

## When the Ink is Dry

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I have my mother's hands: bulging veins stretch like bending rivers over a ridge of tendons. The appearance of them often makes me woozy—veins stutter-stepping as I open my hand, or protrude to the skin as if they might come up for air. I find myself looking at them now, studying the lines and crevices, willing myself to remember. Sometimes when I open and close my fists, they resemble a heart beating.

My mother had a strong heart, so strong that it continued to beat long after she stopped breathing. The irony was that growing up, the doctors thought her heart too irreparably damaged by rheumatic fever for any physical exertion. In truth she was in perfect health... apart from the disease that was killing her, whittling away her body like a stick, sloughing and splintering from the inside.

When she lived, she was wondrously alive: adoringly optimistic, finding the humor in cumbersome places, unwilling to sit too long and miss the buzzing life around her. In her actions, she showed us that enjoying life was the only way to live it, whistling everything from Dolly Parton to Lady Gaga around the house like a living jukebox. It may have only occurred to us, on a subconscious level, that she was the life blood of our family, the source of which everything flowed, the embodiment of the Tree of Life pendant she wore like a cross around her neck.

Life, no matter how bright, ends in a body bag. By the end, her body (can one call it that?) was just skin and bones, and bore only a small resemblance of what she was, serving only to remind us of what she wasn't. Memory is a fickle friend, fixating on images with little regard to peaceful rumination. It was on her birthday, when her absence hung heavy in the brisk autumn air, that the ink in my arm, etched black and permanent as the body bag, stained traces of memory across my skin. The pattern stretched in a silhouette of knots and branches, earthy and strong, rooting into the arm that held her hand, lifeless and sinewy, for the last time.

I am reminded of her often, in the lines of my hand, the lyrics of a song, the sound of the wind in the trees, dancing and swaying to the rhythm of the earth; as I open and close my fists, blood courses through my veins and runs under the sturdy roots that one day will fade to blue, as the skin continues to thin, leaves fall, when the heart stops and the ink is dry.