

A SKETCH OF MY MOTHER

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My mother makes the most horrendous gagging noise every time she brushes her teeth. You can hear it from two rooms away, and it makes my skin crawl. But every night that I'm at home now, I lie in her bed—nestled in the covers on the left side, her spot—and listen as she tries to speak and brush at the same time, too busy complaining about the latest work politics to avoid choking. I'm so used to it at this point that most nights I say nothing, but sometimes I'll call out in a dry tone, "You alright in there? God."

She giggles and tells me to "chaht up." I smile. My mother grew up in Panama and has a pretty thick accent. She can say both the *sh* and *ch* sounds, but inevitably switches them.

From where I'm snuggled up, I watch her in the mirror as she bustles about her night-time routine. She removes her contacts and her makeup, washes her face and moisturizes, updating as she goes me on drama at work. When she's finished, she flips off the bathroom light and struts into the bedroom.

"Well?" she looks at me, expectant, "What are the highlights?" As if I could've gotten a word in edge-wise.

I smirk and roll my eyes. It has become our inside joke: she plays the stereotypical, prying mom, and I take on the role of grumbling teen. "Well, first I woke up," I respond, "Then I got out of bed. Then I peed. Oh! Then I brushed my teeth *without* almost dying over the sink..." As I fill her in on the happenings of the day, she walks

around the room. She stops in front of the walk-in closet, and instead of going inside to change, she stands outside and slides her work blouse and slacks off, leaving them pooled on the carpet. I continue to chatter as she makes her way to the jewelry chest in the corner, takes her watch and earrings off, then unclasps her bra with a sigh. Naked, she scratches at the marks the unforgiving wires leave on her back and under her breasts, then bends to pick my father's shirt up off the floor.

Over the years, I've watched my mother turn this way and that in front of her sliding mirror, pinching at the bit of her stomach that bunches over the top of her jeans or tugging the skin of her chest upward in a dress. I try to remind her it's impossible to reverse the effects of having two children. But at the end of a long day, in *her* bedroom, *her* space, she changes at her own pace, without covering or hiding from view, regardless of who is in the room.

I've always preferred seeing her this way—my brother, not so much. Around age eleven, he told my mom he “had read somewhere” that it was damaging to young boys to see their mothers naked. She cocked an eyebrow and pursed her lips.

“You *read* somewhere?” before bursting into laughter at the idea.

She tells this story now and then among family just to embarrass him, giving my brother's cheek an affectionate smooch: “Sorry, baby. You've never been a reader.” In the end, along with the ice-cold mom-diss, she told him that if he didn't want to see it, then he could leave the room.

I admire moments like this when my mother refuses to be ashamed of her body. In fact, I wish she felt just as comfortable dismissing others' opinions out in the real world. As I've grown older, I've made a point to go out dressed in whatever way I feel most comfortable. My mom acts scandalized every time I refuse to wear a bra, but secretly I think she's really proud of me.

All that being said, I do have to sympathize with my brother a bit. The truth is the woman has no qualms in interrupting whatever you happen to be doing when she gets home and guilted you into coming upstairs with her. So for him, it's a lose-lose. She loves company, especially her children's company, and wants to vent her frustrations and chatter for a while at the end of the day. That would be fine, but

when she pressures you to come join her in doing what she wants, she isn't above hanging around and pouting and distracting you from what you're doing. For my brother, it's either go sit and stare at the ceiling while your mom gets naked or be pestered for the next half hour about how you don't spend time with her.

As for me, the nakedness has never bothered me as much as giving up the time. In high school, it wasn't uncommon for me to get home at 9:00 pm, eat dinner, shower, and sit down to finally start my homework around 10:00—exactly the time my mother would bring the dog downstairs to let him out into the backyard. I would hear her bedroom door open and listen to her knees creak as she made her way down the stairs (terrible joints are another lucky inheritance of the Varela women). I made sure I was hunched, intent over my work, by the time she passed me on her way to the backdoor. It never worked.

Into the kitchen she'd go, then I'd hear the *woosh* of the sliding glass door. And even though I knew it was coming, I still jumped at the first of her many rapid knocks against the door. "*Aaaberdaabad-abadaah!*" I wish I were kidding—to this day, my mother yells gibberish out the backdoor and knocks on the glass for at least five full seconds every single time she lets the dog out. Bubba, our fluffy, white, and rail-skinny Poodle rescue, has been skunked twice. Mom was emotionally scarred by those experiences.

I'll never forget the sight of her that first time, face all twisted up, holding the stinking pup at arm's length as she ran toward the laundry room sink. I guess there aren't any skunks in the tropics, so she never had to worry about this with her dogs as a child—and nobody had told her that the tomato soup trick was only a thing in old cartoons. By the time I had gone upstairs to Google *real* skunk-smell solutions, the smell had leaked up the vents from where she was trying to wash the dog in the basement. As it turns out, bringing the dog inside the house is not a good move. All of our clothes stunk for a week.

Now, every spring, when the little skunks start scampering across the street with their babies, she glares at them darkly—"I *hate* skunks!"—and commits to her skunk-prevention measures with renewed vigor. I'm pretty sure she isn't scaring anything away but the neighbors, standing hunched in her pajamas in the doorway, flicking the lights on and off. I learned a while ago, though, that to argue the point is useless.

At any rate, back in the living room, where I always did my homework, I would sit, hoping that she would take note of my visible stress and walk back up the stairs. The door would slide shut; “Bah-bah, stay!” would be followed by her coos. She would towel off his dirty paws, then, inevitably, she’d come in to “say hi” to me.

Perched on the edge of the sofa, she would lean her head casually on her hand, and ask, “Whatcha doin?”

“Homework.”

“Ooh, what homework?”

“Calc.”

“Ooh, let me see!” motioning for me to hand her the paper.

“No.”

“You’re mean,” with a full blown pout on her lips.

“Yep.”

“How was your day?”

“Mom, seriously. I have so much work to do.”

“Fine!” She would throw her hands up, officially offended.

“Come on, Bah-bah.” And she would march back up the stairs, muttering how nobody in this house ever spends any time with her except her puppy. The melodrama of these moments never seemed to be anything other than completely genuine.

Sometimes she was just so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but break down and laugh as she stormed off. And every once in a while, I would give in and follow her up the stairs. Truth be told, cuddling with my mom in bed, wrapped in her sheets and her comforting mom-smell, usually did sound a hell of a lot better than calculus.

For the majority of the year, I don’t live at home anymore; I’m only there for one or two weeks on my visits. Even though I usually have something I’m supposed to be working on while I’m there, there’s always a night or two, when I don’t have plans to see old friends, that this ritual will repeat itself. Secretly, I look forward to the silly knocking on the back door, to the interruption, to begrudgingly climbing the stairs. I brush my teeth, smiling to myself in the bathroom mirror. I wash my face, moisturize, change into my PJs, and walk upstairs to my mom’s room. The familiar sounds of her fussing about in the bathroom

make me sleepy. I pull back the covers on the left side of her bed, and sit massaging my knees as I wait for her to realize I'm there.

“I hope you're happy, mom. When I flunk out of college, it'll be all your fault!”

After a moment, there's a garbled attempt at an exclamation, then I roll my eyes at the sound of gagging.

