

MICHAEL KOUROUBETES

The Tool Box



My mother switched off the TV, grabbed my dad's rusting tool box from under the kitchen sink—the tool box he left after their separation. Before I knew it, she was dragging me out of our house with the tool box clinched under her arm.

I was six years old and we were watching an *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode in which a husband murders his wife with a hammer. She suddenly was convinced that my father was going to bash her head in with a Ball-peen hammer and stab her eyes out with a Phillips and Frearson screwdrivers. She threw it into the trunk of the Plymouth Fury. As we jumped into the car I smelled the creosote from the corner telephone pole. We drove off, the thick petroleum smell of tar chasing us out of the driveway, with the rattling, tumbling tool box in the trunk.

She screeched the car to a stop on the Jefferson Street Bridge, the most popular place for the depressed to jump without a "Good-bye." She grabbed the tool box. I ran to the bridge's cement balustrades peeking through its columns. With furious broken English she said, "You no going to kill me!" and tossed it the metal case—arcing over the balustrades—SPLASH!

The tool box sank immediately into the murky swirling deep and I remember thinking there must be many tool boxes on the river bottom, along with old Studebakers and dead bodies in driver's seats swaying in the blue-black undercurrents of the river, decaying in thick threads of river weeds rippling like green underwater ribbons.

*

My parents had a traditional wedding. It was arranged by their families. My father was Greek-American born in Mishawaka but my mother was born and raised in Athens. My mother grew up poor and lost her own mother to cancer at age thirteen. She was brought by her half brother and sister. My grandfather was a tailor and an alcoholic; his stomach was pumped more than once. When I was visiting my family in Athens years later they told me she was always *excitable* and deeply untrusting.

She never overcame those traits.

*

When I was ten, my mother and I were leaving the one of many doctors'

appointments she rotated through over and over. Her paranoia and rage turned on her, turning into twisting snake inside her, reducing her to a hypochondriac. We were walking hand in hand down the sidewalk and she started crying.

She said, "Mikey, my son, I know I have breast cancer."

"Mother you don't. The doctors keep telling you that you're okay."

"I don't believe them, I know I'm sick."

I pulled her down to me, her knees on the cold cement, I hugged her.

I said, "You are stronger than you know. You will fight it all."

She squeezed me tighter and nodded yes.

*

As I grew older I forgot about our few tender moments, and only remembered the irrational fights and arguments we had. She was always my insane mother in my mind. Then for years, my mother flew back and forth from Athens to South Bend and back again. She was restless, always seeking a home, but never finding one. We'd visit, and she always told me how much she missed me and how we should live together. I always refused.

*

My mother is dead now. She was found in her Athens apartment a week after her demise. She didn't have many friends and wasn't immediately missed. I was stunned when at the news of her death.

Here's what a mother's death does to you: you are numb and you realize that you will never break through the wall of tombstones that death slams down before you, impregnable and forever standing between you and her. There is no chance for reconciliation, no chance for forgiveness, no chance to see her again. Death is master of the past, leaving you in a pallid present.

*

The last phone call I had with my mother, she was pleading to come back to Indiana to be with me and my father. I said "No". Our fighting, her paranoia, her manic-depression, left inside of me, a broken mother that no tools from some magical tool box could ever fix.

To this day, I regret those two letters issuing from my mouth.

And when I drive over the Jefferson Bridge, I still imagine the tool box planted at the bottom of the river along with cars, dead swaying corpses and murky weeds.