

By Joan Cusack Handler

I never visit my mother's grave.

But I keep her alive,
in a pot of geraniums
basking (as if on her oh so familiar
pink recliner) in the roaring sun
on my living room terrace-- a cutting
she gave me thirty some years ago
from one of her hundreds of giddy
crimson, cinnamon, magenta families.
Her fingers and hands electric-
setting fire to everything she touched:
dough, flowers, a mix of spinach and
potatoes, our backsides, shoulders,
Thank God, never our faces....

Her mighty hands – the threat we ran from, but she was always faster--determined not to miss this chance to teach us a lesson.

We seldom knew.
Through the relentless
tsunami of years, her
terrible terrorizing hands.

Positions reversed, now mine are all
we can count on to prune her
knarled shoots, twins of
her own arthritic fingers—
battered and toppling, the only
way to revive them is to cut them
back; in my hands, scissors or knife
(weapon or scalpel) force her to flower.

II

I never visit my mother's grave.

It's hardly her. She lived

alive in her body (no box!) 8+ decades,
baking pies, making ice cream, dresses, kitchen curtains,
knitting sweaters, hats, painting bedrooms, living room,
sawing a dresser once
to make tables for me and my sister...

then resting,

feet up, head back

in her Barcalounger

as she grew closer to

God and the torment.

It's not

her

in the frozen earth

lace dress

hardly enough

for the dirt's freeze.

Graves aren't homes.

Who'd want to go there?

A Sunday visit, perhaps,

as if at home--

the small house, warm, safe,

radiators sizzling loud

to defeat the cold,

her in the kitchen

basting lamb & roasted potatoes.

The set table says you're important--

taking a day off to visit your mother

(she was sure it was

she you came for) —

Dad she always

considered less special--him

too, of course,

happy to be included: a side dish

like the candied carrots...but

she is the lamb of God;

he is dressing- the saint

at her side.

You are

Judas sometimes, Peter often,

the Blessed Mother always -- her

adored daughter the image and likeness

of her long dead mother--
both Siobbann- long red
hair a dazzling commotion
coming in from the cold.

I never visit my mother's grave,

but I keep her alive
in my daily moisturized face
like her cold cream frosting
that greeted us daily when
we returned from school.

You can tell
a lot about a mother from watching her
daughter. Kathy's always wore
lipstick, Donna's never; Carol's has
penciled eyebrows, coifed hair;
Ida's a cook, but always with make-up;
Maida never shows her legs,
has perfectly manicured nails.

Like my mother's, my table's
an altar to family--freshly laundered cloth and napkins,
lamb the favorite meal, flowers at the center.

And see-through hand painted tea cups—
thin as newborn skin--the twin
to Mom's I discovered
at an auction. She found hers
when a neighbor lady died.

Mom seldom went out but
for a trip to Hearn's or church, an emergency trip
to the doctor or beach to collect an errant child,
but this day, she was gone for hours,
came home with knives, (so frightening
as were all sharp edges in her hands) huge
kitchen knives for slicing cabbage, turnips,
parsnips...oversized overweight roots
she insisted be part of every meal. And
the prize—a full set of teacups,
unblemished china teacups-
Aunt May's and the Bishop's for
special occasions but only Dad's
for everyday when Mom served him tea
after supper. I haven't seen them for
years.

But I've kept mine
untouched as if to surprise her—
as if she'll walk in here any minute
ask for tea, & I'll open this closet &
show her- "Your identical teacups;
I kept them for you."

Then I'll ask her,
"What's a visit to a grave

next to porcelain tea cups
& geraniums glowing
in a small clay pot?"