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Ruth Supko Owens

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More Like My Mother

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Thursday February 29, 2024

By Ruth Supko Owens

“You’re wasting all your maternal instinct on animals,” she teased. Delivered by phone from three time zones away, her jab didn’t quite mask my mother’s genuine disappointment.

She was right. This busy career professional felt no biological clock. I gleefully recounted my story of three abandoned baby rabbits and their close encounter with my husband’s new John Deere that day. I told her their names and how I’d fed them with a tiny syringe, but Mom apparently had zero interest in grandchildren of the fuzzy, cotton-tailed variety.

Still, during decades of weekly long-distance calls, I shared my rescue tales — turtles, chipmunks, even a baby porcupine. She managed to listen politely.

Twice a year, I made the two-flight trek home and read reports while Mom prepared feasts. She loved her well-organized kitchen and our high praise of her cooking.

The last couple of times, though, she mostly sat in the living room with empty eyes. Attempting to concoct my few go-to meals in her kitchen, I found the waxed paper in the silverware drawer and the colander in the pantry with the cereal.

Her filter gone, she voiced whatever entered her mind. Sometimes it was uncomfortably accurate. “You’re working hard in there,” she said from the sofa. “Didn’t think you could cook.” That hurt, but again, she was right. She nourished her family. I stared at computers, saved bunnies, and ordered take-out.

As her gaze grew more vacant, we had to explain to her about the cancer. She smiled. “It’s fine. I’ve had a wonderful life with my family. Did you meet any nice boys at college?”

“Mom, I married Thomas. Remember?”

“Oh, Thomas, yes. Such a sweet young man.”

When the final call came, it was the voice of a close family friend. “Hurry. She’s failing.” I caught the earliest flight but had far too much time to think. Time to ponder the impact of a professional career and the mystery of human nesting. Time to wonder why I wasn’t a nurturer, why I wasn’t more like my mother.

When I rushed into the hospital room, her eyes were closed but she was trying to speak. Dad said he couldn’t understand her but nudged me closer.

“She’ll know you’re here,” he said. “That’s the important thing.”

“Mom, I made it. I’m here now.” I held her hand and watched her right cheek and eyebrow rise almost imperceptibly in a far-away smile. I stood there, aching to hear just a few words. After an eternity, I felt a faint squeeze of my fingers and saw her lips part slightly.

“Bunnies,” she whispered.

“Bunnies, Mom?” I asked, leaning closer.

“I’ll take care of your bunnies now.”

—Ruth Supko Owens

Ruth Supko Owens always wanted to write creatively and decided recently that it is finally time to do it. Having spent her entire adult life educating youth, first as a high school teacher and now as a university professor of Spanish, she is an aspiring writer living in Northeast Arkansas. “More Like My Mother” was her first-ever entry in any writing competition and was named a finalist in the 2024 Erma Bombeck Writing Competition. When not teaching or writing, Ruth enjoys playing tennis, riding her bike, traveling, kayaking, and appreciating nature in any way she can.