Three Days Before the Witches Fly by *Suzanne Nielsen*

Since my adopted mother's passing in 1993, I think of her like clockwork, each year on her birthday in October, three days before the witches fly. Her matriarchal voice bellows from the heavens the morning of, and she's shaking her finger insisting I must adhere to the female tribe now as the elder; the corners of her mouth form a smile, and her eyes look smaller, but still attentive. She hands me a note that validates my motherhood. She signs it, "Love, Mother." She closes her tiny eyes and talks as though in a trance, her eyes in perpetual motion under closed lids. She talks about how she was unavailable as a mother due to her dependency on tranquilizers, and how "no one hands you a book, a step-by-step manual for raising a child free of sorrow." She tells me this because she's been watching my progression through single parenthood, through dependency, through bouts of unyielding depression, and she's high-fiving me, blowing me kisses. I feel them touch my cheeks, and widen my eyes. I hug myself and I thank her for visiting me. I thank her for mothering me the only way she knew how. I blow kisses back. "I love you," I say. Three simple syllables that echo my heart.

I am an adoptee. I am a depressive. These things make up a part of who I am. They are my strengths and my challenges. I am also a mother. A mother to little me and big me; a mother to two adult sons, and it's the biggest privilege I've had in life.

If I listen closely, I sometimes I hear echoes from the past. I recall the scene with Dad snoring in the recliner; Mom is outside watering flowers; siblings and half siblings are yelling in unison, "Mom, watch me. Mom, did you see?" She watches them turn summersaults, stand on

their heads, while eagerly awaiting her approval. Aunties are arguing in the kitchen; the uncles are quietly smoking in the living room watching *Wild Kingdom*. A pair of cousins are playing ping pong in the basement. Your mother asks you to go call your brother and cousin for supper. You open the door and yell the names of your three previous siblings. You close the door and your mother kneels down to your height and says, "It's okay, Suzanne. Now go call your brother and cousin." You do so with vivid and murky memories competing until you sit down at the table and listen to the matriarchs pray to the heavens for nourishment.

My adoptive parents took me into their home shortly after I turned three. By age five, they had legally adopted me. Some memories I have from the transition seem vague, but others are vividly clear. I remember being in a room that echoed while people paced with tablets and pens, ignoring the huge smeared window behind the desk where a man sat in a black robe, glasses perched atop his head. Also in the chambers were my new mom and dad, along with a state assigned social worker, and four talking heads whispering sentence fragments in the judge's ear. When we entered the room, my father tenderly lifted me onto the judge's desk and there I sat while they mumbled about things I didn't understand. At some point the judge looked at me, an elderly man whose thick glasses slid off his shiny head, and he asked, "You don't talk much do you?" Somehow, I internalized this not as a question, but as a means of identification. I answered back immediately. "I do too talk." And yet I believe that specific moment triggered my many years of long bouts of silence.

I invite you into the courtroom sixty years later primarily to give you a glimpse into markers of the moments when shame, vulnerability, abandonment, and an overwhelming feeling of being odd claimed its space in my psyche. Years later these markers would be identified, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) as clinical depression. With therapy I learned to provoke the silence within. I learned that I needed to identify with my psyche. I needed to comprehend what harbored within, and to accept my challenge, my depression. I needed to learn to not be afraid of it, to not be ashamed of it. I needed to understand how my mother's dependency transformed her invisible depression into a world of silence. My mother could not admit that depression ruled the roost for so many of my developing years. My mother could not admit to her own preexisting depression. Although the two of us butted heads infinitely, we agreed to disagree that depression was at the root of the problem. (Do I need this paragraph?)

The instinctual defiance, and the shame that elapsed in that courtroom sixty years ago, was my first conscious awareness that I was, in fact, inferior. When feeling inferior, you find your own devices such to shield you. These become instinctual to ward off prey. To this day I have the physical motion of rocking. I am rocking as I write this to my own rhythm. I am sitting in a straight back chair and I am rocking. I find this motion comforting and instinctual. I don't realize that I am moving in the slightest. I routinely rock myself to sleep, and many childhood afternoons, I coveted my white rocking chair inside my private bedroom, staring out the window at the overgrown weeping willow, where I played house, which, in reflection, was a strange form of play: I'd be inside the house, usually alone and content, envisioning my pre-

birth existence, my embryonic goo forming and floating, reacting to the sounds sent through an umbilical connection.

For the past four decades, I've lived with swallowing antidepressants, and overall, this keeps me functioning fairly steadily with some side effects. In addition to working with a psychiatrist, I've worked with neurologists, psychologists, acupuncturists, chiropractors, physical trainers, and psychics. I've tried bio feedback, talk therapy, exercise, needles, and array of antidepressants, meditation, Mari-El healing (a form of hands-on healing that teaches you to mother the child within), prescription drugs, street drugs, alcohol, sobriety, and I'll stop there. The modes of therapies occasionally complement one another, as well as contradict one another. But for a long time, and still occasionally, I feel like the gerbil on the wheel, the dog chasing its tail, the polar bear pacing at Como Zoo.

In the basement is where my youngest son paces. He isolates with chemical dependency and depression, unwilling to address the depression via medication. He and I talk at times into the early hours immitating ways to escape its claws. He's completed a 30-day drug treatment program, and a four-month residential aftercare program. He's kind, intuitive and he recognizes his challenges. Over a three-year period, Evan and I became familiar with juvenile court, and his last courtroom appearance brought me back to the judge's chamber, where I sat scared and voiceless so many years previous. I looked at my child, the one who wears his feelings on his face, and he sat scared, and quiet.

Evan and I drove home that mid-morning in silence as the echoes from that room bounced off the dashboard of the car. I replayed the verdict over and over in my head. The

court ordered Evan to complete an in-patient treatment program once again. It was October, 2007, and the witches would be flying later in the month. My mother's birthday would come and go. Evan would extend his stay in aftercare, and I saw him fight like a tiger to break free from depression's hold. I think back to the tribe; Aunt Lil, Esther, my grandmother. I think of the men in my family mesmerized by Wild Kingdom.

If only a child came with an instruction manual. No one prepares you for the depths of motherhood. Perhaps Evan will take life a day at a time; maybe meds might be considered. Over time the highs and lows of my depression become more regulated. And as a result this allows me to live life, not just survive life. Medication for my invisible disease seems to keep me on track. It tames the tiger within, but doesn't extinguish the fight. I still hear echoes of insecurity, but I no longer run from them. In a strange way the echoes that used to haunt me now are warning signs to keep going. Move through the fog, surrender to yourself long enough to hear the noise, and mother the child within.

I think of my life before medication, fourteen years of age, when I felt hopeless and stupid. I ran without a destination like a wild tiger, no camouflage, no voice, no contribution to society. At 63, I've groomed the rhythm that soothes me, my way to mother myself, my attempt to pass for normal. In my quiet time I sometimes call upon the matriarchs to gently push me forward.

They've set an example for me to contribute to society, and I watch as my sons contribute to society. My eldest, Commander Major Murphy is finishing up a three-year

assignment with Special Forces Underwater Operations School in Key West. He serves our country with a passion and honor that brings tears to my eyes. Silent and stoic, he holds his feelings close to his heart like his body armor. He finished an Ironman Triathlon with a broken collar bone. He is disciplined like many first children are. I just spent a week with him in the Keys, and although we didn't talk much I noticed the lines surrounding his eyes, and I think of what he's seen in Afghanistan and many other places of war-torn destruction; I think of the adrenaline rush he must have experienced seeing his blood pour out of a gunshot wound. There's a tiger within, tamed and controlled. This was my first trip since covid.

In March of 2020, the year of COVID-19, I traveled to Tarpon Springs, Florida, where Evan had relocated a year earlier. On the drive from the airport to Evan's apartment I rattled on about the imposition of the virus's strange and surreal reality. Evan took a detour, we parked the car and walked 100 feet to the water. "This is my favorite place to come and sit," Evan said. We sat next to the gulf's gentle tide and let the midafternoon sun warm our bottoms. We stared into the vastness of the ocean in front of us. I asked Evan how he was doing. He lit a joint and said, "you know Mom, up and down." He stared ahead and spotted a manatee, and then another. "The males always follow the females," he said. They were huge, and carefree. "That's smart of them to do so," I replied. Evan laughed and said, they're matriarchs I guess." I thought on that while I watched them float almost lifeless. "Do you think they're depressed? Their bodies get so beat up here by boat motors. I watch them a lot and their scars are pretty deep, but they survive," Evan said. "That is a fact, Evan. They do seem to survive." We sat there listening to the modes of movement. The boat motors roared, the seagulls squeaked. The sky was almost one consistent shade of blue. "I could stay here

forever," Evan said. Then it dawned on me; there was a rhythm that soothed him. I watched as he tapped his right foot to what was swaying him, a habit he'd developed before he set foot in school. The angst was moving into his foot and burying itself deep within the warmth of the sand. "We can stay here as long as you like," I said. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it three times while I rocked back and forth so naturally. Three squeezes meant I Love You, if you counted the syllables.