

of absence from being a mother? Well, they don't give LOA's from motherhood, my dear."

"I just wanted to make something beautiful and all my own."

"You already made beautiful kids. Doesn't that satisfy you?"

"No, it doesn't. It doesn't!!" I yelled. I ran downstairs and slumped on the floor of the dark room. I cried for hours, wetting the photographs spread on my lap. I wondered what would happen if I ate the potassium tablets. It would take away the guilt and confusion at least. But, no, one trip to the emergency room is enough for one night, I thought. Crazy, huh? Well, I put away my photographs, those stillborn hopes, and packed away my camera. I turned to close the dark room door and it seemed to me then that I could develop pictures and develop children, but never develop just myself. I closed the door, and I haven't been down here for any time since.

"Mom, why didn't you run away?" Kate asks me.

"How Kate? Where to? And what if it turned out that I had no real gift, that it was just a housewife fantasy? I would have had no husband, no children, and no true talent to sustain me. I wasn't brave enough to take that chance."

"But Mom, these pictures are great."

"Keep them if you like, Kate."

"Mom, why didn't you wait twenty years to divorce Daddy? He was an asshole to you then."

"I thought so too, Kate, and I made him suffer for what I thought he made me give up. But Kate, he wasn't the bad guy or the jailer. He was as frightened and as confused by a changing wife as I was frightened by the changing. Kate, try to understand. I was my own jailer."

"Mom, I met Daddy's girlfriend yesterday."

"Yes? Did you like her?"

"I liked her, but Mom? Mom, did you know she is a photographer?"

I start laughing, laughing hard, and tears are coming down, and I'm hiccoughing and holding my stomach and this sick, silly laughter echoes through the basement.

Kate's staring at me. "Mom? Are you all right?"

"Oh, Kate, that sounds like, hic, a bad ending in a bad story."

Finally I stop laughing and Kate leaves to meet her fiance. I sit in the dark room and hold the camera to my eye. Click. The damn thing still works after twenty years.

