

AUGUST WIND

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"What do I need this for, I can't even be buried in it!" My mother frowned, as I stuffed the new Hawaiian sarong back into the shopping bag. With the car quickly packed, we began our panicky ride back to Stowe. The temperature sky rocketed to close to 100 that first week in May, 1990, and my mother had only heavy woolen clothes at my house. At her favorite department store she was too tired to prowl through racks she used to tear through excitedly, but sat quietly while I brought dresses to her. She settled on a plum and guava dress I wasn't sure she'd ever wear, but only after I tried it on to make sure if she couldn't wear it, I could.

I thought my mother might die in the car. She'd eaten so little the last few days. Since Bambi and a book of German stories where a child plays with matches and burns her mother up, I'd had fears of my mother dying. We'd been extremely close, without boundaries, it often seemed, as tangled at times as Siamese twins. My sister pointed out that usually if one twin died, the other did too.

Though my sister and I had not spoken for several years, we were flung back together when my mother, who *had* been getting thinner, suddenly couldn't eat. Although diagnosed with flu and dehydration, after years of saying she didn't want my sister or my sister's husband, a physician, to be contacted about anything, any health problems, she agreed, since I was going to be traveling and lecturing in Hawaii and California, to go to my sister's just to get her strength back.

My sister and I had ordinary childhood rivalries. She was petite, thin, blonde, a beauty with a lot of friends. I did well in school, skipped grades, wrote and painted but was shy, fat with glasses. I suppose we each longed for what the other had and could do. In school my sister wrote a story and was accused of plagiarism, something no one could prove. Perhaps, since she is a good writer, she had ambivalent feelings about my writing, the poems I'd published. Once my mother read me one of my sister's poems that touched me and I wrote a poem in response that was to be the title poem of a book, *KISS THE SKIN OFF*. Days before going to press, a night after I'd told a class that writing about family is a good place to start, I found a message on my answering

machine from Joy that she was seeing a lawyer, would sue, if the poem wasn't removed. She called the publisher too. I was hurt, then, angry. I called a lawyer. It wasn't a legal issue I was told but a family one. I took the poem out, feeling my sister was more important. For a year, things seemed alright between us. I helped her through something very difficult for her, something she said she couldn't have gotten through alone.

Then, a car accident that slashed my forehead seemed trivial to her and my mother felt my sister was becoming a stranger, someone she didn't know. My sister and I didn't talk at all until that winter of 1990. When I got back from the west coast, my mother, who I thought was eating, gaining some weight, had another day when she couldn't eat or swallow.

After throat X-rays, the doctor drew my sister and me together and told us that unless he was wrong, my mother had inoperable cancer, had a few months to a year left. Dazed on valium, my mother waited under a blue sheet on the examining table. Still high, she joked that she'd be happy to take a drug the surgeon offered since it was a Merck drug and she had that stock.

Joy and I had promised mother she could come to my house if she had the tests. Even before this bad news, the stay in Stowe was stressful for both of them. My mother said she felt she was in jail, caged like my sister's turtles. My sister said mother was difficult, rude. Still, Joy was sure I could not properly care for my mother. "Don't forget, *you* are the poet. You write. I," she insisted, "take care of sick and dying people and animals." Somehow my mother and I wanted to believe that if we got to my house, she'd perk up, as she had often in the past, and be ok.

Shopping and eating out were what she loved to do. One night, everything seemed the way it had been. Her voice had a bell like quality I'd forgotten was missing. She ordered and ate salmon. In her new blue suit with lipstick, she looked lovely in the veiled light. It stung when she was reluctant to wear the suit, when she said she didn't want to wear it out. I felt as I had when she asked me to get rubber sandals for her, asked me to get 20 pair so she'd have enough to last, then revised the number down to 7.

After two weeks at my house, the tests came back. Inoperable cancer of the esophagus had been confirmed. My mother didn't want to go back. She didn't want to know anything more about "good" and "bad" cells. I was scared. My mother couldn't walk more than a step or two in the malls, couldn't even swallow a cheese sandwich. I made a hair appointment she felt too sick to go to. I'd planned a vet appointment for when she'd be with me, knowing she loved animals. She grinned at the red setter, at the poodles and cats. But she didn't feel well enough to come to a mother and daughter workshop even in the afternoon. And she wasn't drinking shakes I laced with rich ice cream or even tasting her broiled fish. She wasn't eating anything. When she tried to, she ran to vomit. At least, I thought, my mother had a doctor in Stowe she liked. Maybe my sister and I, together, *could* help each other and my mother through this.

Back in Stowe, I dreamt the leaves already had turned. Days were a blur of vomit bins. The high of each day for me was making an early morning cup of coffee. Just smelling the coffee became one of only a few pleasant rituals. Most of the time I sat with my mother in front of a hardly visible black and white TV in a room of caged turtles and we talked until she nodded off. When she wasn't too tired, I asked her questions about her past and taped her. I had my mail forwarded. My sister locked her two cats up in different rooms, in separate cages, doted on my mother and the turtles. My mother wanted to leave, said she felt like the turtles and cats, caged and trapped. I hardly left the house. I thought I'd gain weight from eating meals and just sitting, but, as if to keep up with my mother, I became bonier too. My sister's husband said we ought to write her obituary, that since she wasn't eating, she couldn't last to the second week in May. Ants gnawed wood, as if symbolic of the dark eating my mother, eating all of us.

For Mother's Day we gave mother piles of cards, knowing it would be the last chance to. "Why don't you save some, this is too much," she insisted. Words were charged. When my mother said she hated her hair cut, said "it killed her to look at it," it didn't seem funny. I cringed when she ordered, "Death by Chocolate," for dessert. Sammy Davis was in a coma from the same disease. My new anthology, *LIPS UNSEALED*, came out and my sister said I must not show it to Mother since the first piece was about the Jewish rituals of death. Tho she was weak, my mother still told me my skirt was too short, my hair brushing her cheek hurt her. I read that such criticism was a luxury of health in aging parents, felt relieved that that hadn't changed. Often I thought of *The Midnight Cowboy*, of John Voight dragging a scrawny Dustin Hoffman toward a dream of sea and light on Greyhound. I imagined rushing out, middle of the night, with my

Mama, my Ranzo Rizzo, for one last trip to the ocean, Hawaii, or New York City, the place my mother most longed to visit. Our outings were only to the doctor's, where, at one seascape in Maine, my mother shook her head, said she'd never go there again.

We weren't sure my mother would make it until her birthday in late May but we shopped madly, bought twenty or more cards, not knowing what to get someone dying. We did get an automatic iced tea maker my mother had wanted. As I sat with my mother, cut off from everything, I wrote poems, caught my mother's words, the iced tea maker, the days burning down. We celebrated two birthdays, one for May 25th, her real birthday, something she only found out about when she applied for social security: it had not been reported, since she was a girl and therefore a disappointment, until May 28, the day we always thought was her birth. One night while my sister and I frosted cakes, wrapped presents and blew up balloons, my mother, like a mischievous child, called up from the bottom floor at 1 am that she was coming upstairs and we were all, for an instant, giggly. On her second birthday, she woke up from a dream of fruit, starved, feeling wonderful, sure she was getting better until a ride out on bumpy roads made her dizzy, sick.

The cancer, we learned, was huge, had spread to her lungs, her stomach, liver. Though losing weight, she couldn't stand anything around her waist. I've heard people often hang on until their birthday. The day after hers, she still hadn't eaten, had a fever. Looking back, it was as if my sister and I, also, were only able to hang on until her birthday. Next day we went to the doctors. My mother had a slight bladder infection and the doctor prescribed some antibiotic. That night I sat with her. We were watching TV, *THE WONDER YEARS*, I think. Suddenly, she became someone else: a hunched up bird in the chair, giggling, hysterical. I'd been next to her, writing out checks. She was giddy. She said she'd never been so happy. I woke my sister and we bundled this stranger, vomiting and singing, "Tattle Tail, Tattle Tail your house is on fire," out to the hospital.

This was two days after my mother's birthday. My sister always tended to be bossy but often my mother would say it was just her way. For a long time, my sister and brother in law had felt my mother favored me, preferred to visit me and always stood up for me, as she had even when, as a child, I apparently was beating up a neighbor boy in the sandbox. We were all stressed, scared, had had little sleep. With my mother in the hospital, I felt even more isolated and more and more alone.

My mother's strange behaviour had been a bad reaction to the antibiotics. From the hospital, my mother wanted to go to her apartment in Middlebury or to my house. She didn't want to go back to Stowe. But she did agree, when doctors said it would make her more comfortable, to go on hydration i.v. Angio-cath, syringes, Heplock, tubing, striated ringers, became new and mysterious parts of our vocabulary. Plans to escape with my mother seemed a lot more complicated with all these twists of plastic, bags, alcohol swabs, needles -- my sister made it clear that these were strange instruments for procedures *I'd* never be able to do.

Everything was more tense. My sister wanted power of attorney. My mother refused, didn't want the little money she'd saved drained, wanted out, wanted to die, wanted to be in her own house. My sister wished mother was in a coma so she could take care of her and not have to listen to her complain. My mother screamed that she wasn't a turtle, an animal. It was my sister's house and more and more, I felt that I was following her commands. If I had been able to leave the house even for a few hours occasionally, I wouldn't have felt so angry, resented it so much when my sister and brother-in-law drove to look at a house or when they both drove six hours each way to take her cat to a vet.

Tho she isn't, my sister looks older and doctors spoke mostly to her. I had moved into the twin bed next to my mother so I could help her to the bathroom throughout the night, bring her ice, try to coax her to take pills she refused. My mother moaned in pain but insisted nothing hurt her. One day I cleaned the vomit bowl 70 times. Losing control over so much, my mother insisted her slippers had to be pointed out a certain way, life savers arranged just so on the nightstand. Often I didn't wash her hands right. There was too much soap, or the water was too cold, or I didn't fold the towel right. When she didn't have the strength to pull herself up from the toilet, she'd put her arms around my neck. I think we both wondered when she wouldn't still be able to do that.

The more starved my mother seemed, the more ads for restaurants she read. She wanted lamb chops, steak, roast beef. Even in June it was clammy and chilly in the mountains especially in the room we shared, already half under ground. Like a tree near the house that cracked and exploded one night there were explosions between us. One day, after some confrontations, my sister's husband raised his hand over me and told me *I'd* better get out. He said if I wasn't gone in 20 minutes, he'd call the police. He

and my sister screamed that I was an incompetent, selfish bitch. "Get out," he bellowed, "and take that shit of a mother too."

I drove into town shaking. I'd never felt he liked me, but we were all trying to somehow help each other and my mother through this. Part of me wanted to get in the car and never go back. But I couldn't leave my mother, tho she whispered, "Get out. It was always like this before you came. It will blow over." It was July 2, my sister's birthday. I didn't leave. And it did, for a short time, quiet down. I gave Joy the gift I had picked out, a green basalt turtle. She seemed sad, extremely overweight, older than she was. Talking about Mother she said how our mother had wasted her life, then added, maybe thinking of her own life, "doesn't everybody."

Two days later, on July 4th, relatives came up. It was a buffer. We all put on fronts. The roads washed out. There were huge gullies. No one could go anywhere. It hadn't been a bad day. My uncle had brought date cookies and it was a relief to have others in the house. Later that night my mother refused her pill again and my sister who, in the beginning had worked hard to buy my mother special foods, shopped with me for treats that might entice Mother to eat, seemed to have run out of patience. When she snarled, "You'll take it or go to a nursing home, " we were on the beginning of the end of our stay in Stowe.

July 10th, was one of the first warm days in the mountains. At the doctor's office, my mother exploded, said she was sick of being bossed around and she wanted to leave. Gutsy, tho weak, even at this stage my mother blurted out what she felt. She said she had to say what she felt and said she wanted to come to my house. My sister was shocked. Her face went white. Shaken, she stayed at the office while her husband, not knowing what happened, took my mother and me back to their house. I couldn't believe my mother would, no *could*, actually leave. I threw all the books I'd brought with me, clothes, everything into my car. That night, my sister and brother-in-law glared, asked if I really thought I could take mother to my house and I said yes. I'm not sure I believed the words.

The next morning was one of the most painful. My mother seemed calm about leaving. I was to go to Niskayuna first to find a doctor, nurses, aides, then come back and ride with her on the ambulance. I couldn't sleep. It was July 11th, the night before my birthday. I dressed about 4 am, as if sleep walking. My sister had bought presents for

me before this last explosion, Chloe and some coconut skin cream she knew I liked. She had a card for my mother to give me but my mother seemed almost too out of it to sign it. I think it was the only time I drove anywhere that she was not terribly worried.

When I backed my Thunderbird through the dark pines, it was the first time I'd been alone in months. But there wasn't much time to catch my breath. I felt overwhelmed. I called nursing associations, Hospice. Few doctors would even consider taking on anyone as ill as my mother. No I.V. therapy firms would agree to take my mother without a doctor's request. Finally one doctor said he would see my mother, but only if she was on Hospice.

Friction between my sister and I escalated while I tried to make arrangements. I think it was hard for her to see me taking some control. She called me often at 6 am to check up on me. When I arranged a visiting nurse, she called the association and gave them different information. Even arranging the ambulance became complicated. My sister canceled it and wanted to make different arrangements. One moment my sister wanted my mother to leave immediately, within 24 hours. The next, she told me she was doing much better in Stowe and shouldn't leave. Finding an acceptable doctor was eventually turned over to the lawyer, as getting the ambulance was.

On August 5, friends drove me up to Stowe so I could be on the ambulance with my mother. I stayed Nichols Lodge, a rustic place in the middle of fruits and flowers. It was a strange day. In the afternoon I'd driven to my sister's to pick up my mother's things. When I didn't follow Joy's orders to return at twilight for more instructions, my sister, who'd kept up a calm facade to my friends, broke out with "You selfish bitch."

I walked around the grounds at the lodge that warm misty night, knew it would be the last time I would be alone until I was. When it was too dark to take in the chrysanthemums, daisies, sun flowers, apples, all the huge dripping leaves, I sat on a tiny bed knowing, I would never not remember the musk of wet grass, lilies, damp earth and roses.

In the morning I put on khaki pants that had been tight but now bagged. They would be my next week's uniform. It was rainy and dark. The ambulance picked me up, then my mother. My sister was as stony faced as when her cat died, its heart full of clots. She and I said nothing to each other.

As we drove toward Lake Champlain my mother smiled as if she was on a special vacation trip. She loved seeing the black eyed susans and asked me to stop at a Dunkin Donuts for coffee and muffins. Although she hadn't had coffee for a while, she seemed to enjoy it, as if we were back in our old pattern. The road down from the house on the mountain in Stowe was bumpy, something that seemed especially uncomfortable for my mother, even with a drug, Compazine, to relieve nausea, but as we got closer to the ferry, she seemed more comfortable. When she needed the bed pan, the attendant did it. Soon I knew I would be doing things I never had.

The trip was long. I think about five or six hours. I was sitting on a metal bench in the ambulance. We had to stop at the doctor's where my mother insisted nothing hurt but winced when he touched her. My sister sent a letter with the ambulance crew to the doctor saying if my mother's care at my house was not good enough, to notify my sister. I wouldn't have known this if the doctor didn't hand it over to me. My mother and I were both exhausted when we got to my house. I had brought photographs of her mother and of us as babies but she didn't seem to care. I'd "redone" "her" bedroom with tables for pills and lotions and put plastic sheets on the bed. To my amazement, the i.v. team came and gave me a kit and a list of instructions. They didn't even have me try it out with them! I was terrified. All the tubes, the swaths the catheters and solutions, needles I still find the covers for in corners, under beds. The i.v. therapy that my sister had said I couldn't learn, turned out to be the easiest part of those last days.

Since my mother associated my house with fun and being able to do things, she expected, somehow, that coming back there again, she'd magically be ok. That first night, after I helped her to the bathroom that was just around the corner, pulling her off the toilet, as I had in Stowe, she slid from my arms to the floor. Luckily someone was there to help me get her back to bed.

Those last days my mother didn't want me out of her sight. She didn't want me to shower, go to the bathroom, talk on the phone. She was upset if I called nurses or doctors. Still, in two weeks so many people came and I think my mother enjoyed that. The house was quickly transformed. The fruit wood bed was folded up and placed in my study, a barricade to books I wouldn't have time to think about. Instead, a hospital bed, wheel chair, egg crate mattress and sheep skin changed the room, as a film crew coming to do a documentary with dollies and cameras had a few years earlier.

I think my mother's lawyer anticipated trouble after her death. So when my sister insisted she wanted to be able to talk to mother directly, not go through my answering machine or me, I put in a private line and phone in my mother's room. That morning seemed unreal. My mother had only been at my house a few days but by then we had a commode near the bed. Tho she was failing faster than anyone realized, my mother was so feisty and verbal one nursing agency said she'd be going strong at least half a year. Only one Hospice nurse gave me a prognosis in terms of time left. When she said three weeks, I gasped. I felt whatever was ahead, I wanted to do, however difficult and demanding. On the way to the commode that Tuesday, my mother had an accident. It wasn't the first. She had an adult diaper by this time and as I was trying to figure out how best to deal with the situation, the door bell rang and it was the phone man. I told him he'd *have* to wait. I tried to clean up the floor, the bed, my mother. Then, getting her back up into bed, somehow, she got into an awkward position and couldn't move and I couldn't move her. The intravenous therapy was nothing compared to trying to move her 70 lbs gently. I asked the phone man and, as if this was a totally standard part of any phone installation, he picked her up and got her on the soaker in the middle of the bed.

Oddly, my mother began eating: tongue sandwiches, strawberries, chicken, pizza and lots and lots of spinach soup and beet soup. I began crushing Demerol into that red liquid since she began to refuse all pills and the nurse said not to force her.

The Hospice nurse told me I could do what at first I had little confidence I could. Those months were a series of strange gifts: the gifts my sister and I exchanged that now seemed ringed with sadness, the gift I tried to give my mother of my time and love, something I'd always given but not always without a bit of resentment. For weeks, my mother kept trying to shove twenty dollar bills from the black pocket book she never was without into my hands. An uncle gave me an extra large birthday check for the expenses when my mother came. My mother gave me the gift of confiding in me, trusting me with her checks and keys as she did no one else. She told me what to take from the apartment: the ivory mahjong set, old binoculars, the white and gold dishes, bowls from Bavaria, the leaded glass chandelier. She told me where her will was, told me to look at it. I couldn't find it until later, clearing out her apartment. In those months, as in the years before, she gave me, from things she said or did, more poems than I know what to do with. She gave me the ok to write anything about our relationship, only wanted me to show the published work to her. Later, in her cluttered apartment, my

books and magazines were perfectly ordered, behind glass. My friends wrote cards to my mother and to me wishing the best, talking about our unique closeness. But perhaps one of the most important gift was from the head Hospice nurse when she told me I could support and help my mother through her dying and even more important, made me believe her, as I had believed my sister, earlier, when she said I could never deal with what I would have to.

There were distractions. My cat stayed close to my mother, often on her TV. She seemed to know my mother didn't want to be alone. Because my house had been empty so long while I was in Vermont, mice skittered through corners. One night the evening aide, Tammy, and I caught one in a jar, hiding on a light cord in my room. One of the saddest things was my mother's answer when asked what she would want if she could have anything and she said, "to find out the diagnosis was wrong."

Dina, a tomboyish therapist, was one of my mother's favorites. They talked about dogs, TV, recipes, the races, laughed but my mother never talked about her cancer. When Dina came for a few hours, I'd shop, take an hour to just sit alone in a friend's house. At 11 each night, I flushed my mother's Heplock, kissed her goodnight and waited for the night aide. It was the second week in August. I stood at the screened door and listened to leaves, knew I had a few hours to myself but was too tired to work. One night a new nurse came and my mother called her a murderer, wanted her out, hated her garlic smell, her accent. When my mother fought with such fury and energy, no one could imagine she was so ill. That night my mother and I had had a nice dinner together, watched a drama on TV. We both fell asleep in the middle of it. The evening, a Friday night, had seemed a close, calm quiet night. I was stunned how enraged my mother became at this poor woman. "Get her out," my other screamed, "I want Lyn to stay up all night with me." I was so tired. It was the day I'd been told that three weeks was probably all she'd live. I don't know if I was more racked with anger or pain. I wanted to hold her, but I didn't. In the morning, uncles came and my mother grinned, as I rubbed her back, "we got our fighting done last night."

On August 12th, armed with Compazine and some Demerol in strawberries we carried her to the car and to her favorite place: the mall. It had been a good day. She had even eaten corn on the cob that noon. Had we thought of wheel chairs earlier, she could have gotten out on the bike path in Stowe, seen lilacs one last time. At Crossgates Mall she didn't want to miss a store. Her face lit up but she was so scrawny, sitting must have been uncomfortable. We bought and devoured butter pecan ice cream. She wanted to

buy me sandals at every shoe store since mine were in shreds. Next, a stop at a French bakery for almond paste croissants. When she died, I washed the shift she was wearing that day, there were still almond slivers stuck to it. She didn't want to leave and insisted we drive past where the new Macy's would open in the fall.

Every year my mother hated the tiger lilies, said they meant summer was gone. That August, blood crept into the maples early and my mother talked about not wanting to be around for any snow. I joked that we'd be having Thanksgiving in her bedroom, but I didn't believe it. My mother never mentioned my sister while she was at my house. If I asked her about that time in Stowe before I came back with the ambulance, she just shook her head.

We touched more than we had for a long time. I rubbed her shoulders and feet and I think it helped the pain she wouldn't admit she had. That first weekend in April I'd gone up to Stowe, I had taken her to have the hair cut she hated. But it gave my sister and me the distraction of setting it and playing with it, trying to joke that we might have a new calling. Four months later, it grew out into lustrous, long beautiful waves. Maybe it was the i.v. Her hair never looked nicer. I brushed it as the night aide did, gave her rub downs, took notes. Although the bed was electric, she never could seem to sit right for long and I couldn't leave the room without someone there. Hospice decided I needed more help, that I had to have a minute to myself and they scheduled a second volunteer to come from 10 am until noon every day to bathe my mother and let me do laundry, cook, just sit and have a cup of coffee.

On Friday, August 17, my mother complained so about everything I cooked that I remade a whole dinner. I needed a break and since one nurse was available, I went out to see a film. My mother seemed to resent that. When I came in, my contact lenses were hurting and I went to take them off. "Forget your eyes, " she said, "think about my i.v." This was so unlike my mother who for so long just worried about me, would want to come down and make soup for me if I a sore throat.

The following Sunday, Dina came for an hour in the morning and I went out and bought chicken. I stopped for coffee at a bakery where I kept falling asleep. Back in my house, my mother seemed more mellow. In a better mood, she wanted to help me cut up some zucchini. We watched two Sunday afternoon movies. I stretched out on the mattress on the floor, couldn't seem to stay awake. After dinner, my mother talked to college friends

and to several cousins. Tammy, the night aide, as always left notes about the evening. It seemed ordinary." Toward dawn (the patient) asked for hot chocolate but didn't drink much."

At 7 am, I flushed the i.v. The nurse thought perhaps it would be best to have my mother ask for Demerol, not add it without her knowing. I was a little nervous about this. On TV, strange movements in Iraq and Kuwait, where it seemed something was about to, on the verge of. The aide was coming at 8 am to meet me. I knew she'd bathe and clean my mother, so, since I hadn't the knack of removing and repinning the diapers, it would be easier to let her. This new aide, Joanne, seemed pleasant and friendly. Since my mother had not wanted me out of her sight, the nurse and aide insisted I be in another part of the house for those two hours so they could get to know my mother.

I took a cup of coffee out in front of the house and wrote for the first time since my mother had been there. I imagined, in a long poem, my mother's old friend, Murray, calling for her. Then Joanne said my mother was calling for me and calling for a Murray. "Don't go into the room," she told me. She said she had to be firm, let my mother know that for me to take care of her, I had to be able to breathe myself, keep my strength up for her.

At ten am I went in and turned on TV. It was a new talk show but my mother didn't seem interested. Her hands and frown said no. Something seemed different. I called the nurse and she said she'd stop by. My mother began calling, "Murray, Mama, Lyn." I called a friend who didn't think much could have changed since the night before. When the nurse came, she said there was almost no blood pressure, unlike earlier in the day. She rolled my mother over and said, "see, her skin is mottled. She's dying."

She gave my mother a morphine suppository. My mother did not seem peaceful. She seemed wretched, scared, and couldn't get comfortable. She kept saying she was cold. For the first

time, she didn't want me to rub her feet or hold her hand. She asked for toast and milk, something I remember she'd had on Sunday evenings as a child. But she didn't touch it. She didn't want the cat near her either, moaned for Murray, said he'd be angry at her. I told her Murray loved her and I loved her. I kept saying it over and over. Other friends, aides and nurses came. One told me people go to the brink of death, come back and

have to do it over. That seemed horrible. The day was like moving under water. I found even my loose clothes were digging into me as if everything that held me hurt.

I sat near the bed. I had a notebook and only wrote a line on each page I never, until now, went back to:

Not able to believe this is happening

Now my hands are warmer than yours (my mother always complained that my hands were cool, so before I rubbed her back, I'd soak them in hot water)

Oh Lyn, help me

She doesn't say she feels "so so" but pushes me away

The flowers lasted as long as she did

We never got my mother lobster

All these lines were on top of blank empty pages in a dark blue notebook with just August 20, 1990 on the cover.

One friend came to my house and cooked pasta and insisted I eat some. It seemed I was walking in quicksand. It seemed unreal. My mother's lawyer called and I just said it wasn't a good time. "Love you, I love, " I said and my mother shook her head, a no. And I said you know I do and she finally said, "I know," but not that she loved me. Later I heard that the dying have to break off, they have to let go. And my mother never let go of me ever before for anything.

She told the nurse there was no more pain but she had her foot out from under the blankets and it was twitching. She said she wanted the bed pan, then seemed to forget. At 8 pm Dina came and gave her another stick of morphine and left. Betty, a new aide would be there at 11, although I knew I would stay in the room all night too. Friends who cooked and stopped by went home. One, Jordan, and I sat by the bed. Her moans were quieter, as if the morphine finally had taken hold and she seemed to be sleeping. She was so quiet. Her breath was quiet. We sat there from 8 until 9. There was a breeze in the maples, the dark moving in. Her breath seemed so slow, imperceptible. Then it seemed she hadn't been breathing for a while. We weren't sure how to tell. Her skin seemed no different. But the book about dying said there would be spaces. After what seemed one of the quietest moments, we called the nurse. It was 9:20 on the clock which, like so much in my house, she'd given me. I just sat there in the quiet, 9:20 like a brand or a tattoo in big red digital numbers.

My sister would insist that it wasn't a nurse, but a doctor who had to sign the death certificate, the release, that I'd called the wrong funeral parlor. She would change the funeral plans six or seven times, refuse to let the rabbi say a psalm at the grave, rewrite the obituary and have her own idea how the apartment would be cleaned out. When my sister and I got copies of the will, an even deeper freeze would set in between us.

But before that, before my mother would be wrapped in dark purple velvet and I'd watch them carry her out of the house, photograph later, the room as a hospital room, the bed even her tiny frame left a shape in, I just held her and let the August wind blow over us both.