**“Spirit Animals” By Hope Cotter**

“You know I always thought Mom was a lesbian,” I say to my sister Rachel.  We walk and wind our way through the the LegoLand San Diego amusement park.  Our children Henry, James, Teddy and Winston eagerly go from attraction to roller coaster. We had spent all week together on spring break and nearly avoided talking about our mom.  Her, the void, the missing part that our families orbited around. Over time, we decided the story was maybe she would not have been a super grandma, but we told ourselves she was a great mom.

“Right? Maybe she is.  Maybe you are. I mean people thought you were a lesbian in western PA.  Love of musical theater. Short hair.” she says, pulling at my wavy chestnut brown locks that are second place to her mane of flaming red curls.  I know the back of her hair better than she does; I curled it for years in our shared lower-level bedroom before she went on dates with cowboys, businessmen and lead guitar players.  I know that she sees sides of me better than I can see myself.

“I was progressive.” I say defensively, “And I thought boys were stupid. None of that screams lesbian.,” I protect my view that love and sex are atomically bonded and that I was prudish at NYU for personal safety reasons. I was open to all and offered myself to very few.

“Boys *are* stupid.” Rachel says.  This is ironic because she has a son; I have three.  We are women trying to raise the opposite of what we experienced in our adolescence. I have no idea how we are going to avoid repeating the past, unless we accept it.

“What about NYU?” She pokes my side.

“Everyone was a little bisexual in college.” I say dismissively.

“Look at this!” My nephew Henry sprints to the center of a room hosting an open top aquarium pond for children to touch and play.

He says in a hush, “A starfish.” Tiny yellow lego scuba divers flank the creature.

“Wait,” Henry says thinking about his other cousins on his dad’s side who are gendered differently, “Is a starfish male or female?”

*“*It is a *they*.  How beautiful is that?” I think to myself, *the most adaptable of creatures*. Starfish have exceptionally complex living environments.  They navigate being under water pressure and overwhelmed by the tides.  Then clinging to the rock walls the sea subsides; these magical creatures then are fresh air basking in sunlight. It’s a bit like me right now – tender body with nubby tough surface from daily-life exposure, unsure what environment it thrives in best.

“It’s both.” I say, insistently. Rachel nods and tries to pick it up, pulling on its suction cups anchoring it in place. It is a huge one so probably presenting as a female.  Sometimes they break off pieces of themselves and bear male invertebrate offspring.

“When a starfish is tired of watching its fishtank friends flirting, it just reproduces.” I say cheerfully to him.  As if explaining asexual reproduction is a simple task. “It can also transform from female to male. And back again.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun?” I chuckle to Rachel, “Just to be able to do that.”

“I would always choose being a female.” She says to me flatly and she tugs on her backpack, “who wants to be a man?” She laughs deeply. Her Rubenesque frame of translucent skin marked with a million freckles just screams to me ‘I want hold babies.’  She turned her love to animals and hosts a small domestic zoo in southern California at her home.  Great Dane, terrier, shitzu, dozen chickens, a pair of rabbits and the occasional animal sitting for neighbors and our cousins.  She grew a banana farm at the local elementary school and taught the journey of a potato from Idaho in her gardening club. Of course she would always choose being female; she was a mini Mother Earth herself.

“Don’t you feel like you were both the dad and the mom when Kris was sick?” I ask her.  Her husband had a horrible version of throat cancer during COVID, and they were deeply isolated to protect his immune system.  At one point she saved his life by identifying his symptoms as sepsis and rushed him back to the hospital. I am puzzled by where she found the strength, how she coped through the unknown.

“Nah, I was just me.  Why do you get all deep?  You just do it because you have to do it because you don’t have any other choice.”  She bounces happily, choosing ‘what nows’ over ‘what ifs’, and she announces to our set of boys that a visit to get ice cream was imminent.  They can’t wait! We trapse through the amusement park seeing all the plastic creations out made out of lego pieces; replicas of the New York City Skyline, the White House, a mini-Las Vegas strip hosting hundreds of eyes oo-hing and ahhh-ing at the displays. We move toward the concessions arena. The day warms. We place our order, and Rachel, Henry, James, Teddy and I set up at two picnic bench tables to rest.

“Okay,” I say, trying to bubble up some conversation, “If you were an animal, what would you be you?”

 “A tiger.”  Teddy enthusiastically says. He has coveted orange for years, sought out a cat that looks like a tiger and draws them in his spare time.

“A wolf.” Winston nods for approval looking at his two brothers. He is the one who would travel in a pack no matter what.  His big brown eyes wait for the ice cream.

“A red panda.” James says. I don’t see the character match with this spirit animal but his auburn hair does.

“This is a silly question; I can’t be an animal.  I’m human!”  Henry’s blue eyes exclaim.  My nephew is profoundly logical which he gets from his father, a software engineer, and it’s his way of being a little counterculture in the land of imagination.

The ice cream is taking longer than I thought so I string out the questioning, “Well, what animals do you think Rachel, and I would be?”

Teddy’s hand shoots up as if this is a classroom, his slight dimples flash and he bobs his head excitedly.

“You would be a vegetarian lion with a forcefield so other creatures don’t eat you, with rainbow fur.” Teddy proudly proclaims.  The other kids laugh and they forget the question because the ice cream arrives; the moment is gone before it barely landed.

Of all the things I have been called in my life – kind, beautiful, talented – this description of me supersedes them.  It is accurate.

“So much for your starfish, sister -- looks like you are a lioness.” Rachel’s unending positivity buoys me.  She knows it’s been a hard year in my body and mind. Her sister love to me feels entirely untethered and unconditional.

I dig into the chocolate cone to ground myself with food. For years I felt I was able to adapt to my environments and thrive in spaces and places others would be too brittle to bend into. I saw myself as someone who could transform into what a situation required of me.  I was a country girl who grew into an urban woman.  I ‘lived’ in many environments like the starfish. Adaptability was one of my greatest personal strengths for years.

Here, my son, who has known me for a decade, as pronounced me a lioness.  That is how he sees me.  But I see myself as a starfish, ever being thrown in nature’s drama.

“Am I a lioness?” I ask Rachel quietly.

“Yup!” She smiles at me. She side hugs me while holding her soft serve in the other hand. I love being with her. How we ask questions that we cannot answer, how we as sisters hold each other’s hands through the turbulence, how we demand things of our self today to ensure the future self is confident and content we made our best choice.

The day exhausts us. We collapse into her Subaru.  She thumbs through the radio for her music, not the kids.  She selects *Here I go again on my own* by Whitesnake.

I think my son is so right.

I am a lioness, hunting who I am meant to be.