

## Oval

During the last weeks of her life, once, I wiped my mom. She was dying of ovarian cancer and chemotherapy and was irregular.

Yes, wiped isn't the word. Cleaned is better.

Like cleaning a window.

Or a bowl.

She was incredible. Distended is the word she used. "I'm so distended," she'd say. And she drooped forward like a stocking full of sand.

She had a hard time walking. There was much Fentanyl floating in her, and the chemo. The patch on her stomach that numbed her discomfort also numbed her self-consciousness, spun her vulnerability and made it funny to her. She was glassy from despair swaying towards glee when she said:

"David, there's shit in my pants."

"Uh oh," I said.

Then confessionally, "David I shat my pants."

"Shit."

"Would you be willing to clean me up?"

I always had a physically affectionate relationship with my mom. If I encountered her seated I often came up behind her and played with her hair or rubbed her shoulders.

"Ok," I said.

I helped her shift into the bathroom and dock at the sink. She gripped the sink with both hands then keeled forward bouncing off the recognition of her own drugged eyes in the mirror, her head and her

reflected head repellant. She settled with her face tipped as if examining her mustache. Her half-lidded scrutiny maintained an air of distance alongside whatever thoughts her upper lip and nostrils were provoking.

“I’m bald.”

She lifted an eyebrow and looked at me in the mirror.

“Well?” she said, repositioning her hands on the sink. “I have to support myself.”

“You don’t,” I said.

She sniffled, unsure what I meant. Her eyebrows went up then her head, then her head fell forward and swung.

“I’d like them off please.”

Her pants were heavy.

“There’re gloves under the sink,” she offered.

I looked through her legs at the cabinet under the sink then back up into the mirror. She exhaled impatiently.

“Take them off, I’d like them off. Off off.”

“Ok,” I said.

It didn’t take much to make them fall. The pants had a sewn-in liner intended to contain this sort of thing but she should have been wearing another layer. I went and got a plastic bag from the bag of bags and tonged them in with my thumbs and index fingers. I tied the bag and brought it outside.

When I returned to the bathroom she was humming. There was a washcloth hanging next to the sink and a bar of soap resting in a puddle of itself. I reached between her bracing arm and her body and made the water warm. I wet the washcloth and pressed it against her forearm so she could feel the temperature.

“Good.”

Starting around her ankles, I decided to clean her feet even though they weren't shitty. I wiped the tops of her toes and her bunions and along her insoles and the long tendons. Folding the cloth to refresh it, I worked my way up her calves without looking up. Her legs were pallid and laced with veins and I traced one with my eyes to the back of her knee.

There, when I was six or seven sitting in the back of a cab with her, the veins in the back of her hand were fat under her skin and I remember nudging them back and forth over the bones, shifting the blue from one side of a bone to the other. I couldn't imagine then having hands that looked like that with the inside so visible. It was hypnotic. As I pushed the veins around, her hand became bigger and more translucent and the rest of her faded from the seat.

"Stop."

She was barely audible. I looked up.

"Stop?"

"No... sorry, don't stop. I was thinking."

"What were you thinking?"

"I don't know, I think I sort of fell asleep..."

Her ass there, at my crouched eye level, was wide and white and deflated and dirty and I couldn't quite see it. It was like being in an elevator with a celebrity, the little gates in me were all fluttering...

"...Unsure."

I stood up and rinsed the cloth, put my hand on her shoulder to steady myself. Her eyes in the mirror were closed so I looked at her face. Bending at the knees and glancing down intermittently I wiped up the back of her left thigh cupping the shit to contain it then rinsed. I wiped up the back of her right thigh gathering the shit and rinsed again. The mirror over the sink was ovular.

"Oval-shaped," she mumbled. "That's not what ovular means."

The mirror over the sink was oval-shaped with postcards and photographs tucked behind it. The postcards and photographs were arrayed like feathers in a headdress around her reflected face. Her soft cheek bones were there, our shared nose in the middle, in the mirror.

Above her left eye like a horn there was a picture of our shih tzu Monday. Monday's left eye was frosted with scar tissue. When Monday was a puppy we washed her with my mom's shampoo so they smelled alike when they were both clean.

"Did I ever tell you when you were born you were bright blue?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were bright blue for a second then you turned red."

Her eyes were still closed.

"You were bright blue! Like a..."

Eyebrows up.

"...like a doll. Like a blue doll."

She grinned. She was amused by her flat simile. I turned on the faucet again to rinse and re-warm the cloth.

"Just for a second," she said.

"No, you haven't."

I took a step back to assess with the cloth draped over my right hand. I forced myself to look unflinchingly at her bare bottom half. It was radiant.

"I thought you were dead. I remember I tried to scream but I couldn't. Then your face filled with red but your body was still blue like one of those things..."

"Some weird doll you've seen?"

“No! One of those pops...”

Her lazy grin.

“Pops...”

“Icees? The clear tubes. The blue tubes. Different colors. You pinch them...”

“Oh right. They're called something.”

“...Yeah It was so strange! The tubes you pinch and push the ice out. I think it must have been a hallucination but I've thought about it looking at you throughout your life, pictured your body blue.”

I rinsed the cloth again and wrung it out.

To the right of her reflection there was a picture of us, her and I in the shallow end of a pool. I was nine or ten wearing a white speedo and she a black one-piece. Her pubic hair escaped it everywhere. I was holding her in my arms as if I'd just rescued her from a fire. Her 180 pounds were buoyant in the water but I could feel her mass in my arms, her fat hugged and taught under the suit. I remembered the thrill I got from that. Like holding a seal. We're both looking out of the picture proud.

Her eyes in the mirror were open then too, looking at me looking.

“Where was that?” She said.

“Yeah where do you think, the Poconos?”

“Coulda been.”

I looked down.

“When you were one and you were all sick with toxic shock syndrome there with that fever and I cooled you down by putting a frozen turkey in front of a fan... you were blue then...”

The cloth draped over my right hand dripped once on the floor.

“...even though you had a fever you were clear blue. Then when you got your head stuck in that fence at 91st street, blue. When you broke your pinky...”

I began wiping up the outside of her ass.

“...faintly, a bit, when I found you drunk that time with all the fruit. And god, when you had your surgery...”

Her flesh bunched.

Jutting out from her chin there was one cut row of a contact sheet, four pictures of her when she was sixteen taken moments apart. She’s wearing a large flannel shirt flirting at the camera, her hands hooded in the long sleeves. She’s performing for a man, someone older.

“...you put your hand on that old radiator and got a blue cast! You’re very clumsy. But it was blue that cast...”

The photos had not been there long and they felt out of place. They were found in a box in the attic of her younger brother’s house after he died.

“...you were so young with that cast. A baby. It was too much, too adult... like glasses or a fedora or like when animals wear sweaters. Nobody wrote on it...”

Her younger brother John was two and my mom was eight when their father died. Their mother fell into despondency so Mom stepped into mothering.

“...I wish I’d drawn something on it. John had a cast when he was a baby and I drew all over it. There are pictures of that. He used to smash things with it. He broke a fishbowl.”

When she was ten she was tall and overweight with oily skin but by the time she was twelve her body had arranged itself into a shape that older men felt entitled to. She had her first consensual sexual encounters, in her words, when she was thirteen with her father’s first son Joel, her half-brother. He was twenty.

“We used to hypnotize each other, Joel and I. We learned from a book.”

“Yeah you’ve talked about this.”

“First I’d fall and he’d catch me. Then he’d fall and I’d catch him. Then I’d fall... that was the first step. I always tensed up when I leaned back. He couldn’t remember his childhood and he wanted to, but whenever we did it he always got stuck at a pretty old age. I started talking to him like he was a baby one day, singing songs to him. I put a towel around him like a diaper and I was singing to him when he opened his eyes suddenly and started yelling at me and beating my chest with his fists in a tantrum and I had to hold his wrists and press down on him till he shut up..”

Her voice was gaining clarity. She was all clean except for the middle.

“I wasn’t attracted to him after that. It made me not want kids...”

I put my left hand on her back to steady us both and slowly pressed the cloth into her. She stopped talking.

Even veiled by the cloth it was a charged touch. Bright like touching a reptile.

“You ok?” I said.

She was sort of squinting now. I tried to make my hand wide to disperse the touch, to make it less probing.

“Yes.”

Her face, her mind was suddenly very awake. She looked at me in the mirror and smiled with concern, her head resting against something unseen.

“Are you ok David?”

I folded the cloth and pressed in again, tuning the pressure. I closed my eyes to feel the touch on my own body, behind me.

“Am I blue?”

I felt her weight shift to the left so I withdrew the cloth. When I opened my eyes she was holding her right hand over the mirror to hide my reflection.

“I took such good care of you.”

“You really did.”