



Nat Lurie

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Will Dunlap

Category: Short Story

The Mother

The Mother

My father told me it was like magic when I was born. He said the thunder outside froze mid clap. He said my mother had told him the building shuddered, and it felt like all the world around her had imploded into a little muffled dot. My father said that was the moment her mind had finally cracked.

As a child, I hadn't noticed anything unusual about her. My mother, as mothers are to all toddlers, was beyond human. A subspecies that slept standing straight up with their eyes wide open, a spirit that faded from existence whenever I retired from requiring constant attention. So it hadn't seemed strange to me that she never spoke, not even once. Nor showed any hint of emotion; I didn't think the muscles in her face had shifted in years. Crust had built up in the corners of her eyes, little tufts of eyelashes and dust, because she didn't blink either. But I had never met another mother. I knew they existed, out in the world, but never saw them, and so I assumed that they were all exactly like mine.

And it didn't bother me, the lack of feeling. She expressed her love in other ways. Our old house was nestled in its own corner of reality. A concrete building with five sets of stairs all joined together in one long, vertical well. The windows were sealed with lines of thick glue, colorfully patterned carpet blanketed the floors broken in intervals by bare patches where squares of it had been pulled up. Rectangular fluorescent lights blinked on and off haphazardly within the rooms and along the hallways. My father liked to name the rooms inside the building. The fifth cupboard on the third floor was called Cobweb, the dim chasm-like room below the first floor was Mildew. Even the bathroom with seven toilettes, all separated by graffiti branded, thin, plaster walls he endearingly dubbed Leopold. Every evening, without fail, I would be asked to fetch a glass from Bristle, after my father had seated himself at the head of the dining table and realized he had forgotten a drink for my mother. And I would kick back my stool and clamber up onto the split granite counter top to reach the shelves where the elusive styrofoam cups roosted. It became routine, and so familiar. I would think *hand on stone, foot on handle, knee on stone* and suddenly I would stand four feet taller than I had been before. Until, one night, the handle of the cabinet door beneath the countertop wasn't there. The world slowed down as my bare foot had grazed the empty space where my step was supposed to be. The hole in the asbestos tile ceiling grinned at me as I fell, menacing, ragged edges dripping with dust as it salivated, anticipating my demise. It was then a hand had brushed my head. I widened my eyes and there was my mother's face. I was cradled in her arms, inches from the concrete floor. She set me on my feet, reached into the cabinet, and retrieved a tube of cups, wrapped in a sleeve of plastic. I don't remember my father ever forgetting a glass after that.

I was fifteen when I first met another mother. It was January, the first week of the month, and gloomy as I had annually observed from the clear paned window on the third floor. But this January was different. I could hear it in the pipes, groaning as frigid water inched through them, and could feel it in the woolen coat my father slipped over my arms and shoulders. At first, I was uncomfortable in the thick fabric, my arms pinned in place, my shirt ruffled against my back, and my shirt sleeves shoved halfway up those of the jacket. But I kept it on, because my father wore his only twice a year. I could tell that this was the day he would take me outside with him.

My father had packed a large bag with every set of clothing both he and I owned, save for the thick corduroy pants I wore tucked into long socks. He then sat me down upon the first stair and shoved my feet in molded leather footwear, thick and rigid, pulled on two plastic capped pieces of string, and tied them in a neat bow near where my ankle began. Then he helped me to my feet.

"There, your own pair of shoes," my father had explained. He slipped his own on as I wobbled around the entryway. Excitement bubbled in my chest as he stood and took two face masks off of their hook, one whipped and rugged, the other still scented faintly of plastic packaging. The first time he had put one on I had been frightened. His hair was

matted down and smothered by a cap of leather, and his voice was muffled behind a muzzle of mesh. What had scared me the most, however, were his eyes. They were just two domes of shiny black plastic. He told me he could see out of them, but I didn't quite believe him.

So when he placed the duplicate over my head and tightened the straps at the back of my skull, panic flared and I stumbled backwards.

"It's all right," he cautioned me. "We need these on to breath out there."

I relaxed immediately. My father nodded concisely, took my shoulders, and spun me around to face my mother, who was placed in the mouth of the hallway, arms by her sides.

"Say goodbye to your mother," my father murmured. I could feel his breath against my neck as it funneled from his mask. "Say goodbye, now."

I tried to turn around, puzzled, but my father held my shoulders firmly set towards my mother where she stood, all shrouded in a dim fluorescent glow.

My father sighed. "Like this, boy." He lifted one hand off of my right shoulder and waved his splayed fingers, palm out, at my mother. "Go on."

I slowly stretched my arm out, locked my elbow, and unclenched my fist. My mother cocked her head. With two jerks, I waved my hand back and forth, then, as my mother shuffled forward once, my father grabbed my still outstretched hand and motioned me towards the door.

I turned with him, facing the outside, but stayed rooted to my place on the tile, my hand pulling from his as he continued forward. My father stopped by the doorway, slung his bag over his shoulder and pushed his way into the outside. A blast of frigid, sulfurous air knocked me backwards in his wake, but my mother stepped up behind me and pushed me through the door after him. He was waiting for me, hands shoved into his pockets, and wooly hood waving back behind his head. I stole a glance back and up the building. The fifth floor was hidden in a yellow fog that sagged in tendrils, seeping a film that clouded the windows of the lower floors. Through the door I could see my mother, stone-faced as ever, turn away and disappear down the hallway.

With a shuddering breath, I faced what my father called the Tundra. Far along the horizon, a haze of ash and ice blew fiercely. Yellowish mounds capped with thick mist stretched for miles. Faults in the ground spewed gusts of toxic smoke like fire from a dragon's maw. Dust tumbled over the tops of my shoes. My father took my hand and led me away.

We stumbled on for hours. The wind blew, but it was silent, and I could hear my father as he told me what things were, and what things had been. Shriveled rags of what looked like cloth sticking out of the ground were shrubs. He said that these had been tall things once. Taller than our building, tall enough for their green tufts to scrape the white sacks of moisture my father called clouds. A cut in the ground, wide as it was deep, he said once had water flowing through it. But now it was just a snaking bed of loose silt, gently piling up its slopes as the wind forced dust down into it.

I was grateful for the shoes. Every so often, a speck of rock would drill itself into their thick leather, but never pierced all the way to my toes. The wind blew these tiny stones up near my face as well, but the mask warded them off. The mesh that covered the tube over my mouth was made of layers of tighter and tighter mesh as it closed in on my face, preventing the suspended particles from finding their way into my nose. My father said that years ago, the tall growing things would have held the dust in place, but now the breeze snatched it up and hurled it in great gusts that would fill my lungs faster than I could cough.

We trudged onwards until the swirling mists of dust and gas were darkened by the light dimming behind them. It was then my father stopped. I almost ran into his back, it was so sudden and night so close. He helped me duck down under an overhanging slab of stone and then he talked. We sat there until I could barely see my own hand in front of me. The only thing I could spot of my father was the glare off the black orbs in his mask. He explained to me how everything had been. When he was only a boy and the sky was blue, not orange. When buildings towered even higher than our own. When roaring metal boxers shot down paved paths faster than anything he'd ever seen. He said that there were things living in the ground when he was young. Things that slunk around on four legs, not two, and slithered flat on their stomachs, and flew through the sky on wings of silk. There were people too, he said. People like us everywhere you looked. At each and every turn there was someone who talked just like we did.

I didn't believe him. I wiped the layer of grit from my mask and pushed back out from under the overhang. My father was quick to follow after me. He took me by the shoulders and stared down at me, but however kind his voice was, I couldn't attach it to his mouth. It was all shuttered inside the grated muzzle of his mask. Still, when he turned and walked away again, I followed him. Because he was my father, and anyways, I wasn't sure which way led back to home.

It wasn't much further before I saw the lights. They were puffy and ragged behind the swarms of dust, but they were there. And behind the lights, as we grew closer, there were walls. Walls and windows climbing more than twelve stories into the air. I stopped a few paces from the steel door, my face bathed in fluorescents, and stared up at the

concrete. Any indication of an end to the building was only the little lip of stone that rimmed the roof. But my eyes were torn from the inverted abyss of height that made my head swim to a patch of light on the second floor. A silhouette, fading into the glow behind it, stared out at us. Seconds later, the steel door creaked open.

My father took my hand and hurried me inside before the doors were slammed shut behind us. The room we had entered was so bright and clear, I felt my hair bleaching. Faces, faces of people, peaked out from underneath plaster trimmed archways. People with bagging eyes and thin hands and gaunt cheeks.

My hands shook too violently to remove my own mask, so my father lifted it off my face for me. I scrunched my eyes against the glare, and gingerly felt the raw patches where the rim of the leather had eaten into my skin. A man with a fiery red beard and round face walked up to me and my father. He wore a stocking cap and jacket with cuffs around the elbows, the ends of which were tucked into the waistband of his pants. When he extended a hand, my father took it in his and shook it up and down twice. Then the man did the same to me. His palm was very cold against mine, and his long fingernails grazed my wrist.

“Welcome back, Johannas,” he said. His voice was gravelly and low, but somehow squeaky, like he had something stuck in his throat that wouldn’t allow the words to pass by it.

“Every year, like clockwork,” my father replied.

The man laughed. None of the other figures in the entryway had made a move towards my father. They all just stood staring at us with their fingers locked in their laps and their ears open.

“But something has changed, yes?” The man smiled at me, gravely. “Your son?”

“Yes,” my father answered. “Things have changed.” He handed the man his large bag who in turn placed it in the arms of a younger child. The child lugged it up the stairs and disappeared around a corner.

“You will make yourselves at home?” the man asked.

My father nodded. And the others turned and walked back from where they had come from.

My father smiled at me, took my by the shoulders, and guided me down the hallway in front of us. Little images in thin boxes hung from spindly wire lodged in the creamy colored walls. Fibrous carpet clung to the rims of my shoes. When we reached the end of the corridor, my father swung back a pair of doors and ushered me into the room beyond.

It was larger than anything I had ever seen. Enormous rafters soared into the ether above, painted in shadow, as the lights were mounted in sections low against the walls. People sat nestled in cushions or by fires. Some whispered a greeting to my father when he passed by them. But he never stopped to speak as he had with the man at the door. Instead, he made a swerving path towards a young woman in a chair near the corner.

She put a hand to her mouth when my father approached and wrapped him in an embrace. Her smile widened when he kissed her cheek and held her hand and she whispered a few words to him. A child, her child, tugged on her sleeve. He wore a red shirt splattered with purple stains, and his hair was frizzled around his face in a blonde halo. She snatched the giggling toddler off the ground and nuzzled his cheek.

Each action hit me like a slap to the face. Each blink of her eyes, each twitch of her mouth, every word she cooed to the squealing child in her arms sent me reeling. This woman, this being, was a mother. But she could move. She could speak. And my father, my father had come alive too. When she swung her boy into my father's arms he smiled wider than I had ever seen before. It sickened me.

Then the mother leaned towards me. “It is wonderful to meet you,” she said. Her eyes were charcoal. The color it was before being thrown into a fire. A flaky grey, like ash already burned.

I fell to the ground.

My father knelt next to me. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “This is your mother now. She will love you. She will care for you. As yours never has.”

But I was afraid. So afraid I feared the beating in my chest would rip through my skin and splatter to the floor.

“We will stay here,” my father told me. But his voice sounded very far away. The walls around me were melting. The air was congealing. The fire in the corner hissed and spat. When I looked at my father’s face, his eyes seemed hidden by glossy black shells, and his mouth looked smothered in a mesh muzzle.

I scrambled to my feet. My father mirrored me, grabbing my elbow as I flung myself away from the mother.

“Come, now,” my father murmured. “Collect yourself.” His eyes searched my face, but behind the orbs of black engulfing his sight, he couldn’t match my gaze, nor could he see my fingers, gradually twisting out of his grip. I wrenched myself from his grasp, turned around and never saw him again. My father’s yells rumbled after me, but I never paused. The double doors were open, the hallway passed in a blur as I fled. My head pulsed when I pulled the mask over my eyes and then I was outside. I could feel the lights on my back and so I ran. Before I could be burned by the bright white. I ran with my eyes closed. Ran and ran with no direction, only forward with my hands stretched out in front of me and my fingernails collecting dust. In each gust of wind I could hear her voice behind me.

Unnatural.

There was no way to tell how I had found our building. But the sky was brighter when I came close to it, and the air

was cleaner. There, beyond the edge of the revolving door, sat my mother. She had pulled up a folding chair and was looking out at me.
Just watching me, silently, as I pushed into the building and shattered my mask on the concrete floor.