

The Deepest Dive by Caren Gussoff

About this story:

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Comments or questions can be directed to me at caren@spitkitten.com.

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one

My mother has learned to email. Lying on her bed, she speaks into a microphone and software translates everything she says and sends it to me automatically. She is proud of herself; she remembers manual typewriters and before—when she could still write by hand. Her emails arrive daily, sprawling with facts, information, all from the History Channel, which has run continually since her strokes two years ago. This worries my father, who remembers cathode tubes and phosphor releasing dust and heat and light just like small stars. He worries when he has to leave her alone because she is so sleepy and so numb, and with the agnosia, she wouldn't even notice the potential damage, the damage done.

two

I run myself a bath. No matter how many times I dunk my head beneath the water, I can't block out fighting with Allan. I wipe the mirror and pull out a folded lash from a sty. My eye fills with tears.

There are many ways to cry.

Allan does not make me unhappy, as much as I try to be.

There are many reasons to cry. I try and concentrate on one. How all the waistbands of my jeans are too tight. How I buy CDs and there are only one or two good songs and how they are always the songs I already know. My mother lying in bed. How no matter where I look, the clock is always in the corner. How I'd leave and go somewhere but I can't bear knowing that anywhere I go I would come home before Allan did.

three

My mother writes me an email about a program she watched on the Marianas Trench, 37,800 feet below the surface of the Pacific Ocean, two hundred and ten miles from Guam.

Today, I read, I saw a documentary on the deepest ocean dives. It was the 1960s, when most of us were looking up to the sky. Men dove downward, where looking upward was to the surface, the earth the sky itself. Seven miles down into the Mariana Trench. Can you imagine a plunge like that? Can you imagine something, anything like that, my darling? The silence? The fear?

four

When Allen comes home, I know he will bring me a present in apology. He'll walk in quietly, kick off his shoes. Watching me, and lay my gift on my pillow, by my head. He'll press into my, crack my back, the sound of billiards breaking. I won't say anything, and I will fight him. He will try to make me smile. I won't smile.

You were hysterical, Clara, he'll say. Then he'll pin me, my hands above my head, and his stomach in the small of my back, my face turned sideways. He'll move his lips on my cheek. He'll ask, You going to stop fighting me now?

Never, I'll answer and smile. Never.

five

There are many reasons to cry. I try and concentrate on one: my mother's legs, stacked onto a rolled blanket, with veins of Japanese ink.

Her pain isn't what makes me cry. She was always in pain, even before she was in pain. Always picturesque, kneading the rise around her thin eyebrows, headaches.

No, it's that the woman who taught me everything replacing what she cannot remember with facts, information stolen from the television—things she never knew to begin with.

six

The first night I spent with Allan, neither of us slept. I listened to him breath, to the wind pushing up against the windows. He wanted me to tell him everything, and I answered I had nothing to say. I traced the outlines of his scars, his lips, and asked, Should I fall in love with you?

He laughed at that, and pinned me on my stomach. Maybe not, he said, but this was before I noticed the potential damage, the damage done.

seven

My father worries when he leaves my mother alone, but sometimes he just needs to get out, just drive around. Sometimes he feels the falls squeezing in on him. He can't understand how my mother can lie so still, listening to the television. So, he says, he drives around, gets a cup of coffee at the mall. He stops by the supermarket and holds the produce to his cheeks. Sometimes he runs out of places to go, so he goes to churches, museums, the library. I imagine my father there, in hollow stone places with the sound of water dripping whose source can't be traced.

My mother lies on their bed. She's stopped trying to get up. She likes the voices speaking to her. She likes how the sound. She likes, she writes me, what they say.

eight

I didn't want to be in love. But nothing else was holding me down as hard as he was. I moved in with him to an apartment with small windows, where I try and be unhappy, where the light is yellow after a rain.

nine

What's most interesting, my mother writes, was this dive, this dive wasn't for a shipwreck or to win a war, but just because. Just because.

ten

When Allen comes home, I will shut my eyes and pretend I am asleep. He will stand above me and watch. I will try and imagine falling, falling, falling, seven miles into the Marianas Trench.

Clara. I know you aren't asleep. He says, I know.

eleven

I can imagine what it was like, my mother writes. Being pressed between the ballasts in the Trieste bathysphere, 18,000 pounds of pressure per inch pressing down on the steel shell. I can imagine what that was like, my darling, she writes, and I can't help wondering if she means for me or for her.