**A Pinch of Finch**

**To the memory of my mother**

**Her hands are moving again.** My mother lies in bed, her new permanent home, eyes closed, doing work in a world I have no access to. She, who has been unable to raise her head from the pillow or a cup to her lips, lifts one hand, then the other, her hands as weightless as feathers. What should I make of these easy, airy gestures?

If, as a nurse friend trained in Death and Dying suggests, you need to listen to the *symbolic* language as a person is leaving this life—gone now, the normal sentence structure, gone the proper grammar, long gone the logical thought processes, now only a word here, a word there, for us to decipher—what then of my mother’s symbolic gestures?

When my partner’s sister was near the end and “moving towards the light,” she too was instructed to listen for the symbolic. She waited at her sister’s bedside, primed for any utterance. On the doorjamb of death, in what looked like a deep sleep, her sister suddenly rustled, and offered up one barely audible word. “Closer,” she whispered. A second later, “Getting closer.” Then, with the anticipated last breath? “Aw, forget it,” and with that she woke up, sat up, and went on to live three more days.

No Ph.D. needed in “Sign, Symbol and Signifying” to figure out that one.

Outside my mother’s bedroom window there are birds in the trees. Robins, blue jays. A woodpecker. Given the circumstances, maybe short-scripted is good. Flitting from one branch to another, as the mind flits from one thought to another, these birds would never light long enough for an extended oration.

There’s no doubt about it. She is doing *something* with her hands. She raises one, then the other. She continues her work. She could be screwing on a lid, packing a tuna tin, or pouring an imaginary cup of tea for me. I watch her in her labors.

But which labors?

Is she back serving food in the hospital cafeteria—the work she found after my father fished his last fish and died young? Is she spooning up the *Daily Special* for a hospital administrator, waiting there, impatient, possibly callous, as his fingers, free of callus, beat out a tense drumbeat on the counter?

Or, is she back in our kitchen, her right hand lifting the knife, inserting the tip at the throat of the salmon, one swift slice down the underbelly, cleaning the fish my father netted, fish who just the day before were swimming towards unseen squares of twine floating in a green sea?

Or even further back, on Terminal Island, the cannery years, standing with all the other girls on the line, these fishy *Rockettes*, as the silver tuna flashed down the conveyer belt, the slice again, just the right amount to fit into a can. What knife technique? The number of cans equaled the number of punches on a work card equaled the pay you brought home to the widowed mother waiting there, her hand out as you climbed the porch steps.

Or back farther still.

Were her hands ever idle? I remember the safety pins she attached, one to another in a line, then pinned to the front of her housecoat, this silver strand her set of worry beads. How she took the last pin between the thumb and forefinger and continually clicked the pin open, then shut, over and over, click, click, click. Unfastened, how can I escape the image of the safety pin’s open hook?

If I put that hook on a line, what memory could I catch?

A month ago, in her apartment. She’s telling that story again. The same one she tells so often these days. The story about her very first job and the nice Italian lady who lived down the street.

“She wore a wig that sat high on her head like a bird’s nest. And she smoked these thin cigars.” She smiles as she says this, puts an imaginary *Tiparillo* to her mouth and puffs. “Every day, after school, I walked home, kissed my mother, then ran down the street to her house.”

Yes, quickly, the need to escape home, her old-country mother forever in black after her husband died young and...
left her with seven, quick, escape the cruel uncle who came to stay, escape the demanding boarders, the shrouded house. Who wouldn’t flee to the sunnier Italians, so like the Slavs, like kissing cousins, with so much in common but from the happier side of the Adriatic?

How she tells the tale: The Italian lady’s husband was a small man who followed orders. He did what he was told. And he was good with his hands. He could make a satchel out of a sow’s ear. He could make a silk purse with compartments! But his greatest gift? He could take his wife’s ideas and make them flesh.

Like this one: In their backyard, near the grapevine, near the garden plot of greens—the broccoli, spinach, kale, bordered by a row of pink sweet peas for color—one extravagant gesture—there, his wife told him, rig up a net that will stand up straight to the wind. Like a soccer net. A net that would be hard to see unless you had a bird’s eye.

Lucky for them, the birds in that part of town were nearsighted.

Oh, the vulnerable birds. Oh, the little clueless birds, says my look.

Oh, the Depression, says her look in return. With no food on the table. With the hand-me-downs and no money. With the mother climbing down the embankment to the railroad tracks to pick up the spilled corn from some railcar, tomorrow’s polenta.

The idea worked. The birds flew straight into the net. He caught them as easily as his wife caught him years ago. With her shy smile and that wig hat.

“What kind of birds?” I ask.

“How do I know? The kind of birds that would fly into a net.”

“What did she do with them?” I ask, not wanting to know and wanting to.

“She took the birds and made a sauce out of them. Best sauce you’ve ever tasted.”

Bird sauce. She tells me she can’t describe the taste, just that it was delicious. What does flight taste like? How would you know when the sauce needed a pinch of finch? All I’m left with is the undifferentiated main ingredient. What’s a person to do with a recipe that has no instructions?

“So, what was your job?” How to stop the mind from imagining her straining the sauce, picking out the tiny bird bones.

“She made ravioli, the best in town. Enough for the family and to sell to the Italian deli. It was my job to pinch...
My mother has lifted off, she is sailing. Where is the opening in the net so I can join her? Where is the door to her house, the door with the porthole that you could open to look out as if you were on the sea, or look in on her life? Where is the kitchen, the brodet simmering on the stove, the table laid out with kruha, the place where the wood box stood, where a shoe kicked a barrel and black olives turned slowly in the brine, one clean revolution, where bakalar hung like bats from the ceiling, where the hrustule was rolled onto the board, the dough sliced in ribbons, knotted and tied in bows, each knot a regret. Or a wish.

If ravioli contains filling and, in each soft pillow, a wish, this is my wish for her: To have it easy as she leaves this life. For my mother to be saved from her labors.

Our “D and D” friend says that timing is everything and nothing. That when a woman labors to bring a child into the world no one can pinpoint the exact time of birth. And at death, it is the same. No one knows the exact moment your loved one will be born into the next world.

She awakens, stares out as I stare in. She asks for some water. I take my hand and cup the back of her head. This is what I can do with my hands, I who cannot cook, this is my gesture. I cup her head, the white downy hair there at the back, pour some water in her glass, and bring it to her lips. She takes a small sip. Then she closes her eyes.

She’s flown away. She was here just a minute ago. She’s flown away again.

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