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## On Bruised Knees

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# On Bruised Knees

You're four and sitting on the white bedsheets as a nurse cleans out your mom's c-section incision that refuses to heal. He's all smiles as he sterilizes the open wound, making jokes to your mother, whose eyes are shut tight. His assistant appears a little more sensitive, trying to hide the bloodied gauze from your prying gaze. Curiosity triumphs over any sense of self-preservation, so you stick around. The scene is reminiscent of Hemingway's "Indian Camp," just a little less bloody and a little more contemporary. Your mom turns her head away from you but can't manage to stifle the occasional hiss of pain. You're still perched next to her like a loyal little bird, but can't seem to leave your post to comfort her. She's been reduced to an open wound. These sessions are where you learn what sepsis is and just how lethal it can be.

You're five when you decide you don't want to be a mother. You own baby dolls who won't die from SIDS, the mysterious phenomenon that you had heard about on some TLC show, so they'll have to do. You tell your mother that you'll never have children, even when you're thirty, which seems like centuries away. But, again, you're five and haven't quite figured out the difference between minutes and hours. With a laugh, she tells you that she felt the same when she was your age. This is the first time you remember feeling fear. It is all too familiar now.

When you're six, you tell your mom that she's like Cinderella, your current favorite princess, because she's "always cleaning on her hands and knees." Being a mother means cracked palms and sweat, and you've pledged yourself to being clean and whole, like Cinderella post-fairy godmother. Every time you look your mother in the eyes, you hear her wistfully recount sitting in the back of her high school boyfriend's truck and drinking grape soda. Your mom loses pieces of the woman she used to be each time she bends down to pick

up a rogue Cheerio that strayed from your little brother's highchair. Where is her fairy godmother? Where is her grape soda?

You first start going to church at eight as per your father's requests. You supposed he wanted to put your baptism to good use. Every Sunday, you would panic upon waking up, dreading the large cold room and the monotonous hymns. You try to bury these mornings, but memory prevails. The most memorable service was about Mother's Day. Towards the end of the service, the pastor asks all the mothers in the room to stand up to be appreciated and applauded. Your father misunderstands the request. He thinks the pastor wants all future mothers to stand. He tries to pull you and your sister up into standing positions despite the ache in your knees from coming up from a kneel too fast. With his hands around your wrists, he grits into your ear, "If you don't stand up right now, you won't have technology for a week." This threat scares you. You're eight and addicted to *Minecraft*. How else are you supposed to spend your time without the game? You and your sister stand for the longest three seconds of your lives before slamming down into the pew, heads down, cheeks ablaze. Shame has coiled itself in between each individual rib, snaking up into the cavity your heart lies in. You do not repeat this story for another five years before it hurts less. Your mother doesn't even remember it. For eleven years, you do not know exactly why you were so ashamed. But now you do. You were being groomed to be a mother. And that was terrifying. You saw the ferocity of your father's desire to be a future grandfather, as though your worth was aligned with your status as a prospective bearer of menstrual cramps and children. You do not want to be Mary, who was forced to carry a child because of the will of the Holy Spirit. You think you deserve more autonomy.

Your father and his absurdity is stained on you like red wine. You know how tough that shit is to get out from your seventh grade stint with Mrs. Ristau, your unforgettable home economics teacher. Every other day, in between sewing tutorials and laundry dos and don'ts, you listen to her tales of being a tireless wife and mother. You wonder how she's still standing. She laughs when recalling how she got rug burn from scrubbing the carpet on her hands and knees while her husband shouted at the TV, watching a particularly rough tackle. You and your female classmates are baffled. There is nothing funny about existing just for your usefulness. Hearing this story makes you, for the first time in your life, want to fail a class. If you learn nothing, you will not have to take care of men. Your napkin folds get sloppier, and suddenly you forget how to fold ingredients into your batter mixtures. The guys in your class elbow each other and grin. You're certain they have the same smiles as their fathers. Every night, you see your mother tend to your father's every need. She doesn't even eat dinner with you anymore, not even her favorite

meals. The man she married is too demanding. This is motherhood. This is wifehood. You don't want either.

In tenth grade, when your best friend walks into a church next to her mother's coffin, you don't let your tears escape from the confines of your waterline. No tears of yours can resurrect the mother she lost. There is no use trying to water a flower that has already started to smell of the sickly sweetness of rot. The bagpipes outside the church walls wail into the gray sky. They sound as shrill as a hungry newborn. Three hours later, after her mother has been buried, you sit next to your friend in a local diner across from her father, who is now a gutless willow tree, which is how you'd describe her mom, too. His suit is too big, cheeks too gaunt. He is hollow. You almost write "fuck" in cursive on a napkin, because *man* this fucking sucks. Your best friend stops you. Since then, her house has felt empty. There is a stillness that her mother used to occupy. She was the glue that kept the seam of your best friend's life together, and now she is gone. This understanding allows you to reinforce your anti-motherhood sentiment. You will not permit yourself to be depended on so heavily that your loss disturbs the very foundation that your children had been growing up on.

The next thing you know, it is the summer of 2020 and you are cleaning out your hoarder father's garage. Quarantine had left you stir-crazy and anxious to remove all traces of him from your life. You come across a mysterious jug labeled "poisen." The man can't spell. You think it's funny. It is then that your mom laughs. With a smile, she speaks of how antifreeze cannot be detected when testing for drugs, something she picked up from one of her *Forensic Files* binges. Her eyes harden into obsidian despite the glare of the sun. Here's the important part: when she gives you her bank account information in case your father kills her with the sweetness of antifreeze, do not freak out. You are allowed five seconds to silently panic before she starts to furrow her eyebrows and worry that she should not have told her seventeen year old, who can't go to the dentist without taking Xanax, that she feels her end is near. You have spent your entire life trying to calm the waters your mother has to sail on. You cannot do anything this time. You are not Poseidon. You are Medusa. It is better to look away.

You grow up thinking that motherhood means being torn in half from your center, going hungry, being on your hands and knees like you're praying. Being a mother often means engaging in the affairs of dangerous men. Men who don't nibble. Men who sharpen their teeth with pocket knives and devour. Motherhood is perilous and sacrificial, and you cannot afford to lose more pieces of yourself. You are aware that there are mothers who happily choose the lives they live, who smile when stirring in ingredients for a meal meant for five people. But that is not you. You were not meant to be soft and pliant. You were born with thorns.

Logically, you also know that not all mothers are wounded creatures or broken women. But you were a pink, fleshy child who grew up being nestled against the breastbone of a skeleton. Your mother was a woman slaughtered by motherhood and its expectations, who unconsciously led her daughters into the house of a butcher. You were a pitiful “for just seventy-nine cents a day...” child who grew up to be incapable of caring for your beloved fuzzy cactus, Frank. You were a shelter dog to your friend’s mothers who wanted to nurture you, to feed the starving dog that you were. You don’t know anything else. You are a victim of motherhood, a redness that metastasizes. You want no part in it.