

Who Will This Be To Me?

An Excerpt from *Filling Her Shoes: a Memoir of an Inherited Family*

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One afternoon a few months before Tom and I were to be married, Max, who was almost seven, wandered into the dining room of the house we all shared. I was organizing a box of old photographs. He tossed a bright orange Nerf ball in the air over and over and said nothing. Soon he began to twirl around after each toss, catching the ball behind his back. Then he bounced it off the wall over the table, then off the ceiling.

“Hi, Bud,” I said. “Nice moves.” No reply. Wall. Ceiling. Twirl.

In my months of living with Tom and his son Max, I’d learned to let the boy come close on his own. If I crowded him or moved too quickly, he skittered away. If I was patient, we often ended up playing, laughing and, recently, even snuggling on the couch with a book or a TV show.

“Who’s that?” he asked, peeking around my shoulder.

“My mom when she was young.”

“What’s she sitting on?”

“A paper moon. They used to have them at fairs and carnivals. People posed for pictures on them.”

“That’s dumb. It doesn’t even look like a real moon.”

“After the wedding, I suppose she’ll be your Grandma Sylvia.”

“Cool.” Wall. Ceiling. Wall. Twirl. He caught the ball and then pressed a dirt-smudged finger on another photo. “Who will that be to me?”

“That was my grandfather, the one who died a few months ago.”

Max shrugged and resumed his tossing. “I already got a grandfather,” he said, not unkindly.

“Lots of kids have two grandpas. I guess my grandfather would have been your great-grandfather.”

“Hmm. Too bad he had to die. I coulda used one of those.”

I felt a pinch in my chest. Max had lost his mother only two years before. I shuffled quickly past the pictures of dead relatives.

Max propped his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his upturned palms. “What about them?” he asked, pointing to a picture of my sister and her family.

He’d played with my niece and nephew, attended birthday parties and family dinners. But I could see he was starting to ponder how, after the wedding, my family might be something different to him. “Di and Jim will be your aunt and uncle. Megan and Matt will be your cousins.”

“Sweet!” Then, after we’d sorted stacks of aunts and uncles, cousins and friends, Max sighed. “Wow, you have a lot of people.” A warmth began to fill me. Perhaps my family was the dowry I’d bring to this little boy who had lost so much. “Whoa,” he exclaimed, laughing at my third-grade photo, the one where my hair had been expanded to new dimensions by a humid day.

At moments like those, Max was just a little boy. At other times, when he was still or thought no one was looking, it seemed that the Earth’s pull was just a little stronger where he stood, tugging the corners of his mouth downward, making his eyes years older than seven birthdays would imply. Just as I was about to put the last of the pictures in the box, Max pressed his finger once more to a face—this time, mine. “And who will this be to me?”

I was suddenly flooded with a heart swell for which I had no name. This son of the man I loved was becoming *my* son. Being a mother was something I’d long hoped for. I should have

known the answer to his simple question. I should have known how to say just the right, wise, magical thing. But I didn't. So I asked a cop-out question. "Well, what do you think?"

Max shrugged.

"I'll be your second mom."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry that your first mom died. I liked her a lot." I added.

"What will I call you? After our wedding?"

My heart pounded. "You can call me Mom, or Mama. You can also call me Betsy, if you'd rather. Whatever feels OK for you."

He stood there a minute. I waited. Then he picked up his ball. "What's for dinner?" I told him burgers.

"Sweet," he said, as he walked out of the room.

At our wedding a few months later, I made vows to Max, as well as to his dad. I promised to step into the shoes his mother had been forced to leave behind, to help him remember her and to be the best mother I could be. For the next few days, Max tried out a new title for me. "Can we go bowling?" he'd ask, and then follow the question by mouthing the word *Mom*. Or, "Can we go to the store?" And the mouthed word *Mom*. *Mom* was always silent. It seemed he was trying it on, seeing how it felt in his mouth. I understood, but I felt small . . . and smaller still when he started calling me Betsy again. I tucked this shameful disappointment away, telling no one.

Weeks later as I drove him home from school, Max pulled a ziptop bag full of Cheez-Its from his lunchbox. He munched away, licking the orange dust off each finger. With his focus

deep inside the near-empty bag, he suddenly said, “I notice I don’t call you Mom.” Oof. Who threw that rock at my chest? Dead hit.

I breathed to calm my voice. “I noticed that.”

One last cracker, then four fingers to lick. “When I say Betsy, I mean Mom.”

I swallowed past the dirt clod that formed in my throat. “Thanks. “That’s nice to know.”

He looked out the window. “Moms die, you know. I think it’s maybe safer if you’re just Betsy.”

We could have had a talk about magical thinking and death and how nothing he could say would cause me to die, or could have caused his mother to die. But that didn’t feel right.

“Thanks, Bud. I appreciate you telling me.” Those big chocolate eyes found mine. I waited.

“Hey, Betsy?”

“Yeah,” I said, delighted with the new sound of my old name.

“What’s for dinner?”