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Natural Rites

Jessica Radin | Text and the City | Chayei Sarah

Jessica Radin (Bronfman '93) works as an English & History teacher at the Beacon School and lives in New York. We want to wish her a big Mazel Tov on the birth of her daughter, Ella, last week.

In honor of Chayei Sarah, which chronicles the death of Sarah, Jessica shares a meditation on the Jewish ritual of *tahar*a, the cleaning of the body before death, as she writes about parenthood, the body, and lifelong friendship.

The first dead body I touched was my mother's. I was thirty-one. The second body, two years later, belonged to June, a long, thin, reed of a woman who, when fully upright, would have stood two inches taller than me today, and nine inches taller than my mother. Best friends, Mom and June were Class-of-1948 graduates of an all-girls high school on the East Side of Manhattan; they died almost fifty years later, each with her daughters at her side. Strolling down the city's sidewalks, arm-in-arm, past the corner newsstands and coffee shops, they must have made a striking pair: my mother, barely five feet tall, with a rotund body, pudgy fingers, and wide, dark, glittering eyes perched under a wing of nut-brown hair; and then June, with her coiffed, blonde head of curls like a Swedish movie star, at nearly five feet ten, with the willowy long limbs that so often proportion such stature.

June could make my mother laugh so hard she'd start wheezing. Black-and-white postcards, sent by June, adorned the refrigerator when I was growing up, most featuring old ladies with white hair and frisky faces—biking together, sitting on park benches, or whispering in each other's ears while eating cake. On the backs of these cards, in airy, looped letters, were scrawled their classic one-liners: "I *SAID*, I'm happy to have a friend like you! Turn up your hearing aid!" or "What do you think: A dress or a pant suit for our arrival in mother martyr heaven?" To my mom and June, aging was an absurd nuisance they combated together.

They also shared another reality, this one their own choice: Both were single mothers.

My mother had divorced her husband after becoming a parent to my sister, but before adopting me six years later. June had left her husband when both her daughters were in grade school. And even though June had moved to California, our families spent every winter break together, alternating between Los Angeles and New York City. If we were East Coast bound, I hoped for snow, while on the West Coast I relished wearing short sleeves in December. We taught them Hanukkah prayers, and they opened their presents with us Christmas morning. In between those trips, Mom and June talked on the phone almost every day. Often, I would wake at night to the sound of my mother's deep diaphragmic chuckle. Under the yellow glow of a bedside lamp would materialize a shadowy projection of Mom in her nightgown, one hand bobbing across the robust bouncing bulge of her abdomen, the other holding the receiver to ear, laughing and chatting away.

While June had cycled through various boyfriends after her divorce, my mother had never dated again, nor had she seemed to miss it. By the time I was in high school, June had stopped dating as well. Instead, she referred to her "friends" on TV talk shows and appeared to need only my mother's friendship for her daily diet of socializing. Lovers they were not. Yet the companionship and confidence each provided the other was wordlessly, unconsciously deemed "more than enough," and it wasn't until I became old enough to explore the bumpy road of romance as a teenager that I even thought to interrogate this silent pact they had made with their lives and with each other.

A year after Mom died, in 2007, I traveled to California. I had a need to see June. When she opened the door, I saw that her golden curls had turned a muted grey. She no longer stood with her neck stretched and her shoulders rolled back. Her face was bare; she had on none of her usual mascara, soft powdery foundation, or lipstick. I reached out and hugged her. Within six months of that visit, after I was back in New York, her eldest daughter called to say that June's health had taken a bad turn and that the end was most likely near. This time when I arrived, it was that daughter who answered the door and led me through the cream-painted hallways. June was lying on her back in an adjustable bed, her eyes closed, her mouth agape, her head at an angle on the pillow as if she were about to ask a question. Once again, there was wheezing. Decades of smoking had finally tightened its grip on her chest, and her hand hovered over the oxygen mask when she opened her eyes and received my kiss. "Mom is waiting for you," was all I could think to say.

I had come to June's bedside because my mother could not. And unlike me, Mom would have known exactly what to do. Not only because of her singular relationship with June, but for another, more mysterious reason, a secret that she revealed to me only a few months before she died. We were sitting in a Vietnamese restaurant on Columbus Avenue. All around us young mothers were wiping food off children's chins and ferrying cups or condiment jars away from jerky limbs. Pushing her plate of noodles aside and leaning in towards me, she lowered her voice and began to explain why, on the previous Tuesday, I hadn't been able to reach her by phone. The clink of plates and the clank of glasses in bussing trays competed with the shriek of children. She leaned in toward me.

"You can't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you," she said. "You have to promise me." Looking at the almost giddy expression in her face, I wondered if it was actually possible, that after two decades alone, my mother had rediscovered her sexuality and found a lover. I myself had just recently found a man whom I planned to marry, which made me wonder in new ways about the lack of male companionship in my mother's life. Now I, too, leaned in.

"Well, as I said, I wasn't sleeping when you called…"

Here it comes, I thought, feeling my stomach tighten, imagining her sipping wine on a couch with a potential beau, one who might wear a gray blazer whose corduroy would nearly match his salt-and-pepper hair. But where my mother actually was on that previous Tuesday turned out to be much less romantic. Standing with six other women, that evening, around a metal gurney in the tiled basement of a funeral home, under fluorescent almost obscene light, she had been preparing a dead body for burial.

I took a sip of water, hoping to cover my stunned bemusement.

"Wait, now . . . what? Sorry, Mom, who died?"

"That, I can't tell you. But what I can tell you, Jessie, is that it is truly special—more than special; it's an honor, a privilege." Her chubby fingers pinched a string bean and lifted it to her mouth.

It is, she went on to explain, an ancient ritual, called *tahara.* Jewish law dictates exactly how a body should be buried, but more so: how a life should brought to its close; how a life's ending should be understood. She said all this with such an earnest expression, and

yet, in that crowded restaurant, amid all that clatter, all I could think was, *My mother is cleaning dead bodies?* "Tell me more," I said, and as she spoke, she let me ask her question after question. The more we talked, the more the full intention and vision of the ritual materialized. It wouldn't be until I faced the void of her own death less than a year later, the void that sent me on a red-eye flight to California to say goodbye to June, that I'd begin to understand her respect for *tahara* and glean for myself what appears to be its innate wisdom as a ritual for both the dead and the living.

The purpose of *tahara* is to reorient the *met*, the body, away from life and towards death. The cleansing of the body and purification of the soul are both its objectives. Transformation of the body is both physical and figurative. It will be cleaned carefully and buried as whole as possible. If strands of hair fall in the course of the evening, the team will gather them to be placed in the coffin. Along with any remaining clipped IV catheters, for they may have some of the body's blood still in them. I winced at the thought of a needle in a hand's vein.

My mother touched my arm with her fingertips and continued with her lesson: The women of the *tahara* team will use luke-warm water to clean you from head-to-toe, she said, always right-side first. Humming old Jewish *niggunim*, they will dab wounds, run toothpicks under fingernails, and pour water between gray folds and creases where skin and limbs meet. Nothing is ever passed over you, but always respectfully around. Only the individual limbs being worked on are exposed; a sheet is draped over the rest of you and a soft cloth rests lightly over the face. Only necessary conversation is allowed, the rest -- the laughter, the tears, and the wishes for their own long lives -- are saved for later at the regular meeting spot, a diner on Broadway, on the Upper West Side, where another ritual of dipping fries into ketchup and slurping milkshakes will take place.

As dusk turned to a gray-navy-blue sky, the lights inside the restaurant where we were sitting dimmed to an orange haze, and the crying toddlers began filing out, mothers trailing behind with a stuffed animal or squeaky toy in hand. I imagined Mom's cushioned palms and fingertips caressing flesh that no longer vibrated with hearts beating or blood pumping. The same hands had cradled my forehead when I had a fever or splashed water over my back when I was so small I could fit in a sink. "Why and how, did you decide to join this *tahara* team," I asked. "Because, Jessie, why not, how could I not," she replied. "It is the ultimate *mitzvah.*" She also explained that her membership was a secret because a family's grief is sacred and takes priority. "The point is not to be thanked," she said. Seeing the amber irises of her eyes catch the light from the bulbs in the wall

sconces, I wondered if the clarity of purpose animating my mother that night was similar to her determination to steam ahead after divorce, to choose celibacy, to adopt another child, to face all the adolescent tantrums my sister and I launched at her -- the ones that she and her oldest friend often commiserated about during those late night calls.

Two years after that conversation, I stood before June's three-story apartment building in Los Feliz, a hilly residential area near Hollywood, close to Griffith Park. The scorched hills rose several streets behind, shedding dusty particles that squeezed in between houses and left a film on windows. I pushed June's buzzer, and when I rapped my knuckles on the hollow front door, her daughters greeted me with tight hugs and stormy eyes.

Unlike my mother, whose body had been bloated and inflamed during her last hours, June was rickety-thin, her face sallow. A mini-brigade of pill bottles and cups with straws stood guard on the bedside table. The sunlight incubated the staleness of the air. Her unused queen-sized bed, the commode with silver handrails, the boxy, plastic bags of adult diapers, and the IV stand, crowded the room.

"Do you think it's too hot in here for her?" the oldest daughter asked, adjusting the fan so it blew in June's direction, making sure it did not blow directly on her face.

I told her I wasn't sure, but that I'd be happy to go buy an air conditioner if they wanted me to.
"Oh, Jessie, that would be great. Take my car. And my credit card."

I told them I had mine and before they could argue I was on my way back down the hallway in which hung dozens of framed photos of our vacations together.

It was still early in the day but after rush-hour, so the streets flowed more like highways, storefronts flittering all around me. The car's dashboard radiated with the day's heat, and I flipped the visor down. The morning Mom died, the year's first flurries had cascaded onto the grey city, crossing the frame of the hospital window in a wind-blown blur. Now, in Los Angeles, pollen and dust spotted the little Toyota's windshield. I put on my right-turn blinker and entered the parking lot of Home Depot.

While I was trying to decide between 5,000 and 10,000 BTUs in the air conditioning aisle, June's heart stopped beating. I heard it in her daughter's voice over the building's intercom

when I returned. Seated on either side of the bed, each daughter held a part of her dead mother, a pulse-less wrist, a cooling forearm. I stood at the foot of the bed and lightly cupped her shin. Such particular stillness. We took careful breaths, while outside the open windows, car tires rolled against gravelly, paved streets; engines started; tree branches rustled; and in the hallway, the elevator went *ting* before opening. The air conditioner stood in its box, unopened, by the front door.

My mother had always been more affectionate than June. Although June was vibrant and elegant, she was not as emotive, often cloaking her feelings with the witty sarcasm that emblazoned the backs of those postcards on the fridge that now were carefully packed in shoeboxes marked "Mom." Whenever I spoke to June, she would lean back, her chin tucked and aligned with her spine. It was as if she gathered up both herself and her heart just a couple inches further from the person she was talking to. For protection perhaps? Distance? Safety? But when she and my mother would laugh, another part of her would open, suddenly it seemed, like shutters flapping and slapping the sides of a house, letting in the fresh air. June would fling her arms around my mother, grinning down the bridge of her nose, and nudging her with a hip. I now stared at the straight line of June's legs, extending to the blanket's edges. My mother would have held June's hand to her own cheek and then touched her lips to each finger's knuckle.
June's daughters eventually left the room and called the coroner. I reminded them to eat. I, too, had needed to be reminded while I kept vigil over my mother's body those last twelve hours. Listening for all that time to a machine push air in and out of her lungs had distracted me from my own body's needs. It was as if my brain were swollen, filled with a thick sludge that lolled about, and it was all I could feel.

But in June's apartment on that summer day in Los Angeles, it was the opposite. I was alert. I tucked the covers around her hips. I closed her mouth and tried to slide her head so it was straight on the pillow. Those last breaths had probably rattled, I thought. Touching her forehead once more, I scanned through lines of the mourner's *kaddish* and even the *shema*, from memory, since I didn't know the specific prayers for *tahara*.

I wanted to wait in the bedroom with June until the coroner arrived. When my mother died, members of our synagogue had sat with her body overnight, reciting psalms. Then, the same team of women with whom she had stood many nights worked carefully and quietly on her bruised body before finally dressing her in white linen and placing her in the simple, pine coffin. I liked the idea that she had not been alone, from the moment of her last breath until her burial.

I grabbed a washcloth from the closet and filled a bowl with lukewarm water. I dabbed the skin around June's eyes and her nostrils, then ran the cloth from her brow, down across her cheeks to the tip of her chin. Her skin was loose and crinkled. I wondered what it would have been like to do this, together, with Mom. I thought of the women for whom my mother's touch was the last contact their bodies had before they were lowered into the earth. I knew that those women had experienced tenderness. Those smooth palms. When at last I pulled the sheet over June's eyes, I thought about how bodies of infants are celebrated but the bodies of the elderly are feared, or sometimes treated with disdain. I myself had avoided older relatives, as a shy teenager, or averted my eyes when I saw the characteristic hunch of an arthritic back on a city street.

What did my mother feel when she first touched a dead body? What *met*, what body, was the first to have contact with my mother's hands? Perhaps it was her own mother, who, ridden with infection, had died in childbirth. Once removed from the womb, was my mother placed by a well-intentioned nurse upon her own dead mother's still chest? Or perhaps it was her father, who at the age of sixty-two, had collapsed from a heart attack. When I was in college, I had watched Mom say goodbye to the woman I called "Grandma"—my mother's stepmother, who had always carried butterscotch sucking candies in her leather purse. Mom had caressed Grandma's cheek and kissed the thin skin on her forehead. At the time, I was too uncomfortable in that room, one of many rooms in that building, with metal guardrails against beds, large absorbent pads, and the sharp smells of ammonia and urine. I couldn't appreciate then, at that age, the tenderness of the gesture itself, nor the fact that it ushered in my mother's first moment of being an orphan.

And what was it like for my mother to touch the dead body of someone she hadn't known? Sometimes, the synagogue performed *tahara* on relatives of congregants, strangers to my mother and the rest of the team; now, as I tried to clear a path for the coroner to take June away, I realized I was able to do this for her, *wanted* to do this for her, in fact, because I had known her. I could picture her eating coffee ice cream out of the container with a spoon and trying to entertain a baby with a napkin that she would move across her face to play peek-a-boo. She loved my mother deeply, and by extension, me. Once in fifth grade, when a boy I liked was coming over to the house, she suggested putting out beforehand the game Othello, with its shiny black and white discs and checkered board. That way, June had said, you'll have something ready to start playing when he arrives.

With my mother, in a way I hadn't been able to do with my grandmother, I could touch her body because I needed that intimacy with her physical presence before it disappeared forever. But when it is a body you don't know, one not attached to a personality, a voice's tenor, an image of a certain gait—the motive must be different. An orphan too now, having lost the only parent I'd ever known, I could conceive how maybe my mother's sense of mortality had shifted when Grandma died—not only because she was now parentless, but also because she was aging: her knee was stiff after a joint replacement, she had to prick her finger to monitor her blood sugar every morning, stenosis of the spine caused nerves to flare in her legs, and neuropathy made her walking unsteady as the sensation of pins and needles radiated from the soles of her feet up through her ankles.

Perhaps *tahara* was her way of navigating the bewildering forest of old age. Perhaps, in the process, her own ailments, her own physical trials, faded like the ambient sounds of nature to a veteran park ranger—the rushing of a waterfall in the distance or wind bristling the tips of leaves becoming mere background noise, atmospherics. But after touching June's frail frame those last hours, I guessed it was something more. The experience had tethered me to what I could barely describe. Something resembling truth, or some form of resignation, but a liberating one –a welcome acceptance of what I could not know that was inextricably linked to the corporeal experience of being with June's body. What I saw in my mother's eyes that night in the Vietnamese restaurant was not only clarity of purpose. It was perchance, a sublime reckoning.

The comfort of a lifelong lover or spouse, albeit sustaining, is illusory. For me, the idea of marriage had often conjured spectral scenes: my partner, slumbering softly in a velvet reading chair by the adjustable bed that had been delivered by a rumbling truck into our living room so I could die at home; me, spooning clear broth between his lips, a long napkin tucked into his pajama top; or more daring, a cool dawn morning, and us, clasping hands while lying side-by-side on a bed having swallowed hoarded sleeping pills, our silver hair flattened on the pillow. But timing at the end of life does not cater to romance. Nor does it service our fears. The cliché that we all die alone is a simple fact. Losing our youth, becoming orphans, and dying are what we all do.

With *tahara*, I envision the vast horizons of the unknowable becoming irrelevant to my mother. Despite the shame or fear about aging bodies, despite the loss of best friends, even with failed marriages, honor and love were present and solace soon followed. Padded fingers and soft cloth dabbing delicate skin. Luke-warm water splashed over limbs. Fully-

dressed in white linen, ushered forth with words of prayer and hope, she was not alone. She was ready, indeed, to face whatever was next.

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