

BROWNSMEAD STORIES

BY DEBBY BARENSIE REED



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THE ONLY TIME I SAW MY MOTHER DANCE

It was at my first wedding.
She was probably already sick though we didn't know it.
It didn't show in the blue swishy dress cinched tight at her waist
or in the young flush of her cheeks as she tried to move
like one of my boy-groom's friends who had been pressed
into partnership.
She was like a small child or even a puppy
finding its first freedom from the parent's hand or the leash.
She moved unpredictably,
unsensuously, wholesome and pure,
never in time with the music.

Now, years after, it is not my husband's smooth face or
the grown-up happenings of the day, or the stiff, cheap lace dress
my grandmother made me
that I remember, but my mother
in her moment's delight.

She drifted into sickness soon after
and my husband went his own way and had an affair
with the pizza delivery girl.
But as I think of my mother,
twirling,
gesturing wildly,
her blue dress swirling around her fine, strong calves,
I almost feel I should call up my ex-husband and
thank the son-of-a-bitch.

CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

Always be ready with something
to get others through the hard times.

Tell of eating fishbacks and handwashing clothes.
Offer up how you used to walk to the market with
your mother's food stamps to buy family milk
and save her pride.
How you rode the ferris wheel at the state fair with
your father & his girlfriend but didn't tell your mother.
Don't flinch away from the time your own child
tucked you into bed, read you her library book and told you
it would probably be okay

Stay away from passes on, being let go, it's not you
it's me, crumbling cookies, bouncing balls,
water that's already under the bridge.

Stop for a moment and tell us a story.
Tell about the time you had too much to drink and drove
your pickup truck straight over the dike
into the slough.
Upside down in the water
you kicked through the window and walked on home
to tell your husband to go back & dive in
to get your purse.

BERRYPICKING

In the morning fog that still clings to the low landscape
we are quiet on separate sides of the same row.
Hunting down wild blackberries used to take all day.
It was my mother's job to load the station wagon with kids, dogs,
pails, bologna and potato chip sandwiches on white bread.
Bumping down gravel logging roads, she always found spots
the county spray crew missed.

Our navigational skills have grown scarce so
we head for Sauvie's Island where the berries grow
in ladylike rows on
family farms.

Grandma's bucket is on a rope
around her neck leaving both hands free to pick.
I try it her way but give up laughing telling her I have
too much education to be any good at field work.

As the sun climbs, our work gets serious.
I can feel my bare shoulders burning. She is much faster than I
so much farther down the row I can't hear anymore.
Nearby tractors kick up a fine dust that settles around me.
I figure she's remembering her life on the farm.
How she made a living peeling chitum bark and digging razor clams before you needed a license.
How my uncles were the soldiers that came home.
How her only daughter became so sick we knew she couldn't get better.
The field is so large the tractor is just a faraway buzzing in my ears.

We stop for my sake, long before she's ready.
We'll come back when
the green peaches hanging low on the stub trees
around us are ripe.

Riding home loosened by sun and work,
we laugh over how she divorced the grandpa I never knew by
not setting his place at the family table one night.
How I threw my husband's things out on the lawn and told him things would be easier without him.
Not much like my parents I say boldly who never did get around to it.
I ask the questions I never got to last time I went on this trip.

Backtracking home, roadside stands selling
flats of fruit for ten bucks
make her shake her head and scold.
Separating our flats in the drive, I
wave her on her way. I'll be buying flats of berries someday soon
but for now, I wash and bag my berries for the freezer
in the same afternoon
just like I've been taught.

TALKING TO YOURSELF

Begin with bicycle winds whooshing around your ears
down steep hills. Happy dollhouse chatter — sober and affectionate.
Catalog rustlings of canopy beds with matching
vanities and tiny pedestal benches trimmed golden.

Become flimsy, paperback romance whisperings behind
heavy brown false-fronted grammar and history books.
Décolletage rising, falling until Mrs. Stahl plucks away the petals,
hands out books with hard covers and says "you'll never grow up
till you learn to tolerate an unhappy ending."

Move to dingy, coffeeshop smokings. Desiring literature,
write down every conversation. Hold tightly to diaries,
scrapbooks, and journals full of big nervous words. Run into
junk drawers full of tedious, embarrassing bits of paper.
See other gesturing girls talking deeply while trying to attract
the attention of boys, then men. Take English for a major
figuring on law school, teaching a masters degree or
something like that.

Then Mother gets sick. And her funeral is just read-aloud passages
carefully copied from other people's books; bumper stickers,
refrigerator magnets, stolen T-shirt slogans.
In cleaning and rearranging after, there is a diary.
Uncreased and blank, her name written on the first page
then nothing else.

After that, start small, sports and weather mostly.
Pick berries with Grandma while she talks to herself.
Sun warming your bare shoulders, just listen.
Nod approvingly over the buckets while eating tuna fish and
butter sandwiches side-by-side on the tailgate.
Stand when her time comes. Say in a loud clear voice
what you say even when no one is listening.

Go on like this. Mornings in the garden, clear out brown spaces
around plants. Sit children in an afternoon circle to hear anything friendly.
If a good man breathes in darkness, quietly listening,
talk to yourself while he doesn't try to fix a thing.

Friends will puzzle the habit; explain its praying.
God can hear everything, they claim.
Go to church Sundays. Listen to the music but don't drink the wine.
Not cynical. Not pessimistic. Just not asking
for anything in return.

The poems on these pages are from Debby Barendsie Reed's
book, *Brownsmead Stories*. She is a lifelong resident of the
Oregon north coast, a teacher, poet, waitress and mother.

THE WAY I REMEMBER HER

When the muffler was falling
off her old Chevy Malibu and
lacking the money or patience or
interest to fix it,
my mother sent me out
to drive the car
up and down
our gravel driveway till
it fell off on its own.

When I questioned the wisdom of this plan
she just looked at me and said,
"Chin above water, smile on your face."

WHEN YOUR MOTHER DIES

You cannot go home again.
Someone else lives there,
though it's only been a month.

You no longer want a fold-out, futon couch
or brick and board bookcases
that can't be dusted.
You want real things.
Whole things.

You inherit certain legacies —
the antique oak table,
the big, blue mixing bowl.
You eat dinner at the table.
You try to bake bread.

You still pick up the phone sometimes.
Even dial the intimate numbers
before you realize.

And you hang her fuchsias
remembering to water them each day,
watching the water drip from
the hanging buckets —
forming a puddle at your feet
and slowly
drying into the sun.