Personal Essay

Of Tethering and Flight

Sundy Watanabe

A soft rain comes during the night. I anticipated its coming, but when it didn't arrive by nightfall, welcomed a reprieve. Now, it taps lightly against the dark windows of our sleep. Wet leaves rustle in the orchards and sift a restlessness into my dreaming, as if a child whispers to me from behind a half-opened door, urging me to wakefulness. I dream of babies shivering and fabric wrinkling under the soothing of my fingertips. In my dream, I think I am young and have forgotten something important. I fly naked, a thin small thing, clutching the strong wing of some night bird. I tuck my head and brace against the chill of a sky full of water. Much later, somehow, I fall into dawn and awaken to the realization of a journey just beginning. We have prepared for this journey, my daughter and I, for the past eighteen years. With fierce determination and exquisite reluctance, we have taken turns struggling toward independence.

"Tell me about when I was little," she says, clinging to the expanse of kitchen countertop with all the strength of her ten fingers. The length of her six-year-old torso flattens against the butcher block, but her legs dangle off the edge. As she teeters there, her earnestness makes me smile: "when I was little." Even while asking for stories to tether her, she tests the space of the edge with determination, a self-will evident from infancy. This is the daughter who insists on bringing me the baby from his crib even though she has to stand on the side rail to reach him. This is the daughter who manages late night emergency room visits for asthma—cold stethoscopes, IVs, epinephrine shots—without

tears. In those critical hours, I resist the mother-growl that threatens to escape my throat at the intern's indifference. I long to remove my child from the chatty nurse and her bumbling fingers. I need to fold this daughter safely into my lap, squeezing out my anguish and hers, leaving no space for fear. She needs only a small blanket, a book, and someone to stand by as her pupils dilate and her hands become jittery. So I stand close by and offer a forced reassurance, my grown-up restraint, for comfort.

In this quiet September drizzle, we load boxes of blankets, books, and medications into the back of her small red car. The neighbors call it the Demolition Derby. It has survived dents to all four sides, various scratches up and down its length, brake burnouts, tire blowouts, and a bent axle. We hold our breath and pronounce a confident appraisal; it will survive this trip as well. It will carry its cargo through the maze of freeway construction to the apple orchards of Santaquin. It will course through historic Fillmore and through long stretches of desert until it reaches the summit and breezes into Cedar City. My car will carry pots, pans, and a week's worth of food to tide my daughter over until she gets settled. Her clothes—including the white "Cinderella" dress and silver platform shoes like the ones I wore in the '70s—drape over the back seat. Who knows? She might get asked to a dance.

"You should have seen it," she says with excitement bubbling in her laugh. She is unpacking from her second year as a junior counselor at Camp Snowbird, the local asthma camp for elementary kids.

"We knew we were okay, but water just came pouring into the campground." At sixteen, she thinks she knows it all. I swallow an instinctual panic; the danger is past. Today she is safe, the July sun is shining, and it's good to have her home.

"They brought in crews to keep the road from washing out. All the little kids were scared of the lightning, and the other counselors were huddled under plastic garbage sacks. They thought I was crazy, but it was great! I took off my shoes and ran out in the rain. There was mud everywhere—it was so-oo squishy—and I got it in my hair and everything. I was jumping up and down in the water and laughing and dancing. They thought I was crazy. It was a blast! You should have seen it. Do you think I'm crazy?"

We pray that the new windshield wipers on her car will provide clear vision, that the tires will grip even though the tires of other travelers might hydroplane, that the headlights will pierce the low cloud cover now settling over nearby mountain ranges. Just to be safe, though, we decide to travel in tandem. I will lead the way. We go back inside the house to take one last look around.

"You have all your medicine?" I ask. She does. And her new prescriptions, she adds. And her nebulizer. Stop worrying.

Her room stands empty, the closet door slightly ajar, the bed unmade. With the exception of a stray hanger on the floor, it's as clean as it's ever been. The light green stains on the carpet under her drafting table are still there. The carpet cleaner just made the forgotten bits of art chalk spread. Her mirror reflects a steel bed frame, no cheesy photographs, no favorite book open across a pillow.

". . . she stitched frantically, her needle dipping and surfacing in the nettle flax as the moon rose higher and higher."

"Mom," she interrupts, placing a hand over the page. "She can do it, can't she?"

"Honey, I can't remember. You have to let me finish."

". . . Her scratched fingers bled tiny droplets onto the shirtfront, but she couldn't stop. Already, a faint glow covered the sky and she could hear the honking now. All but the last sleeve was finished. One by one the geese descended. She stood, and quickly

threw a perfect shirt about the shoulders of each stately form. As the flaxen shirts fell about them, each goose was transfigured, feather by feather, until six princes stood before her. But the seventh—"

"No, Mom. No. She just couldn't let him stay that way forever."

"Shh. Let me finish."

". . . but the seventh stood waiting, his wings raised against the silver air. He turned slowly and his silky neck brushed against her soft arm. 'It is the best I can do,' she said, and draped the last, unfinished shirt around him."[1]

It takes two days to pull everything out of boxes, drawers, shelves, and decide which corsages to keep, which photos to stash, which letters to throw away. We tuck back the yarn hair of her Cabbage Patch dolls before boxing them up. We smooth the acrylic fur of her favorite "stuffed-up" animals. We laugh again over that one. So many allergies for her, the word *stuffed* was automatically tagged with *up*. It stuck. Even her brothers and sister say it. Even her dad and I.

Standing together in the doorway, I avoid remembering quarrels about responsibility, trust, curfew. I don't remind her how hurt I was after finding out that she lied to me about piercing her navel. She did it months ago, and I only find out now, hours before losing her to the future. I'm still not past a welling-up of tears. The whole two days of cleaning out her room, when I most want to draw her again into my lap and smooth back her wild, dark hair and remember, I am stung with her separateness. I try to remind myself that this is normal; this is the goal. I want it too.

In the photograph, she leans against her tall dad, the top of her head not quite reaching his shoulder. Her look tells the camera that she might have just stopped crying. But with the gray sky as a frame in the background, it could just be the effect of rain. In the

next shot, her father and I have exchanged places. My arm hugs her shoulder, and we gaze into the lens. Key chains dangle from our fingers. We smile, but the focus is fuzzy, which makes it even more amazing how aware I am of the sharp outline of the house to the side. And there, right there, so at ease in flight, is a bird soaring past the upper righthand cornice.

The gray asphalt streams ahead like in a chalk drawing. Through the intermittent swish of wipers, the wide earth opens up and a framed landscape presents itself again and again. Each minute of closure before opening makes the rain-painted colors stand out in vivid relief. I notice how dark the green is on the trees, how black the rivulets that streak the bark. Above the horizon, dense bands of charcoal slash horizontal clouds. I glance west. Flying in formation, geese tip their wings and veer briefly toward the mountains before straightening again, making their way south. It's too soon for fall. My brow creases, and I question the sky which looms both higher and lower, heavy with imminent downpour. Behind me a wash of red follows. An hour and a half into the trip, I signal to pull over.

At the next turnout, we exit and pull into a gas station. She doesn't understand why we're stopping and, with a frown, leans to roll down the window. A low rumble of thunder startles us both, and she brushes off the raindrops before they can collect on her white shirtsleeve.

"How fast can your car go?" I ask.

"I can get it up to 75," she says. "At 80 it starts to wobble," and then she grins.

"Well, we'd better fly."

Just before Bryce Canyon, the storm hits. The wind, which has been gradually picking up, now bursts full force against the sides of the car. Rain pounds down double time, and I turn the wipers up as fast as they'll go. Their heavy thump-thump, thump-thump is reassuring. I'm okay, will probably continue just fine. But each time a gust makes my Explorer sway, I worry a little. The red car behind me could soon be in trouble.

A glance in the rearview mirror tells me it's time to slow down. I'm too far ahead, and I can't tell how she is managing at that distance. I brake until she's just a couple of car lengths behind. Even at a lower speed, I watch her through the mirror anxiously. She tries to keep an even course but the road is getting slick, and the car slides a little going around a turn. We're heading uphill, approaching the summit, the highest elevation of the trip.

"Come on, baby," I coax under my breath, as if she can hear. "Keep that pedal steady. You can do it. Keep coming. Keep coming. Don't hesitate now." I force calm down through my shoulders and to my fingers gripping the wheel.

With my attention riveted on the car behind me, I don't notice a semitrailer screaming down the slope, approaching us in the opposite direction—until that hollow second just before calm slaps apart. In that instant, I gasp. A water wake, its velocity born of speed and height, slams against the windshield of my car. For a few seconds, I cannot see the road. I cannot see the boundaries of the highway—don't know where I am—if, or where, the car has drifted. When sight and breath return, and my heartbeat slows to the pounding rhythm of wipers or wings, I blink furiously and find my way to the shoulder of the road. Shaking, I feel the unpredictable nature of journeying deep in my nerves and bones. My arms ache. My forehead is clammy. And I remember my daughter is following.

I turn my head just in time to catch the whoosh of red as her car passes me. Just in time, I see her upraised thumb and brilliant smile as she swoops up the slope ahead. The distance between us widens as I struggle to keep her in sight. Quickly, she crests the summit and then quickly, easily as a bird, disappears over the edge.

Sundy Watanabe has just completed her M.A. in English at Utah State University and is married and has four children. This essay won second place in the 1997 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.

NOTE

[1]Hans Christian Andersen, "The Wild Swans."