

Harvest Moon

by **Lisa Conquet**

It was our seventh anniversary, but being first time parents made our marriage seem new again. Still, I struggled to focus on this exciting beginning while I was dealing with another life coming to an end. It was past evening visiting hours when my mother sent me home. Staying as late as possible had become our daily ritual. On this night, the doctor and nurses were impressed with her turn-around. Her fever was down, her stats were normal, and they told me she was out of the woods. Both the doctors and my mother insisted I go home and get some rest.

I held her hand and looked right in her eyes, “Are you sure you want me to go?” She smiled at me, “I feel better. Go home and at least have a late dinner with your husband. Besides, it’s cold in here and you should be wearing a sweater.” She winked while squeezing my hand and I was relieved to feel some strength ... and warmth. I lingered a bit longer, hoping my idle chatter could fill the void of my conspicuously absent siblings. Two extra visitors’ chairs had sat empty for weeks, since the first day they promised to come, then used traffic and distance as an excuse to opt out.

I slowly walked to the door, then stopped and suggested I call the house so she could say goodnight to my daughter. She and her granddaughter spoke briefly, then she said something that caused a noticeable shift in my level of confidence, “Grandma will always love you, goodbye my precious.” She never said “goodbye”. It was so strange to hear, and it stayed in my ears like the phantom shadow that remains after staring at a naked light bulb.

My mother was in a hospital forty minutes from my siblings, but just down the road from the sweet dollhouse where my baby girl would soon be fast asleep in her crib. I got home quickly, with enough time for my husband and I to piece together a dinner, but I could not feel celebratory.

Too worried to sleep and too exhausted to stay awake, I lay in bed in that odd mental space that allows you to remember dreams and merge them with the days' thoughts. I dreamed a future with my mother living in the new house we were planning to build. I dreamed her watching my daughter playing with the siblings she did not yet have. I dreamed a house filled with love and laughter. I dreamed until I drifted off.

The phone pierced the peaceful silence of that autumn night. I knew what I would hear as I fumbled for the receiver. Today, I can't be sure if the voice was male or female, I just know it said, "Come back, she won't make it through the night."

I do remember grabbing that sweater, cozy and wool, an optimistic gift from her that never fit my wardrobe but became my security that fall. Like a blanket, it gave comfort and a warm embrace during those lonely nights when the cold chill of knowledge lingered in quiet hospital corners and the wind wrestled the remaining stubborn leaves to the ground.

As I pulled that sweater over the t-shirt I had been sleeping in, I frantically dialed my brother. I begged him, "Come now." I knew there would be no visiting hours for her tomorrow. My siblings would have no more opportunity for an excuse not to show up ... again. I called my sister who protested—it was late, her car wasn't working, it was a long drive—she always had excuses. I told her to ride with our brother, or hitchhike, but get here.

I drove blindly, blinking back tears, my throat filled with a scream that had no sound. I wiped my eyes as I turned onto the empty highway and found myself

staring in disbelief at the oversized, red-orange moon hanging before me. My heavy heart tried to soar but any hope was tied to the weight of reality.

When I arrived there was chaos, a patient was coding, nurses raced a crash cart down the hall. I held my breath. I crossed my arms. I tried to find warmth in the sweater. I knew. I walked slowly in the wake of the scrambling nurses and doctors. I heard them yelling, “Come on, your daughter is on her way,” and their collective sigh when the heartbeat returned.

I hesitated. She had a DNR order. They all knew that. Yet they did every thing they could to bring her back. I backed down the hall a bit and watched them hurriedly clean out the room. I slowly walked up to the nurse’s station to ask how my mother was doing. She looked up and stared for a second. I pretended. She played along. “She’s not doing very well. Really, you need to say your goodbyes.”

I called my brother again. They hadn’t left Queens. My sister was stalling. My brother was angry. I knew they would not make it, still I insisted they come. I really wanted them to show up for her, just once. I caught my breath and went into her room. Her skin was no longer pale, but ashen, the sad remains of what once offered so much warmth and light.

I kissed her forehead, and was startled by how cold it felt. I grabbed her icy hand and told her I would not leave her alone. I felt as if she sighed, but really it was just the machine breathing for her. I told her they would be here soon. I so rarely lied to my mother. I told her the baby was sleeping and dinner was good, though I couldn’t tell you what I ate.

I talked until the priest arrived to give her the last rights. We prayed. I checked the clock. I knew she was waiting for them. She always waited for them. They were always late, if they showed at all. The machine faltered, or she did. The

nurse flew in to check. My mom had been here for a while, and I could see in the nurse's eyes my mother had found a way into her heart. She looked at me solemnly and took a deep breath. As she exhaled, the machines began screaming and the code was announced again. I was hurried out the door. The doctor came to me, "Your mother has a DNR ..."



I looked into his eyes and they softened. I thought for a moment about the magnitude of the decision I was about to make. One never thinks they'd be so casually dressed for something as important as deciding if your mother should live, even if it's only for a few more minutes.

I held his eyes as I spoke. "I know, but let's see if we can keep her here until they come to say goodbye." So they ran in and I watched the flurry of activity. A well orchestrated dance of madness. Purposefully attempting the impossible ... again. To what end?

They did all they could. I know. I watched. They ... we ... ignored the inevitable until it became too obvious. Finally, the doctor looked up at the clock and I knew. Instinctively, I checked my watch as well. Yet, just like when someone asks you the time seconds after you've looked at your watch, I had no clue what time it was. At that moment the past and future collided, leaving a present filled with pain.

Moments later I heard a mournful howl in the hall. I knew it was my sister. My siblings had finally arrived. As usual, they were late. This time, she would not forgive them. This time, they would not forgive themselves.

That fall I let go of my mother ... and my family. My siblings blamed me for their missed opportunity to say goodbye and stopped speaking to me.

I donated that sweater in the spring.



Lisa Conquet grew up in NYC where she thrived on the energy and the mix of cultures that reflected her own blended heritage. The city fed her soul and her love of words. As a copywriter for a Madison Avenue ad agency, she utilized her psychology degree to entice consumers, then went back to school and turned the tables. Now she is a psychotherapist who uses poetry to help her clients. Lisa has had many work related health and wellness pieces published without a byline. She has also been published in *Babble* and her poetry was recently published in *The Ekphrastic Review*. She is working on a poetry collection about motherhood and loss as well as a guided journal to be used in conjunction with therapy.