

TETHERED

BY AMY MACKINNON

I PLUNGE MY THUMB BETWEEN THE FOLDS

of the incision, and then hook my forefinger deep into her neck. Unlike most of the bloodlines that offer perfunctory resistance, the carotid artery doesn't surrender itself willingly. Tethered between the heart and head, the sinewy tube is often weighted with years of plaque, thickening its resolve to stay. More so now that rigor mortis has settled deep within the old woman.

Each time I tug on that vessel, I think of my mother. I imagine other daughters are reminded of their dead mothers whenever they hear the refrain from an old song, or feel the heft of a treasured bedtime story resting on their own child's nightstand. My trigger is the transformation of a battered corpse back to someone familiar. I was too young when she died to remember her scent, and I have no memory of her voice. But her funeral—like the accident—plays in my head like a movie reel; some frames taut and crisp, others brittle fluttery things. Though always, her face is clear: before, after, and

then after again at the funeral.

I remember my grandmother's friends, clustered near the Easter lilies, whispering their doubts about my mother's eternal salvation. My grandmother, her frayed black slip hanging just beyond the hem of her dress, bringing me to kneel on road-burned knees before the casket (don't look!) and then hurrying me out, leaving me alone in the family room....What I remember best of all from that day, was Mr. Mulrey, the undertaker.

While mourners huddled in an adjoining room, their fingers clinging to rosary beads, their souls lashed to prayers, I escaped to find Mr. Mulrey. He was standing in the doorway of my mother's room, filling it, appearing as bewildered as I felt. I tugged on his overcoat and he turned to me, hands worrying at the beads. All of him stooped as if to avoid a raised hand: shoulders sunk, chin nearly resting on his chest, eyes buried deep beneath a low, dark brow meeting mine....

"Don't be afraid," said Mr. Mulrey, ushering me over to the coffin. He allowed

me to touch my mother for the first time since the accident. I stroked her hand, but it was hard and cold. So instead my fingers sought the fabric of her dress, knitting through her lace cuff as I spoke....

He brushed aside a lovely curl that flipped over her brow where the worst gash had been to reveal the precise row of stitches he'd made with thread to match her flesh.

"Where's all the blood?" I asked, but he misunderstood. I'd meant the blood that concealed her face in our final moments together as we lay in the street. He tugged open her collar to expose three neat stitches in her neck, telling me how he drained her blood from the carotid artery and replaced it with formaldehyde that then hardened inside of her. In spite of myself, I was awed by his ability to erase the wounds, to help me see my mother again...

When I started to cry, fingering the three stitches (one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, breathe), Mr. Mulrey placed a hand on my shoulder

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and whispered, "Never mind what the others say. We're all sinners and all sinners are welcomed by God."

But I wasn't comforted by a god who couldn't give me back my mother, I found salvation in the undertaker who could. I suppose that's why I became one.