to Emma?

Rosa promised that the psychiatrist would be in to see her in a few hours and it would be at least that long until her mother regained consciousness, if she did regain consciousness. "No one," Rosa said very gently, "knows how much damage the drugs did to her brain. All we know, at this point, is that her heart is in bradycardia. Its beat will be dangerously slowed as the huge doses of vicodin, and the other meds work their way through her system. We will have to see if it levels itself off."

Emma knew only too well about the cocktail of medication her mother took on a regular basis on her own whims. She had a boot-sized shoebox filled with medication: Vicodin, Celexa, Xanax, Wellbutrin, Lexapro, codeine, and the old standby, Valium. Her mother used to talk proudly about her shoebox *filled with legitimate prescriptions given to her by her doctors*. Always a hypochondriac, she made her living going from doctor's office to doctor's office searching for answers to questions, either with the fear of having some deadly, lethal and debilitating disease or the fear of not having one. At any rate, she always left with more prescriptions for her shoebox. Rosa was reassuring, asked Emma if she wanted coffee or water or something, and walked out into the odd bustle of the hospital.

Feeling out of sync with the world, Emma re-situated herself on the upholstered visitor's chair, kicked off her shoes, and tucked her feet in under her. She was slightly chilly and pulled her cozy, gray sweater close around her. Everyone else, who had arrived at the hospital upon hearing the news of her mother, had gone home. Her mother's sister, Aunt Grace, with whom her mother had a turbulent relationship, drove in from Connecticut, but only stayed for a few hours. Her mother's best friend, her only friend after all these volatile years, came for a while, but she also left hours ago. Emma's stepfather...could she still call him that...had refused to come to the hospital. She couldn't blame him after all her mother put him through. He was in his 80s, in frail health and this trauma was too stressful for him. Emma promised to let him know what happened. Now she was all alone listening to the irregular rhythm of a small heart and monitors.

Accustomed to facing tragedy alone an only child, Emma witnessed more than a decade of her parents' battles from the solitary confinement of her bedroom. So why shouldn't Emma bear solitary witness to this latest tragedy of her mother's? This was her lot in life. Emma was angry. She told herself she no longer cared what happened, but as the minutes ticked away, she realized she did care what happened to her mother, just as she would for anyone else. She was eerily calm. Was it strange that Emma was not scared or gravely upset about this, about being here, about why she was here watching her mother in silence without tears? It was not unexpected. It was not a surprise. It had only been a matter of time, actually, and that made her more angry than sad.

Fading back again into a near emotional fugue state, Emma's eyes glazed over as she stared across the dim and somber hospital room. She remembered years ago, shortly after her own daughter was born, visiting her mother during one of her low periods. She sat uncomfortably in her mother's darkened, musty bedroom and nursed her newborn daughter, trying, awkwardly, to

make conversation. Her mother made little sense as she moaned and writhed in depressive agony, eyes closed, on her side of the king-sized bed. There was no physical reason for excruciating pain. It was mental anguish and torment caused by the depressed side of her mother's bipolar disease. Emma was uncomfortable sitting awkwardly on her stepfather's side of the messy, king-sized bed, but forced herself to push past it, and do what she had to. She promised her stepfather, out of guilt, who was at wit's end with her mother, that she would visit, and try to lighten things. So, she held her sweet, pink newborn baby to her breast and tried to engage her mother in conversation. What she got was a shock.

"Ya know," her mother slurred like she was drunk, "you are a terrible daughter. You never come over to spend time with me. You are always busy with that fucking bitch," she raised her shaky hand in a haphazard wave to indicate the baby. "It's her fault that you don't have time for me," she barked. Emma was so shocked she could only gasp and sit there in silence disbelieving what she had heard. Surely, she had heard her mother wrong. She couldn't have just said that about her own granddaughter, but there it was again. "You would have more time for me, if that fucking bitch wasn't always sucking at your tit! What a waste of time! Spending time on *that* instead of with me," she slurred, "when I need you the most."

Emma couldn't stand it anymore and yelled, "how dare you talk about your own granddaughter... my newborn daughter like that!" She quickly packed up their things and slipped out of the bedroom. She told her stepfather what her mother had said and that she was not coming back. But, after a time, she did. She always did. Her mother, as usual, conveniently forgot the incident and denied the whole thing. Emma never got an apology and never got a chance to tell her mother how deeply her words had hurt. Her mother was never able to own her behavior. Even after all the suicide threats in front of Emma's daughter or anyone who would listen, hurtling guilt-laden insults at Emma, and random verbal lashings over midnight phone calls, there was never once any sense of admission or remorse. Emma was left with years of battered feelings and no way to heal.

A few years ago, just as she was putting her daughter down to sleep, the phone rang. On the other end was her mother's sobbing voice begging Emma to come pick her up, "we had a fight and that fucking asshole pulled over to the side of the road and I got out. He drove away, that miserable baby! Come get me now!" So Emma dutifully bundled up her daughter, now a toddler, and drove out to get her mother. Once safely in the warmth of the car, her mother ranted on and on about what a louse her husband was, how he didn't care about her,

and she hated her life. “I want to die,” she sobbed, her face lit only by the green glow of the dash. “I have nothing to live for. I want to kill myself and I have the means to do it,” she threatened. How many times had Emma heard that? *And I have the means to do it!*

Emma was furious at her mother for dragging her into the drama again, but tried to reason with her, tried to get her mother to calm down and stop talking like that in front of her daughter, who was looking scared strapped in her car seat in the back of the darkened Honda. She wasn't making any headway with her at all, and this was only causing Emma to get angrier with herself for trying, once again, to rescue her mother. Then her mother's cell phone rang and it was her husband apologizing, feeling guilty that he left her on the side of the road. She sweetly told him that Emma, her *darling* daughter, had come to rescue her and was bringing her home. The shift in mood was strikingly palpable. Suddenly, she was like midday in July, full of sun, not a cloud in the sky. Emma had to find a way out of the drama. She had to find a way to stop getting pulled in. Each time she swore to herself that she would be stronger next time and not go running, but then the next time would come and she'd run. Why? What did she hope she'd find when she got there? Whatever it was, it was never there. Never. She was always left empty handed.

But here, now, Emma was in the hospital room alone watching her unconscious mother. This room was so different from the darkness of her mother's bedroom, yet somehow the same. Her heart's rhythm was erratic for a time, and Rosa came in to check again and silently smiled, checked her *pulse-ox* and some other numbers on the machines. Emma saw that look of concern quickly pass over Rosa's face before she turned to Emma and said that her mother's heart would probably do this for a while longer and then..." Her voice trailed off and she paused and looked around the room. "...it depends upon how much damage the drugs did to her body and how much damage the years of overuse did to her system. We have to wait and see," Rosa said gently and squeezed Emma's arm. Emma nodded silently. What was there to say?

Emma watched. Rosa slipped out of the room. Her mother's heartbeat continued its out-of-beat rhythm for a long while and Emma glazed over, but listened intently to the machines, to the room, and the noises in the hospital beyond. After some time, the pace changed and the rhythm became a normal, regular sinus rhythm, but before Emma could get too excited or really react at all, her mother's heart stopped beating. There was no pace or rhythm, only the high-pitched squeal of the machine's alarm. Emma stood up but was frozen. A tall, blonde doctor hurried into the room with Rosa, who gave Emma a calm, reassuring look, and they examined the situation. Silently, they stood around

the edges of the bed and watched and listened for a few moments. When the doctor was satisfied that it was over, he nodded at Rosa who shut off the squealing machine and plunged the room into deafening silence. The doctor slowly shook his head, looked at Emma and quietly said, "I'm sorry for your loss," wrote the time on his clipboard, 3:34 am, and then quietly walked out of the room. Rosa put her arm around Emma's shoulder, gave her a little squeeze, and whispered, "take all the time you need. I'll be outside."

Emma pulled the chair close to her mother's side and picked up her hand. It felt foreign and familiar at the same time. It looked like her mother's hand, the shape of the fingers, the wrinkles, the pale skin with the dark freckles, but was clammy to the touch and felt strange in her own. For a long time, Emma just sat next to the bed holding her mother's hand, remembering her, thinking about the journey they took together, the shattering fights, the tears of desolation, the anguish, the love, the heavy guilt, and the constant, ever-present pull. She thought about how complicated it all had been, about how much she held in and accepted with bitterness. There was always a battle, as they screamed, cried, and yelled at each other. How much noise and commotion there were in her mother's overly dramatic episodes, in her life. And now, after all that they had gone through, all there was was silence.