

## Florida 1/15/08

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### Revisiting Mom

I left on Friday to travel to another warm winter climate, Florida, where I met my sisters to visit my Mom's husband, and to go through the items that we would eventually have shipped to New York when their house is finally sold. The plane ride out was fraught with weird flashbacks to the last time I had flown to Orlando — the day my mother died. Almost a year ago, I left East Hampton thinking that I wanted to help her through what we all thought was going to be the painful part of her illness, and what would, we thought, the beginning of the end phase. I remember being angry (ridiculously), while I waited to take off from Islip, that she hadn't waited for me to get there before her suffering began. My anger welled up because I couldn't play my role -- being stoically immune to the pain of the inevitable conclusion of her illness so that I could take care of her. At the same time, I was also grateful that my sisters were already there to hold her hand through the first visit with hospice, which we knew would be a sure sign to her that we were preparing for the end — and might be her first glimpse of that inevitable conclusion -- or maybe she just let us believe that it would be her first glimpse.

I remember sitting on the plane fretting about the fact that my plane had been delayed, that I couldn't be on the phone with them finding out what was happening, and just generally being distraught. And then I remember saying to myself, just let her go. She's already gone. I said this because I realized that the person she was had already departed. Slowly, I began to accept that what was left was merely the shell of the body and her psyche coping with the reality of what was happening. I couldn't fantasize any longer about going on walks with her, or shopping with her, or having in depth and explanatory talks about her life and how that impacted our lives, or having her live to see another grandchild born. And I was strangely relieved to be letting all of that go, realizing that I could find peace in that too.

I remember arriving at the rental car counter and listening to all the inane chatter on the line to the counter about the CNN headlines that were streaming across the TV suspended from the ceiling -- Anna Nicole Smith had just been found dead. Everyone was so shocked. It was so tragic they said, her life, the fact that her teenage son had just died, that she had just had a baby. And I was thinking — that's not tragic! No one on this line even knows her. Don't you know that my mother is now facing her own death? How ridiculous.

In fact, my mother died very near the time that I was on the plane working on my first phase of letting go, realizing that there was nothing left to cling to. I learned this on the highway five minutes after getting in my rental car. It was rush hour and I pulled over so as not to bump into the cars in front of me through the tears. I felt so alone — so helpless — so lost — so guilty. What was I doing in this rental car — or on that plane — while my mother was dying? How could I not have been there? It was too overwhelming to take in. I just wanted to magically be there. Make time turn back. But there was no avoiding the black hole that I was looking down, anymore than I could avoid driving down that flat, dark highway to get to her house that night.

Now, a year later, I still have those feelings about it — especially thinking that I can somehow turn back time. While I stayed at her house — virtually unchanged since she died, I kept thinking I would hear her walking around in the morning through the doorway or feel when she kissed me goodnight how her face was cool and moist from her nightly cleaning routine. Strangely, when I walked into her darkened house this time at 1:30 am, I half believed I would still see her body there the way I did that night almost a year ago. It is only through this experience of her death that I have seen my mind's power to bend time beyond all reason.

And yet, it was lovely to be in her house again. To be around all the silly trinkets she collected over her time in that house. How she mixed TJ Maxx with Italian Majolica. How she kept the sappiest books of poems and "meditations" and how she loved cupids and angels. How strange that she could be so soft after so many years of painful existence. I was relieved to learn that Bill is not in any huge rush to sell the house. That we might still be able to go down there and live in her space again. To bend time enough to bring back all the warm thoughts, maybe enough to get over the more difficult memories.

Either way, as I sit here on my way back to my boys, I feel grateful to have had that time with my sisters. To feel close to my mother again. To realize that I have already said goodbye to her so that now I can simply enjoy her lingering presence.