

## The Mother's Portion

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The gravedigger was a woman. Tall, broad-shouldered, her cheeks flushed red from the cold. Or from shame. She hadn't done the job we'd hired her to do: dig our mother's grave. Father David, the priest from Gibraltar who looked and spoke like Michael Caine, had told her and the groundskeeper that the family would not be leaving until our dead was in the ground. It didn't matter if the hole she had dug couldn't contain her. "Enlarge it," Father David said. "But the *plot* isn't big enough," squirmed the mouse of a groundskeeper, his glasses slipping down his nose. Father David glared over the rim of his own glasses, his chin buried in the folds of his neck. He didn't smile. He didn't budge. The groundskeeper signaled to the gravedigger: *dig*.

So we stood there and watched, the nine of us, as she poised her shovel at the grave's edge and stamped on it with her heel. The grass and earth cleaved off with the sound of hair ripping. Soon the grave doubled in size, and then tripled, the perimeter growing by the minute as our mother's body had grown with the years. She had been a softball player once, in college, before she dropped out to marry our dad. She was short, but strong. She had always been small next to our dad, and he liked her that way, so she never touched butter or anything full-fat. She was often complimented on her girlish figure, even after five kids. For years she maintained it like it was her job. Between carpools and playdates she'd snacked on nonfat cookies made with oil-free cooking sprays, baked chips, diet sodas. Little delighted her so much as a guilt-free treat. But with the sixth child, her first boy, she grew softer and fuller, and her fullness seemed to please her. She lounged more. She told us girls to do the dishes. She sent us to the library for books, histories and biographies mostly. She read and read. Once she'd grown a little, and then a lot, she started introducing butter to her peanut butter sandwiches and whipped cream to her nonfat gingerbread recipe. Her arms thickened. Her breasts overflowed their cups. On the bumpy road to the cemetery, we remembered what she would have said had she been with us: *You need a good bra to drive on this road.*

Her thighs chafed if she wore a skirt, but if she wore pants they burst their buttons and split up the backside, so she dusted herself all over with Gold Bond powder until she looked delicious, like a doughy confection, and slid on a dress. Her stomach rolled and rolled again, tumbling down toward her knees. Her feet swelled with the chore she'd become, so she could no longer walk us to school or soccer practice. She couldn't work our fun runs or field days. Still she ate and ate and most of it was nonfat: no fat in Jujubes or Mike & Ikes, no fat in gummy bears and Necco wafers and Hot Tamales.

She smelled of rising bread. Our father, disgusted, left the bedroom. She slept in the middle of the queen-size bed until it broke beneath her, and he bought her a king. She liked that there wasn't room for anyone else, and she filled the spaces between her arms and her hips with boxes of powdered donuts, with jars of candy corn, with buttered Saltines, and chocolate-covered marshmallows. No one can come in, she'd call when we returned home for a visit. No room, she'd say. It's all me in here. It was impossible for us not to hear the delight in her voice, the joy. We heard her humming. We heard pages turning in paperback books.

She had never liked to be touched. We must've learned that early, because we never hung on her the way other kids hung on their mothers. We never petted her hair or her back or squeezed her fattening arms. Certainly there were no hugs. Marco, emulating his new classmates on his first day of kindergarten, ran into her arms when she arrived to pick him up. She had smiled and shuddered and driven him home, where she told us she needed to take a time out. She slept in the mornings, not much at night. She said our father snored, so she walked the house in the dark, or sat in her chair nibbling on honey-nut rice cakes until she dozed off. We often found her there in the morning, puffs of sticky white rice clinging to her robe.

The larger she grew, the more she talked. She'd always been quiet, letting our dad hold forth on whatever foolish thing his boss had said or done that day, on how his office and the country were going down the tubes. But around the time Stella and Patti replaced her chair at the foot of the table with a rehabbed church pew, she started adding a line or two of contrast to his speeches, and then a paragraph, and soon she was debating him openly between bites of buttered chicken. Our six heads swiveled from one end of the table to the other. Monica, the eldest, tried to hush her. Marco, then thirteen, took his mother's side in everything. The rest of us kept quiet.

She grew larger, and our father shrank. She grew louder, and he quieted. Even at her grave it was hard to remember him among us, razor-thin, silent, but there he was, his eyes sullen on the upturned soil, his mouth just a little bit caved in. We noticed his lips trembling.

Her last days she had laughed so hard the floor shook. Her ribcage stretched and filled with air. She laughed so loud airplanes in the sky heard her and shuddered. The airspace above our home became known for inexplicable turbulence. Over the years she had graduated from her regular king-size bed to a California King, and then a Texan King, and then an Omaha Emperor, and finally the Napoleonic Excelsior, designed by an artist in New York. It came with an artist's statement about high-fructose corn syrup and partially hydrogenated oils that made our mother laugh and laugh. We took down a wall to make room for the bed and sewed quilts together for a coverlet, though she didn't need much to stay warm.

We agreed later that our mother would've loved watching her grave as it grew, swallowing up the plot beside it, and another plot still. When her body was laid in the grave, how much earth she claimed. Her gravedigger loosened her vest, then lifted one strong arm, swiping a flanneled bicep across her cheeks. Her breath billowed above our mother.

We only spoke of it once, but before Father David began to pray, the gravedigger leaned on her shovel and looked at us, hard. Squinting as if to read us. The dead woman's children: five grown women and a teenage boy, shivering, arm in arm.

A ripple ran through us and we huddled closer together. We returned her gaze. She blinked and turned away.

"Let us pray," said the priest.

We bowed our heads.

[clear-line]

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