

(fork and spoon)



alcachofa

m. tamara cutler

The first thing I noticed upon entering my mother's casita was the perfumed humidity.

*E*rect in her chair, hands palm-down on her thighs, she gazed downward toward the earth, a gentle smile across her face. At eighty-three, my mother had recently launched a meditation practice. This wasn't the first time I'd found her in a deep state of measured breathing.

She wore her Moroccan kaftan dyed fresh-kill red, the black embroidery across her chest like a diagram of a circulatory system. An arrangement of orange sections, sliced avocado, and walnuts in a Berber ceramic bowl sat on the table in front of her, a still life waiting to be painted. Birdsong accompanied the hum of the refrigerator fan, while the voice of an English actor reading Poirot lulled from her laptop speaker.

I wouldn't have disturbed her if I hadn't noticed the sauté pan of quartered artichokes on the marble countertop behind her. I've always admired how the spiky vegetable requires methodical patience to savor its heart. I had to eat one, if not two, and walked past her with light steps.

The regal stain of purple across the artichoke's inner leaves reminded me of mixing paint for her series of large canvases, inspired by moody winter sunsets. I had labored over this exact color, experimenting with maroon, beet, cadmium, indigo, plum, and violet. As I scraped the leaves with my upper teeth and tongued the soft meat, a taste of metallic green filled my mouth.

Meditating or not, this should have provoked my mother to say, "Don't eat those artichokes, Mich, I'm saving them for dinner."

That's when I realized her position had been unchanged since I entered. I flashed back to the time her heart rate went so low during a liquid fast she thought she was speaking in real time, when her words were delayed like a slow-motion tape recorder.

I moved to kneel in front of her, my hand

on her leg. The kaftan fabric felt warm from her body. Her skin, clammy over the pulse points of her wrists. I fixated on the mole between her clavicles. I have the same mole in the same place, as if it were imprinted there during my time in her womb.

"Mom? Are you meditating, or sleeping?" I asked. "Mom?" She didn't respond.

I had moved to this rural village in southern Spain to be close to her. I made a promise she wouldn't die alone, and now I felt powerless in an unlisted location on Google Maps. I ran to our main house to alert Eric, my partner. "Emergency!" was all I could articulate. He ran toward my mother's casita.

"Speak gently!" I called out. "I don't know what's going on."

Tall, with a commanding voice that can take you by surprise, Eric would have startled her with one of his grand entrances.

Instead, he bowed in front of her. "Barbara," Eric said with a steady voice. "Squeeze my hand if you're in there."

Nothing.

I stumbled forward to embrace her, blocking a main stream of daylight. My shadow passing over her eyelids must have moved her to lucidity. She looked up at me, then at Eric in his bright runner's orange, and asked, "Are you the paramedic?"

Once we secured a doctor's appointment, I reenacted the day's events. At first, she only remembered a hot shower and a glass of red wine—then, "The Tramadol!" she exclaimed, as if solving the crime in her *Poirot* series. The prescription pain pill

worked so well she forgot she took it.

When our family dog was put down a few years before, we had kissed his forehead as the lethal injection sent him into eternal sleep.

"This is how I'd like to go when the time comes," my mother confided.

On this day, in her red kaftan surrounded by loved ones, she thought it wouldn't have been so bad. I, however, was not ready for

her to make that journey and put my arms around her. Then she noticed the pile of leaves on the counter.

"Did you eat those artichokes, Mich? I was saving them for dinner."

I had to admit they were the most delicious artichokes I'd ever eaten, if only because I thought they were the last to be touched by her hands. 🍷



M. Tamara Cutler is a screenwriter who brings a visual arts background to her work. Essays are published or forthcoming in *Hunger Mountain Review*, *Longridge Review* (finalist for the Barnhill Prize in creative nonfiction), *Please See Me*, *Trail Running* magazine, and the *Brevity Blog*. She has a diploma in Advanced Creative Writing - Nonfiction from Cambridge University and an MFA in Film from NYU. She is the founder of That Place You Love's Gimme Truth Project, thatplaceulove.substack.com.