Mother, Sun, Daughter

The unfinished, light-wood balcony extends from the white french doors of my parents’ room. I’m sat carefully on the wood planks to avoid inevitable splinters. I sit, body hunched to stay upright, legs bent in front of me, small feet and chubby toes pointed up at the cloudless blue sky. Thick arms twist in the fitted sleeves of my floral kuspuk, clumsy hands pull my thin and well-loved pink plaid blanket over my shoulders and my blonde curls tangle in the light breeze. My eyes squint and eyebrows come down to look up at my mom crouched in front of me, but the light outside is so bright I allow myself to occasionally keep my eyes closed. With eyelids glowing a scorching orange, I can feel the sun pouring itself onto the top of my head and it coats my mouth, my throat, sinks into my lungs, and tangles in my stomach. The sun snakes down through my hips, twining tightly around my thighs, knees, calves, then ankles, and finally escapes through the soles of my feet. My nose scrunches as I smell the Coppertone sunscreen that was recently slathered on my face. I sigh in content and I hear my mom chuckle closeby. My eyes flutter open to look at her and I see she’s laughing at me and I grin back. I like making my mom laugh. I close my eyes and sigh heavily again. A chuckle. I peek out at her. My eyelashes disappear in my vision and turn into glittering rainbow prisms reflecting through me. I shut my eyes tightly once more and sigh. No sound. I look out at her again, and I see her eyes are closed and her head tilts up to the sun. The sun touches her straight little nose and sinks through her skull until it touches her sun-bleached curly hair. It moves the corners of her mouth up and relaxes her taut forehead. Her body slumps slightly on the balcony and the warmth soaks into her skin. I close my eyes and slump too, and we talk and meditate and learn from each other without a word.

Five years later and my socked feet slide with the tempo of a cross-country skier over the newly cleaned wood floor. I ski around the counter that juts into the middle of the kitchen, past the fridge, the stove, sink, then loop back again. I weave around my mom, who crosses the kitchen, back and forth, from the pantry to the countertop by the stove, collecting supplies to make fudge. Except I’m sworn to secrecy about this cooking project because if grandma ever found out we weren’t using the family recipe for fudge, she might not live to see 70. Or maybe my mom wouldn’t live to see 50. Would I live to see double digits? My eyes widen a bit as I think about it, but I shrug and continue skiing as I realize that my child brain will forget this relatively unimportant event by tomorrow and it will be replaced with the memory of my last fantastical dream of a T-rex living in a gingerbread house or perhaps my schoolmates all riding on the back of a large fuzzy spider. My mother asks my to rummage through the pantry for the sweetened condensed milk. I have no idea what that is, but I do so anyways because I love to grab one of the old wooden dining room chairs and dragging it beneath the cupboard to use as a step stool. I stand on the steady chair and take a moment to appreciate my new surroundings before sorting through the overcrowded baking shelves. I’m looking for anything that resembles a milk carton or a milk jug, but I cannot find it and hop from my chair to tell my mom we’re out. She shakes her head with a frown, walking back over to the pantry with her hands still clutching measuring cups.

“It’s the can with the red label on it, right up front on the bottom shelf. Grab it, won’t ya? And be careful on that chair.”

I frown as she turns back to what she’s doing and clamber back onto the chair, picking up the can she pointed out. This doesn’t look anything like milk! It’s a heavy little can of something masquerading as milk, and I want to get to the bottom of it. I rush the can to my mother’s side and clamp the can-opener around its metal lip, cranking the handle and letting the dull ridges of the can opener slice into it. I stop when the lid is just barely hanging on so it flips off easily and I don’t cut myself. Inside, it looks like milk. Really thick milk. Like pudding, almost. My mom grabs a spoon and dunks it into the can, lifting out a spoonful of the weird liquid. She offers some to me and I lick it tentatively, screwing up my face to show my distaste before letting the flavor sink in. Once I realize it’s actually quite good, I ask for more, but my mom shakes her head and puts the spoon in her upturned mouth before dumping the can into the pot she’s using for fudge. I sigh heavily and begin to mope, laying my head on the counter next to her and looking pitifully up at her. She breathes out a laugh around the spoon and slides the can to me, then drags the spoon out of her mouth.

“It’s good, isn’t it? When Cassie and I were young, our mom stored a couple of cans of it in the back of the kitchen cupboard and we’d open it up and eat it with our hands. It’s sinful.” I nod, agreeing, washing my sticky hands off in the sink and drying them with a tea towel.

She goes back to making the fudge, singing some song about blueberry pancakes and I continue to ski around the kitchen. The sun is low enough behind the house and high enough above the surrounding spruce to peer in through the windows of the first-level french doors. The yellow sunlight is quickly turning gold, then orange. The floor it rests on is glowing and warm and I step my cold feet onto it. The heat warms my toes, and it swims lazily up my body until it sprouts from the top of my head. I soft sigh exits my nose as I close my eyes for a moment to appreciate the warmth. My mom whisking intensely behind me snaps me out of it, and I continue sliding around the floors to the tempo of her metal whisk scraping the side of the metal pot.

Another five years and I’m sitting in the grass near the lower deck of the house while my mom sways in the porch swing. Her hands clutch her book so gently I think it might fall from her hands. *The Boreal Herbal*. A staple in my mom’s book collection of books about Alaskan wildlife. She’s doing “berry research” but I don’t really know why. I, however, am watching a strange red and black caterpillar with a curved red horn on its head scrunch around in the grass. It’s moving pretty quickly, and I crawl next to it to make sure it’s safe. I’ve never seen anything like it before. It might not even be a caterpillar, but I don’t know what else it could be. Even with its menacing body and sharp little head weapon, it seems like a pretty friendly beast. I do wonder if the horn is as sharp as it appears and I glance down at my bare feet, thinking about what it might feel like to step on it. That’s probably why it’s red, to keep people from getting stabbed. If it were green, it would be stabbing a lot more people. This doesn’t seem like a malicious creature, so it must have decided that red suited it better, and I couldn’t agree more. The stylish little critter crawled under our deck where I couldn’t stay by it anymore, and it disappeared in the dark. I hope he makes it home safe. I crawl up onto the deck and walk over to sit by my mom and she sets her book down on her knee.

“I don’t know how you do it, bugs freak me out. Maybe someday you’ll be a bug scientist and make friends with all of the bugs.” I look up to her excitedly.

“I’d get to be friends with bugs for a living? I should be paid starting right now.”

My mom chuckles to herself and shakes her head, not correcting me, and she pats my knee.

“You don’t get your love of bugs from me, I don’t know how you can stand it, it’s probably your dad’s genes.”

I sit back in the porch swing, looking out into the forest, watching the sun snake between trees, and wondering what dad’s jeans had to do with anything. The sun doesn’t touch me balled into the side of the swing, but it taps my mom’s nose as she leans forward and her face glows. Her cheeks are pink and her sharp nose looks like an orange slice as she leans to stand up and go inside to start dinner. I stay outside to watch the sun disappear behind the trees, wondering how it knows who my mother is and why it says hello every day.

Five years pass once more and I’m standing in wet soil, dark like tar and squishing under my purple Converse. Tall evergreens line the path and crawl over the two hills that rise up on either side of the well-worn trail. Girdwood is always beautiful, year-round. It’s Alaska’s Emerald City, glittering in the rainy season. It’s warm, even in the shaded woods, as my mom and I walk side-by-side in shorts and t-shirts. It had been raining when we arrived, but then the clouds cleared and allowed the sun to slither through dew-drops, over leaves and mossy branches. We don’t usually talk on our nature walks. Maybe to point something out, but my mom just looks for birds or at the diverse plant species, and I admire how green everything is and focus on the sound of a waterfall nearby. The smell of wet soil and decaying logs is thick and sticky in the back of my nose and it makes my eyelids flutter closed for a brief moment.

It’s the smell that every candle company tries to capture in vibrant green wax, but those candles make my nose tingle and feel harsh as the chemical scent of wood burns into my nostrils. This smell feels smooth and comforting and constant. It reminds me of jumping into puddles on the soccer fields at recess with my lady-bug rainboots, or racing the fastest boy in my class through the orange obstacle course cones set up in the school parking lot as it began to rain. It’s familiar, and still never exactly the same as I remember it. I think my mom feels the same. She loves everything about the rain and the woods. I got that from her. Even better than rain, though, is the post-rain sunshine. The smell of the forest becomes overwhelming in the gentle heat of the sun and works itself much more quickly into our noses, our mouths, and sticking to our hair.

No matter what time of day, the sunlight that seems to work itself through the treetops is always a golden, moving light. It trickles and oozes and wraps itself around anything it touches, but as branches bob and leaves flutter, the light moves lazily around the forest floor. We stand and watch it move along the trail until it comes up to greet us. It touches my head first, patting my forehead warmly, and then moves to warm my mother’s face, lingering on her longer than usual. I don’t know why the sun always greets her this way, but it has since I was young. She might move her head slightly to keep it on her face longer, and her upturned nose catches the light anywhere, but there’s something odd about how it works, and even today I cannot understand it. Every time it warms our faces, we close our eyes and sigh. I don’t think she remembers when that first began, or even notices that the sun greets her so often, but the memories have always been prominent in my mind.