**The Statue of Liberty**

By Hope Cotter

Normal, Normal, Normal.  That’s all I want; I tell myself scrubbing the egg residue off the cast iron skillet in my deep farm sink. Is that so hard? My cheerful children are silent in the other room, building Legos from a recent birthday party.  They wait for me and the clock to agree on the departure to our next adventure:  our first visit to the Statue of Liberty.  The mess from breakfast recedes, and I look around the kitchen for the next thing to do. Our cat investigates leftovers near me in hopes of a morsel. I shoo her away from the breakfast and pet her in the same movement.  I go upstairs to collect the things I carry – hat, purse, sunglasses and recently, lipstick.  It makes me look alive on the outside when I feel a little dead inside.

“Ready?’ I say as I go downstairs and retrieve my car keys.

“I can’t tie my shoes,” Winston says, collapsing with defeat onto the floor.  Being the youngest means you are the clown with the crown, and he has us wrapped around his finger.

“Yet,” I correct him “You can’t tie them, yet.  We are all still learning to do things.”

We pile into the Toyota Highlander with our kids James, Teddy and Winston in the backseat and my husband driving.  I visited the Statue of Liberty once in 1997 with my mom Carol and brother.  I remember being amazed that a foreign country would bestow such a gift.  What does one give to France as a thank you for a large copper woman holding a book and a light? Does she still inspire the enlightenment and power as she did to me back then? Weaving and passing through the industrial build outside of Newark, I see beyond Liberty Science Center, smooth water with a tiny green woman peeking over the horizon.

“Can we get a street hot dog?” Teddy asks.  He is reading about Horrible Histories, a series of books to inform a younger audience about the battles, compromises, and victories of the past. I see myself so clearly in him that it’s a little scary. “Or a pretzel?”

“You just finished breakfast; do we have to immediately talk about the next meal? Are you guys excited? I’ve only seen her once up close.”

“Yeah,” James says, “it’s like part lighthouse and part woman, on an island that used to be a fort. She has a nice color.”

“Why is she green?” Teddy asks, “Is she sick?”

“I think she’s jealous,” Winston says.

“Of who?”

“She’s stuck on an island, by herself, alone with broken chains at her feet, with all this inspiring freedom stuffs. But she is not free.” Teddy says his voice emphasizing the last words. He is a glass both half full and half empty kinda guy. He sees answers to questions that are not presented.  He is an original and stubborn thinker.

“I think she’s free; she’s away from everybody” James says with diplomacy, “No one can bug her.” He immediately poked his brother in the side, and they laugh loudly. Some kind of toussle explodes in the backseat, and I wait for their tiny storm to pass.  I do not intervene.  I do not say stop. I can’t tell if it is fun or not.  They can learn to set their own boundaries. I know these micro moments shape them as much as my mom-ologues do.  I restraint myself verbally from controlling them, telling them what to do.

“Do you have the right exit?” I ask my husband who is our captain and pilot. It is the same road I took twenty-two years ago to see the statue, and I think the same questions arose then. My mom drove exhibiting a country grit in city navigation without GPS. She made me hold huge maps in the passenger seat and detailing each mile from Route 80 until we arrived safely.  She took me to visit NYU and see if I might like the university, the dorms and the programming and then, the requisite Statue of Liberty.

“It’s the Holland Tunnel exit, I’ve got it,” my husband replies.

“You know I feel like the Statue of Liberty is the mother of the USA.  Like she gave us all freedom,” I say this.  I fall sad into my heart, thinking about my last visit when I was so close to my mother and now I am so far away.  I admire my mom Carol the way I do the Statue of Liberty.

My mom Carol has been gone for a decade. We had a falling out. I retain the statue of her in my mind, frozen in time. Her voice was buttery smooth and mild would explain the Dewey Decimal system in the local library that would unlock brave new worlds far beyond. For my childhood, I looked up at her from knee level, gazing at her face, her lightness of spirit and steadfast choices. She had these tiny pearl earrings that would swing by her neck that smelled of vanilla lotion. Her warm brown eyes had all the love she could spare. Her hands were strong ropes that held me up as a child.

Should moms say to their children that there’s liberty for all? It seems disappointing. And unrealistic. For my mother Carol, she instilled this zealous self-care of whole foods (before there was a Whole Foods), and natural products (when you had to make them yourself or find a woodland fairy to sell them to you).  For me, I took these beliefs that I could indeed, be a free woman and have it all – career, family, hobbies and perhaps even a thriving herb garden. And now I am trying to decide what to pass down to these the three little rascals in the back seat. What is freedom? What is liberty? Why am I forcing the family to visit this statue?

The ICON parking garage is full so my expert husband circles until a spot appears.  We pile out onto the street corner, and the children chase the pigeons with fervor. The group lags in pace, complains about the journey, and we board the ferry boat. I love the ocean, so the smell of the air softens my philosophical approach and walk on the deck where I have to pay attention to my steps so as not to fall.

It is cinematic. The approach to the island where the magnificent woman stands tall, glass gleaming in the sunlit late morning. Her shape takes up our view and moment by moment, she has us all craning our necks to see the torch. Her light. I remember going here with mom and thinking it was so magnificent. I hoped today to find that spark again with my family. We walk around the base, exhaust our feet, and take pictures from every angle. We enter the gift shop, and I am ready to spend some green to push away the blues I had from last night.

“Can I have the pencil sharpener?” Winston begs.

“What about this pocket watch?” Teddy inquires and poses like a Sherlock Holmes detective.

“A miniature statue,” James says locating the object he loves.

“Yes, yes and yes,” I say, and we see the exit sign to head back to the ferry boat, glide back across the bay, disembark, and walk to the car.  We stop on the bench to get the obligatory hot dogs and the descend into a quiet car ride home.  The rhythm of the car puts Winston to sleep, and he leans on Teddy who pushes his head into the seat belt. He cries out, yells foul play. I use the last resort item in my purse: emergency lollipops.  They are not actually for the children. The lollipops are my last hold out for quiet. No one can speak when eating a lollipop.

As the sugar spreads into the children, I wait with my last question in reserve. I am curious about their experience with the Statue of Liberty.  I’m hopeful that there was some resonance, a sense of awe.  I know Winston is too little but the older two, maybe. As a mom, I hang my hat on maybe. Alot.

“What did you think?” I say, straining my neck to look at them. Teddy raises his hand, as if I’m a teacher and he’s in class.

“It was pretty…” Teddy’s voice trails off, and I wait for him to complete his thought, “pretty disappointing. We didn’t go up in her eyeballs or face or anything.  I thought we might throw something out her nose. Her original lamp was on the ground and there’s a fake one in her hand now.” He went on and on, describing the inadequacies and how it did not match his vision. I listened understanding that in his view, he wanted more grandeur. I realize that today and the day my mom took us to the Statue are twin days in a sense, mothers trying to show their children ‘what liberty looks like.’

Carol was a beacon of light, strength and knowledge.  She defined the word, mother, to me. She is a fixed and frozen memory, she did not take the grandmother title when it was offered, we have not intimately spoken or connected since I became a mother. So. I have what I have.  Thirty years of love, compassion and unwavering faith in me.  Twelve years of not talking or seeing her. I’ll take those, the reels of memories and place them on the island in my mind where she lives. I can visit her. I cannot build a bridge because the waters are now too deep, and the chasm too wide between us.  She is a lady who built her own life and freedoms far away from mine. She is in the harbor of my heart, but on an island of her own making. My mom showed me her version of a liberated woman, free to be her truest self. She’s my own Lady Liberty.

“Was there a person she was modeled after?” James asks from the backseat, crunching his lollipop.

“No,” I say, “And there’s not many women celebrated in statues or monuments.  I think it’s less than ten percent. She’s rare. Unconventional even. Do you guys want to go again?”

“No, I want Chinese food.  California rolls.” James states.

“More food?” My eyes widen, incredulous at their consumption. My hunger is not physical at all, but entirely mental and emotional.  “Does anyone want to go again?”

“No, I want TV. Do you want to go see the Statue of Liberty again, Mom?”

What I want to do is climb up in her arms made of grace and steel and be comforted.

What I want to say is that you have to hold fast to your freedoms because people will step all over them.

What I want to say is that being a mother is the biggest sacrifice and the biggest reward of my personal freedom that I battle to balance.

“I think so. But it’s enough to know she’s out there for me. For now. Representing the ideal.”