



This is the story that I am made to tell. I have written pages and pages of other tales, dancing legends and laughing mysteries, choking secrets that fell away from me the minute they dripped on to the page. But I have always, it seems, been working around this one core subject, the one that eludes me and presses in on me at the same time. You see, I think that in the end, we all have one true tale to tell, to tell well, to tell with all the truth and simplicity, honor and respect that it deserves. And that story will live inside of us forever, praying to be let out. But it isn't easy to unravel the chapters of your one story. For me, it is still quite impossible, but it is time that I try. Nothing I will ever write can approach truth until this story is told. And perhaps it is my job to try.

The story — it is my mother's. And therefore, mine. It is built of nothing less than miracles and tragedy. It is nothing more than the story of one person. It is the only thing that makes me cry, in the deepest [pocket](#) of myself, because it is an untold, unfinished story of the highest importance. The story actually sings in me every time I breathe in, breathe out, every time my eyes [lift](#) to see the air and its tingly life, every time my hip aches or my hands sing, or my cheeks puff up in sickness or cold. But no matter its majestic significance, its indelible mark on my life, I still have never been able to tell it. That is the hole I am trying to fill.

1994, spring, a school day. My father, for some reason, drove me back from school one day. This was very unusual, since my father spent more than half his time in England during those years, and a great deal of time in [other countries](#), as well, all as part of his job. He was rarely around, and when he was, he certainly wasn't picking me up from school or anything else. Either way, he drove me home on this particular day, and as we approached the driveway, almost at our house, he told me an interesting piece of news. Your mother, he told me, has been sad for a long time. You know, how people are sad, and if they stay really sad, they should do something about it. Your mother, he said, is depressed, and she went to a doctor about it, and she's going to take medication now, so things should be fine. He told me it was nothing to worry about, really, and it didn't change anything about my mother.

I sat in silence. In that car seat, the front seat of our old blue tank of a car, my mind stopped working somehow. I couldn't fathom what he was telling me. My 14-year old brain was incapable of understanding this. It simply didn't fit into the world that I understood. My mother, focus of the family, gargantuan epicenter of life and love, was sad — no, more than sad, so sad that she had to see a doctor, she had to take medication. And when my mind did begin to work, in the days, weeks, years that followed, my hesitant mind began to ask the frightening question, why? This question was risky; the potential answers made me topple on the verge of a wholly new and frightening realm. Why was my mother, so intensely and entirely involved in my family's life, so sad? Were we, in fact, the reason for this sadness? In my 14-year old selfishness, I could only question how it would affect me, my life, my image of my mother. But in time, after the initial fright and weakness that the news brought me had waned, I began to realize. I began to realize something that catalyzed this story, or maybe just picked it up, for it had started with the beginning of my mother's life, or maybe even before that. It was the realization that my mother was her own person, and perhaps she had an entire life, an entire emotional and physical life, which had nothing to do with me. Or that, in some ways, I couldn't — or wouldn't — be part of.

1993, spring, a weekday night. I was doing something in my room, which was on the second floor of my old house. I can't be positive, really, that I was doing schoolwork — I could have been doing any number of things, ensconced in my little world of middle school activity. I heard the phone ring, and I heard my mother answer it. I was uninterested, really, in what was going on downstairs, in the kitchen, the hub of my family's life. Until I heard the screams. I have never heard a sound like it, and I don't think I will ever find the right words to describe it. More than a sob, much less than a shriek, it was the wailing of heartbreak, cold and raw, uncomprehending and terrified. It was coming from my mother.

In the bittersweet realm of hindsight, I can see myself that night, rushing out of my room and coming down the stairs, seeing my mother at the foot of the staircase. I can see my middle sister clutching her, hugging her as she gripped the phone and rocked into it, in a daze, horrified. I can hear her words, "Didi. Didi." Her sister. Over and over again. I didn't know what to do. And here's where my hindsight fails me. What should I have done? What could possibly have stopped that most irreconcilably horrible and senseless misery from rushing onto my mother in great waves, in paralyzing fits? She had lost her older sister, her only sibling. The call was from India, from a world away, from family members who must have been in as much shock as she was, and I had no idea what to do. And at the rotten core of my reaction, I had no idea that this was as important as it was. I couldn't understand my mother's pain, because I couldn't even conceive of losing a sister, of losing a family member, of almost entirely dying along with a loved one. I know that I failed my mother then, weakly attempting to hug her and being silent when words could have, perhaps, stemmed the blood and sadness of that moment.

This is a moment in my life that I have revisited over and over again. To me, those seconds somehow hold the essence of my mother and me, of our life together and our lives apart. I know that it is one of the darkest chapters of my mother's life, perhaps the worst, and that even thinking of it, I am somehow digging up the tragedy all over again. Even if I never mention it to her again (and I am terrified to talk to her about it, even now, years later), even if I am simply thinking of it in my head, I feel that it is somehow re-opening wounds that never really healed. But somehow, if I could understand that night, those words that were coming out of her mouth, really understand, really hear her, if I could only hear her, my questions would be answered.

My mother's depression changed her life. It also changed my life, because our lives are each other's. She is mine in a way that no one else will ever be, the one who presented me with life, the one who searched beyond meaning for a way to make me a woman. And I am hers, forever and after, and my fears and disappointments are hers. I was forced to understand her, more and more, through the ways that her emotional swings captured her life and sent her reeling. I could hear her cry, in the soft darkness of her bedroom, and it felt like tender shavings of my heart were being littered all over my belly. There was nothing I wanted to see less than her puffy eyes when I came home from school, or the way I saw her shut down as my father yelled at her. There was nothing I wanted to do more than to somehow stop it, or help her. But just as she could not stop her own emotions, I could not lessen her misery. I pretended not to see, or I offered measly pats and hugs. I felt I was watching a movie, and stepping into the movie would have entailed being badly hurt.

She should have received so much more from me. Hell, she should have been able to expect me to be there for every inch of her suffering, to go through every moment with her. I should have cried with her in the mornings and listened to her aches in the night. I could have told her that she was beautiful. I could have bought her roses every day for a month, or videotaped a sunrise, the time of day she always loved best, so that she could watch it any time she wanted. I could have sprayed her pillow with her favorite scent in the afternoon so she could still smell it at night. I could have learned her favorite song on the piano and sang it to her. I could have written her letters, telling her that she kept my life together, that my respect for her doubled everyday. I could have done countless errands for her, to make things easier, to help her out. I could have... but I did nothing. I failed her, again and again. I shirked any duty, any weight I had in this familial drama. I was the baby in the family, always the last to know about anything, always the first absolved. I let my sisters handle it. I let my father ruin it.

Every time I asked myself why my mother was depressed, the answers came hurtling at me before I could close my mind to them. I tried not to think about the whole thing for that very reason — the shocking way that my mind could shoot up infinite stories and incidents, variations on a theme. The theme was the way my mother was treated. Badly. By us, her family, her very soul. I knew my part in this was not the greatest, nor the least. For none of us could have the least responsibility, we were all tied to it, eternally. But the memories came up regardless of my mind's insistence on forgetting. My mother stopped cooking almost entirely, and I think I mentioned it once. Her answer was bone chilling. For years, she said, no one appreciated her cooking. She was tired of never being thanked. And there they were, ghosts of the past years ready to find a voice in my head. I remembered my father continually making comments about her food, my sisters and I picking at our plates, fussily complaining about her dishes. Asking her to make non-Indian food. My father telling her that her food smelled bad or tasted funny. And the pain of those thoughts, startling and ever fresh, sent me spinning. I should have apologized. I did nothing.

I heard her telling one of my sisters the reason she had stopped quilting. She had been a novice but very passionate quilter: she made a quilt for each other us three daughters. Mine was red and white, in big circles and creamy interlocking moons. It was absolutely gorgeous. But she said, to my sister (she should have been able to say it to me, I can't help but think. She should have been able to say it to me), that our father was the reason she stopped. He said that quilting wasn't classy, it wasn't an elegant hobby. It wasn't something she could talk to his colleagues' wives about. He suggested golf, or going to art auctions, or bonsai trimming. She abandoned quilting, not because she agreed with my father, or because he made her, but because she was tired. Of defending herself against the bullshit. Of being antagonized for what she wanted to do.

And these were just small examples. I cowered under the weight of them, knowing that if I was burdened by their truth, she must be in exquisite misery. I knew that if I saw things from her perspective, I'd have to accept some dark realities about my family. I was afraid of that knowledge for many years. But as time passed, I went through my own pain. I faced my own struggles of recognition and frustration within the family and without, and I began to understand my mother's tears. It was inevitable, really, because my mother is in me, and to turn my back on her story would have been the gravest injustice. And so I am still going back, overturning memories to face the horrid worms and festering mold underneath them, trying to face my feelings for my family.

As I have traveled through those years, wandering through happy times and finding pockets of sadness, as well as remembering shots of joy in cloudy echoes, I have had intense feelings of hatred towards my father. My mother's counterpart and partner, as well as her jailer and nightmare, my father is a complex man. For every painful moment I blame on him, I know that there is a moment of glowing warmth right alongside it. I only wish that the ratio of sadness to happiness did not have to be so high. I only wish that he could have realized the effect of his words, his mumbles, his actions, his reactions. I only wish he could have been a different man to my mother. My wishes will never erase anything; it will only serve as a wedge between us. But I wear my anger towards him like a badge: it's a badge of honor for my mother. It means that I can't forgive what he did, whether he understood it or not. It means that I will never put up with someone like him. It means that I can laugh with my mother and never forget that she fought for those moments of laughter through years of pain, greatly because of him. It sounds harsh. The words appear like the cold claims of a bitter woman, and they are difficult to write. But their harshness is tempered by my continuing, yet mistrustful, love for him. I still love him, but I will never defend him.

My aunt's death, my father's treatment of my mother, my mother's depression, my reaction: they sparkle like dangerous cut edges of a prism, enticing me with the illusion that I can see all the sides of the story. I know they are only details in a life that stretches far beyond all of these things. I know that I can never know the real truth, about any of the above, or the future with my mother. But I can sit with her now, while she's cooking (she likes to cook again, and her food has never tasted so delectable, so fulfilling), while she's reading the newspaper, while she's dressing for an important meeting or fundraiser. I can drive down a road and sing old songs with her. I can wander through parking garages with her, trying to remember where we parked the car. I can take pictures of her while she's on the phone, causing her to get angry and flustered, all the while trying not to let onto the caller that her children are acting like idiots. I can hug her so hard it hurts my ribcage, after my plays, after her arrival back home after a trip. I can fight with her and erupt into giggles in the middle of it, watching a smile spread slowly across her stunning face. I can imitate her accent and laugh as she makes fun of my compulsive shopping. I can make her tea just the way she likes it, after she gets up from a nap in the sunroom. I can see her yellow Prozac tablets on the island in the kitchen, and remind her to take one. I can still see the silence on her face when my father tells her she's acting like a child.

I will always be searching for a way to tell this story — and a way to finish it. I want to be able to capture it in all its pristine loveliness and heart-rending anger, and I want to be able to say that it will end in a burst of eternal joy, a sort of enlightenment. I can't say that, but I know that it's too much to ask. I am happy with what I do know. I know that our silence is over. My silence, in the back seat of my parents' car, at the bottom of the stairs, in the shadow of adolescence, has buckled and given way. And she has ended her silence, as well. Her voice is slowly unraveling, testing out the new world in which it sounds more glorious than it ever has before.