

Motherless Day

by Julia Smillie

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It feels like someone took away Christmas. Perhaps that's a tad dramatic, when what it really feels like is that you were in this club, right, and it was kind of a lame club and you mumbled and groaned about going and participating. But then you got kicked out of the club and now that the whole world is attending the annual meeting, in hindsight, naturally, you wish you could go.

Clearly, I'm talking about Mother's Day.

I'm talking about it because yesterday was my second Mother's Day without one and as I tried to distract myself by power washing the deck and sorting with brutal discretion through a pile of clothes for Goodwill, I realized something. Between my demised maternal parent and the uterus I plan to leave largely unused, I no longer qualify to participate in this holiday in any way. It's over. My Mother's Days are done.

To be honest, Mother's Day is not, perhaps, one of the more truly enjoyable or festive holidays. There are no Mother's Day fireworks. No Mother's Day parades. (At least, and I say this thankfully, not on my street.) Nobody throws Mother's Day parties or dresses up in Mother's Day t-shirts, silly Mother's Day hats perched askew on their heads as they reach for the noisemakers.

In fact, once you're out of elementary school and there are no more clay ashtrays to hand over, wrapped sloppily in the funny pages, then you start to realize it's actually more of an obligation. Not an obligation unearned or undeserved, mind you. The act of giving birth or, if biology isn't the connection, the act of raising a child is a dazzling feat. Few, if any, really get it right and you should get points for trying. (Provided one understands that trying means *trying*, that the parental requirements go beyond feeding and a roof over the head.) Thus, everyone who qualifies should have a fuss made of them on this important day, which may actually predate the Hallmark empire.

After a couple of decades – and I'm being generous there – acknowledging Mother's Day becomes a chore. A note on the calendar to order flowers, get card in mail, pick up chocolates, call Mom. I don't know many grown ups who observe Mother's Day with true reverence. They show up gamely for brunch before reclaiming their Sunday, leaving a potted carnation plant in their wake.

If there are no fireworks, then what is there? There are commercials, billboards, radio advertisements, magazine ads for weeks leading up to the actual Day. If you have a mother, these are either helpful reminders or tiny knives stabbing you at every turn because everyone knows you're not going to actually get your mother the diamond pendant that the annoying little kid on the commercial is pretending to have paid for all on her very own. They are reminders of your inability to measure up, your failure to live up to your potential. Like little, multi-million dollar, thirty-second mothers.

If you don't have a mother, I'm not sure what Mother's Day is. Perhaps if you don't have a mother and you're pretty much used to not having one, then it's just Sunday and the perfect day for power washing the deck.

If, however, you're still grappling after all this time with just what it means to swim out in the world without the perpetual safety net of Simply Having A Mother, then this Day might be something else. It might still be Sunday. And you might still power wash the deck, but you'll do so as though you're being stalked across each dirty plank by a dull ache or an annoying feeling like an itch in the back of your mind.

You'll do it feeling as though you've forgotten something. But what? Your car keys? Your prom date? The recipe for a basic vinaigrette? No. You've forgotten to call your mother. No, wait. You've forgotten to *have* a mother. That's it.

And you may even wish that you could turn the power washer on yourself, even though you know whatever it is that's holding you down is on the inside, too far for the hard fan of water to reach. (Besides which, you've heard you could take off a toe with that thing!)

So you'll just keep moving the water back and forth, back and forth, pretending that the pain is only in your arms, from reining in the power of the water arc. You'll watch years of neglect and a flagrant disregard for proper deck upkeep get washed away, not quickly, but surely. First, a thick layer of green goop, then some good old fashioned dirt. Then, finally, after hours and hours, a hint of what the wood must have once looked like, a slash of honey-tone, fresh like a wound. Open like hope.