MEREDITH RESNICK

My Own Person from *Mama Is a Four-Letter Word*

August was hot, the air conditioner droned, and my mother burrowed beneath the blankets of her four-poster bed. Tiny aisles of carpet led to the bathroom and kitchen, where she wobbled back and forth, using the packing cartons as handrails. She wore the same clothes she did the day before—black stretch pants and an oversized Adidas T-shirt—but she'd shed her bra and her 80-year old breasts hung loosely beneath the black sports logo.

"I feel free," she said.

She pressed the side of her face deep into the pillow but her eyes tracked me from closet to box. "Hang that in the closet," she said, about a plaid skirt.

"I'll get a hanger," I said.

"Forget it, I don't care where the hell it goes," she said and laughed, then dozed, a half smile stretched across her face.

My sister stood by the mirrored closet doors, hanging skirts on clip hangers. I tugged from a cardboard box the wicker hamper of dirty clothes the movers had packed. It smelled like socks. Suddenly awake, my mother laughed, face still on the mattress, feet hanging off the bed. "I'll wash it later," she said, her voice a thick croak.

"I'll do it," I said, finding a tangle of sponge rollers matted together with my mother's hair in the trash.

"I have to go," my mother said suddenly, meaning to the bathroom. She pushed up and off the bed, kicking over a pile of empty boxes.

"We have to remind her," I told my sister. "The appointment is in a few days."

Phyllis looked at me. "You want to do it?"

"She said she'd go," I said. "But she might have forgotten."

My sister shrugged.

With my mother, you never wanted to be the "bad guy" or the "policeman." She'd remind you years later that you'd policed her into this or that, and the upcoming appointment with the geriatric specialist had the potential to come back to haunt us.

I opened another box, this one filled with the forty-two unworn bathing suits. "Which one of us is going to tell her?"

"Let's let it play out," Phyllis said, tossing a pile of unworn winter skirts, six sizes too small for my mother's waist, onto the floor.

The toilet flushed, then my mother appeared. "I went," she announced. She moved as if her Achilles tendons were sewn to the floor, alternately grabbing the doorknob and bedposts to get back to bed safely, where she laid back down and the blankets billowed up around her.

"Mom," Phyllis said.

My mother lifted her head.

I shook her unshaven leg. Where Phyllis had spoken, I singsonged to get her attention.

"Yes?" she said, pressing her cheek back into the pillow.

"Merry and I think it would be good," Phyllis started, "since you're in this new house, to go somewhere soon where they can tell us who the best doctor for you is, and maybe even recommend another psychologist you can—"

"OK," my mother interrupted. "I said I'd go."

"You'll go?" I asked. "Even if we can get an appointment in the next day or two?"

"Is it on the first floor?" she asked groggily.

"We'll find someone on the first floor."

"Then I'll go."

One week later the three of us walked into the social worker's first floor office. It reminded me of the offices I'd had

as a social worker. One was half a closet. Another was a break room so tiny I could not extend my arms out straight without my fingers folding.

My mother sank into the chair inside the door, crammed next to the desk, and gently knocked her head against the wall with a muted thud.

"I've got to exercise more," she announced.

The social worker giggled. "I'm Helen," she said, face toward my mother, brown eyes darting between me and Phyllis. "Sorry about the lack of space."

We all said hi to Helen.

Helen reached for her clipboard, and my mother reached across the desk to hold Helen's hand. "So what's been going on, Mrs. Gordon?"

"My daughters can talk for me," my mother said.

Funny, I thought. This is what I'd always wanted. To tell others what my mother was about, the real deal. But now I dreaded it; I felt too responsible.

A half hour later the social worker said she thought depression might be a problem. My mother smiled when Helen smiled.

"What do you think, Mom?" I asked.

Her hand, palm down, wavered, which meant so-so, maybe, probably. Then she said, "OK."

"Why do you think she's depressed?" my sister asked, pen poised to write down the social worker's words so she could refer to them later if my mother forgot.

"Mrs. Gordon, you look and behave like some of the people at our day treatment center, people who want to be independent for as long as possible, including driving!" She added the latter with zeal. Then she turned to Phyllis. "She's like other people who need help with things like cooking, cleaning." Then she turned back to my mother. "I mean, Mrs. Gordon, who wants to do that anyway, right?"

My mother agreed. I imagined her adding *it ain't my thing to cook and clean*.

"I think she'd be an excellent fit for the day treatment program," Helen said.

"What do you think, Mom?"

"Eh," she said, meaning maybe yes, maybe no, maybe a little. "I'll give it a try."

"Are you sure?" Phyllis asked.

"Well, I used to go to Group" she said.

"This might be like Group," I added.

"Maybe," she said. "Is it on the first floor?"

Helen said it was.

"So, Mom," Phyllis asked. "What do you say?"

"Maybe I'll meet a man," my mother said. "Anyone Jewish?"

Helen thought about it. "There is one man there with Alzheimer's," she said. "But he's married."

"Shit," my mother whispered under her breath.

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Group had been in Manhattan, on West seventy-something street. The Upper West Side, my mother said. Rich. Group was eight people, including my mother. They met in the psychiatrist's apartment and sat on couches and swivel chairs. The psychiatrist's name was Val, short for Valentine.

I was six years old in 1967 when my mother told me she went to Group.

"What's Group?"

It's where people discuss," she said.

I made myself comfortable on the floor and peered up at her. "Discuss what?"

"It's where I go to help people discuss their problems," she said. "To help."

Every Tuesday my mother helped. Every Tuesday for years we'd drive in her 1964 Pontiac LeMans to the Jamaica Station, where I'd slip out of her blue bucket seats and into the brown leather of my father's Cadillac. It was her night, and though my parents weren't divorced they arranged my pickup as if they were.

"I'm going to Group," she'd say, blowing cigarette smoke out of the corner of her mouth. "I'll be home late, so I'll see you tomorrow."

Daddy drove me to White Castle for square hamburgers and Cokes. We'd sit at the counter and eat, facing the fountain. Then he'd drive me to Carvel for soft serve, and once when he gave me my chocolate cone I asked, "What's Group?"

He coughed, jingled the change into the server's hand, and drove into the street. "What's Group?" he said, like he was asking me the same question.

My tongue was cold from the ice cream. "Yeah, what's Group?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Group is group," he said, and started to cough what my mother called his nervous cough. Lots off little coughs that sounded like he was clearing his throat over and over and over again.

While my father's answer was a series of machine gun coughs, my mother said she wished she could tell me, but she was sworn to secrecy.

"I had to promise not to tell so they'd let me in."

"Who made you promise?" I asked.

She sipped from her instant coffee at the little counter in our kitchen. A lit cigarette smoldered in the abalone ashtray next to her.

"We all promise we won't talk about each other," she said, blowing smoke from her nostrils. "It's the rule."

"Oh, OK," I said, disappointed. I wanted to know about the place my mother went where she took the time to dress up, to

wear clothes instead of a nightgown. I stood up and rested my head on her fleshy shoulder. She smelled like Norell perfume and hairspray and smoke that wasn't from a cigarette.

She edged away from me and said, "At Group people talk about their problems."

"Do you have problems?"

"I listen and help," she said. "I support."

I didn't understand what she was talking about. My mother sucked on her cigarette, and as she exhaled she said, "Ruth has a no-good husband and Walter can't cry, but he wants to."

"Why can't he cry?" I asked, suddenly interested.

"He's not a crier," she said. "Val says he has to learn."

She stubbed her cigarette into the ashtray and slid another from the soft pack. She lit the match and inhaled, until the L&M's tip turned bright orange and ash began to form.

"Val sits and listens and smokes his pipe," she said. "He says I'm doing the right thing. Everyone says I'm doing the right thing."

I didn't understand what she was talking about. Was my mother capable of doing the wrong thing? In the way Walter wasn't a crier, my mother wasn't a smiler, that much I knew. And that she slept more than she didn't smile. Was that right?

Once my mother said Val told her she was a good-looking woman. I didn't like that a man other than my father told my mother she was pretty, but my father didn't mind. I didn't understand that. When I was five I told Daddy that I wanted to marry him, that he was the only man I'd ever love. He patted my head and smiled. "That's nice," he said. My mother pushed between the two of us and looped her arms through his. "You can't marry Daddy because he's already taken," she said. "By me." I cried later, buried my head in my pillow because I was so angry that she'd stolen him from me. But my father wasn't jealous about Val telling Mommy she was a good-looking woman. He said, "Jeannette, I've been telling you that all along,

godammit. Why does it have to take a shrink to make you listen?"

"Daddy met Val once," my mother told me. I sat back down on the floor cross-legged, elbows propped on my knees.

I pictured my father coughing his machine gun cough, sitting in a swivel chair while Val smoked his pipe and my mother said things that helped.

"What did Daddy say?"

My mother pulled a sweater around her nightgown. She had clothes in her closet and in the dresser, but usually she wore a nightgown unless she was going out. When she went to Group she wore a knit pantsuit, or a plaid skirt with pleats that fanned out when she turned. "We went to Val to talk about the money Daddy doesn't give me to spend on me because Daddy likes to keep the money and doesn't buy me what I want."

Daddy bought me what I wanted. Ice cream. White Castle hamburgers.

"Val told Daddy to give me money."

It seemed to me that Val and Mommy were on one side, Daddy on the other, and I was nowhere, which seemed kind of crummy.

In the fifth grade my mother told me I needed a psychologist and that *we* were going but that *really* it was only for me. She wanted to pull me out of school early, to boot, saying I had to go.

"I can't," I said. "I can't miss science."

"You're going," she said.

"Why?"

"I go to Val," she said. "You go to Nicki."

"But I *don't* go to Nicki!"

"You will go to Nicki," she said. "You don't want to grow up, you don't want to face reality, and you don't want to go to Nicki. There's too many things you don't want to do."

If I said that wasn't true it would have implied the opposite. So I concentrated on keeping the tears behind my eyes.

The problem was I had got my period and didn't tell her. At eleven-and-a-half, she said, I should have known better. There had been a stain on my underwear when I went to the bathroom. I stared at it for a long time. I didn't recognize what it was. My eyes saw it and I touched the brown-red with my fingers. It was flaky in part, wet in others. I stared at the stain on my underwear. My underwear had a picture of a palm tree on it and was stitched it blue with the word Saturday, but it was Thursday and my world was wrong. I didn't want my world to be as wrong as it felt, so I finished in the bathroom and rushed upstairs to change. I dumped the old underwear into the laundry hamper and slammed the lid, then ran outside to play.

It was dark when I came back, and my mother was waiting for me in the hall with her arms crossed. She hollered at me, pointed to a pile of laundry she'd dragged downstairs. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know," I said.

"This is why you have to see the psychologist, this, Nicki," she said. "You don't want to grow up, and you don't want to face reality."

She shoved a box of feminine napkins into my hands and tossed a white belt on top that looked like elastic bands sewn together. "Use the belt."

In the bathroom I took off my underwear and pulled the belt over my hips. The elastic itched and made red marks on my stomach. I hated it. I laced the flaps of the napkins through the silver belt fasteners. With the napkin on, my thighs no longer touched unless I pressed them together. I felt like I was wearing a blanket between my legs. I pulled up my pants and avoided my mother the rest of the night.

If my mother was angry when we got there, she was angrier when we left. Nicki believed my mother should spend more

time listening to me, not lecturing. Sitting on the couch in Nicki's office, my mother nodded her head like she agreed. At the end of the session Nicki told my mother to give me a hug, then hugged us both in bear hug fashion. Nicki gave me the thumbs up sign as we left.

"You were right," I said. "I like Nicki."

At the elevator my mother said something she told me she learned in Group. "I do not choose to listen to this."

"But I liked Nicki," I said. "I want to go back."

"Nicki's a lesbian," my mother said.

I wasn't sure what a lesbian was, but by the way my mother said it, her lip curled, and I knew it wasn't good. "No she's not!" I screamed.

"She is, and we're never going back."

I started to cry.

"I'm no hovering Jewish mother. I'll hug when I want to, not when she wants me to."

I looked up at her, hot tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Nicki is threatened by me because I am my own person," my mother said, and shook her head at me. "You're fine. You need that Nicki like you need a hole in the head."

"But she's nice," I said.

"She's not," my mother said. "Now, where are we going to have lunch?"