A Feast For What Was Lost by Kim O'Connell

JULY 11, 2012 BY KRISTIN 3 COMMENTS

One night not too long ago, my brother Dean and I were helping my mother up my front steps in the darkness, jockeying her suitcases, a get-well balloon, and her walker. She had endured a lengthy surgery to correct

severe spinal stenosis, a condition that had caused her chronic pain, and would be staying with me for a couple weeks to convalesce. As a Vietnamese woman, she has always been petite, but I was shocked to see that the surgery had diminished her still. She seemed vulnerable and small, curled up on herself like a fern before dawn. I was tired too, nearly 12 weeks into my first trimester of pregnancy, and looked forward to the end of what had been a long ordeal of visits and consultations related to my mother's care.

Inside my tiny kitchen, my father—my mother's ex-husband, who had fallen for her when he was a soldier fighting the war—was helping out by preparing dinner. It was the kind of bachelor meal he was always preparing: store-bought rotisserie chicken, canned green beans, and instant rice. We sat and ate, silently. It occurred to me that this was the first time my family had been in the same room in more than 20 years.

I was nine when my father received primary guardianship of Dean and me, after a bitter divorce and custody battle. By court order, we saw my mother only on Thursday nights and every other weekend, and for six weeks in the summertime. Over the years, however, visitation schedules were dropped as we got involved in other activities. My brother began to suffer from depression and other emotional problems, got a girl pregnant, and flunked out of school. My family grew apart. My mother came to my high school graduation and we all posed for photos, but it was the last time we stood together and smiled. She and I began to argue more frequently, about everything and nothing, eventually falling into a bitter estrangement. We barely spoke for two decades.

Here we were, however, eating a meal together, the four of us, an odd facsimile of the family we used to be: My

RECENT POSTS

father, ill at ease, unsure of what to say to his ex-wife—but here all the same. My brother, helping his mother, at least this once, without expecting her to shove a few bucks in his hand. And me, who reconciled with my mother nearly two years ago, after she wrote me a letter when my son Declan was born. As we ate, Declan was content to play with his trains, oblivious to the interplay of tension and tenderness at work all around him.

A week into her convalescence in my basement guest room, my mother and I settled into a comfortable routine. At first, when she could barely walk, I took trays of food down to her, garnishing the plates with fruit and pre-heating the syrup for her pancakes. One morning, she said the meal made her feel like she was at a Hilton; the next morning it was the Four Seasons. I enjoyed outdoing myself. One time, she said, "Thanks, Mom," and we laughed at the role reversal. Then, after several days of waffles and lasagna and chicken tetrazzini, she sheepishly admitted, "Kim, honey, I miss Vietnamese food. I miss rice."

Yet she seemed happier and stronger in my care, even younger somehow. So I was reluctant to tell her the truth one night after I used the bathroom and saw blood. The on-call obstetrician said it could be nothing, but it could be something. "Call back if it gets worse." After two days in which nothing more happened, in which hope tried valiantly to fill the growing pit in my stomach, it got worse. I summoned my mother and asked her to watch my son while my husband drove me to the hospital. I told her my symptoms, and she nodded knowingly. She prayed out loud, in Vietnamese, and I was grateful both for the prayer and for not understanding what she said. Knowing would have made it too real.

Still Standing's Poetry Sunday: The Miscarriage by Vicky Wallace

CATEGORIES

Art and Photography
Book Reviews
Cover Image
Current Issue
Essay
Fall/Winter 2011
Fall/Winter 2012
Fiction
Letter from the Editor
Poetry
Spring 2011
Spring 2012
Still Standing's Poetry Sundays
Summer 2011
Summer 2012
Summer 2013
Uncategorized

BUTTONS

TODAY ON STILL STANDING

Grief…Like Love

FOLLOW OUR PINS

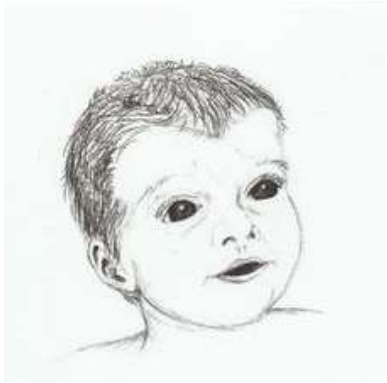
At the hospital, a chirpy young technician prepared to do an ultrasound. She asked me whether I'd been bleeding, and when I said yes, she responded, "Sounds like fun." I was annoyed by her flippant tone but missed it when she grew more sober. She poked and prodded me and asked, "You're sure you took a pregnancy test?" My heart sank. Then she called me "hon"—a sure sign something was terribly wrong—and led us into a windowless consultation room with four chairs and a telephone. "Someone will call with your results," she said as she left. Fifteen agonizing minutes later, the phone rang and a voice told us what we already knew. We'd lost the baby.

Somehow, we made it out of the hospital. We drove home, barely speaking. I dreaded having to tell anyone, but most of all I dreaded having to tell my mother, to say that her prayer went unanswered. Later, she told me that it was, that she prayed only for my health and happiness. But when I walked in the door and saw her waiting face, I found that I didn't have to say anything. We fell together and she held me tight, our roles reversed back to what they were all along.

Sometime later, when my tears had run their course, my mother talked with me about the miscarriage she had had decades ago, before I was born. She had confided this fact to me when I was a teenager, and I was ashamed to remember my awkward, mumbling, unsympathetic response then. But now we commiserated, as women and as mothers, in a way we never had before.

One night toward the end of my mother's stay, we decided to make an easy stir-fry dinner of shrimp and rice. Standing side by side over my small stove, we planned elaborate feasts that we would attempt on future visits—lemongrass chicken, lobster with cream sauce,

Eating for Fertility



Portraits of babies

The Glow – The Proof

filet mignon—after I moved her back home and we returned to our separate lives. At that moment, though, the simple meal worked just fine. But she refused to cook the instant rice with which my father had stocked my pantry, being helpful in his way. Instead, she asked me to bring her two scoops of fragrant jasmine rice from a large bin she once bought for me at the Asian market.

After covering the rice with water, she swirled the grains through her long fingers until the water turned the color of skim milk, removing the excess starch. She drained the rice and refilled the pot, repeating the process until the liquid ran clear. Looking at her, I remembered a favorite Jane Kenyon poem about happiness, about how it fills the empty spaces when you least expect it and may not be ready for it. The poem had come to me in the hospital, when I was preparing for a medical procedure to remove the "products of conception"—a term so clinical that it both offended me and relieved me from imagining the living, breathing child I had already met in my dreams. *"There's just no accounting for happiness,"* the poem begins, *"the way it turns up like a prodigal who comes back to the dust at your feet, having squandered a fortune far away":*

> *And how can you not forgive?*
>
> *You make a feast in honor of what*
>
> *was lost…and you weep night and day*
>
> *to know that you were not abandoned,*
>
> *that happiness saved its most extreme form*

for you alone.

In the hospital, the poem had helped me to feel hopeful; but at that particular moment it felt like a reminder to be grateful. I watched my mother as she steamed the rice over the lowest heat, as slowly as possible. "Patience," she said gently, as I leaned in and stirred the pot. Patience, I thought, through twenty years of estrangements, until a family can reunite over an evening meal. Through nine months of pregnancy, through the fears of forty weeks, until a baby is born. Through fifteen minutes in a windowless room, until you learn that it's time to start over. Later, I told my mother that it was the best rice I'd ever had, and it was.

**This piece originally appeared in the June 2009 issue of *Exhale.*

Photo: Kim O'Connell

Author Bio:

Kim O'Connell is a writer based in Arlington, Va., whose work has appeared in Babble.com, Yahoo News, *The Washington Post, Preservation*, NationalGeographic.com, and other publications. After overcoming a range of fertility challenges, she is now a mother of two: a nearly six-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. She blogs at www.bloomingboy.com.

You Might Also Like:

Finding Contentment in the Ride by Amy McCarter	Cover Image - Rainbow Baby by Sharon Chatham	
Before and After by Emily Geering	Puzzles by Vince Cogley	

Related Posts

- "Belief: Before and After," by Amy McCarter
- The Cardigan by Helene Jangenfält
- Combing My Ground by St. Elsewhere
- Continuity and Expansion by Sara A. Clement
- The Petrified Womb by Susan Griner
- On Scars & Healing by Kathy Benson
- Puzzles by Vince Cogley
- Measures by Kelly Garrity
- Midnight Musings by Kali Lindner
- Breathing New Life into a Torn Soul by Mel Lefebvre

FILED UNDER: ESSAY, SPRING 2012
TAGGED WITH: ESSAY, SPRING 2012

COMMENTS