

# **Guilt**, by Judy Budnitz

"What kind of son are you?" asks Aunt Fran. Aunt Nina says, "Your own flesh and blood." "What your mother wouldn't do for you," Aunt Fran goes on. "She'd do anything for you. Anything in the world. And now you won't give just a little back." "For shame!" says Aunt Nina. The heat is stifling, but she pulls her sweater closer.

We're sitting in the hospital waiting room, Aunt Fran and Aunt Nina and I. My mother suffered a heart attack this morning. We're waiting to see her, the aunts and I.

The doctor told us her heart won't last much longer. "We can't fix it," the doctors said. "She needs a new one. A transplant." "Well, then give her one!" the aunts cried. "It's not that easy," said the doctors. "We need a donor."

The doctors went away. The aunts looked at me. "Arnie?" Nina said. "What about your heart?"

"My heart?" I shouted. "Are you crazy?"

That started them both off on what a bad son I was. It's impossible to argue with Nina, especially with Fran to back her up. I sit in the middle. Aunt Fran clutches one arm, Aunt Nina the other. They wept at first, but now they sit grimly.

A Styrofoam cup of coffee steams next to my foot, but I can't reach for it. The aunts don't care. They're amazed that I bought it, amazed that I could even think of coffee at a time like this.

Aunt Fran wears a bally sweater and sensible shoes. Her lips are pressed tight. She taps her feet nervously. On my other side, Nina licks her lips, again and again.

"I saw it on *60 Minutes*," Aunt Fran announces. "They put the heart in a cooler, a regular Igloo cooler, like we have at home. And they rush it in a helicopter to the hospital. And they put it in, connect up the pipes. It's just like plumbing."

"You must be your mother's tissue type, too. I'm sure you are," Aunt Nina puts in. "You're young. You're strong. You have a college education. Your heart is exactly what she needs." "You shouldn't have started smoking, though," Aunt Fran goes on. "It's so bad for the heart. You should have thought of that when you started."

"But what about me?" I blurt out finally. "That's what we're talking about. We're talking about your heart," Nina says. "But what happens to me?" I say again. "I can't believe he's thinking of himself at a time like this," Aunt Fran sniffs. "I need my heart. You want me to die so my mother can live?"

"Of course we don't want that," says Aunt Fran. "Sylvie loves you so much. She'd want to die herself if you died." "We can't both have my heart," I say.

"Of course not," says Nina. "You can get one of those monkey hearts, or that artificial heart they made such a fuss about in the news a while back." "Why can't mother get one of those? Or a transplant from someone else?"

"Do you want your mother should have a stranger's heart? Or a monkey's heart? Your poor mother. Do you remember how she never used to take you to the zoo because she couldn't stand to see the filthy monkeys? And you want her to have a monkey's heart? It would kill her." Fran cries.

"She's so weak. She needs a heart that will agree with her," Aunt Nina adds. "Any heart but yours just wouldn't do. But you, you can handle anything. You're young. You're strong. You--"

"Have a college education?" I finished for her.

Aunt Nina glares and says, "Your mother worked herself to the bone for you so you could go to college and make something of yourself. And now what do you do? Out of college four years already, all you do is sit in front of a typewriter all day, call yourself a writer. Smoking those cigarettes, never get a haircut."

"And the first time your mother needs you," Aunt Fran finishes, "you turn your back on her." They both tighten their grips on my arm.

"I do things for Mother all the time," I begin. One of the doctors appears at the end of the hall. As he approaches, my aunts rise, pulling me with them. "Is she all right?" demands Fran, when he's still 20 feet away. "We've found a donor," Nina announces.

The doctor greets us. He's a small man, completely bald. The eyes behind thick glasses are sad. He strokes his scalp as he talks, savoring the feel of it. "She's all right. She's being monitored," he says. "We will look for a donor, but there's a long waiting list."

"We've got a donor. Sylvie's son. He's in the prime of health," Aunt Nina says. "This is Arnie," Fran explains.

The doctor studies me carefully. "Surely you don't do that sort of thing?" I say incredulously. He gazes at me. "It's very rare, very rare indeed that a son will be so good as to donate his heart. In a few cases, it has been done. But it's so rare to find such a son, a rare and beautiful thing."

He takes off his glasses and polishes them on his sleeve. Without them, his eyes are small, piggish. He puts them back on, and his eyes are sad and soulful once more. "You must love your mother very much," he says. "Oh, he does," Fran says. I shift my feet and knock over the cup of coffee and it spills on the floor, a sudden ugly brownness spreading over the empty white.

A nurse leads us to the intensive care unit, where my mother is lying attached to machines and bags of fluid. Aunt Fran rushes to one side of the bed, Aunt Nina the other. I shuffle awkwardly at the foot of the bed. I touch my mother's feet.

"Sylvie, are you all right?" The aunts cry. My mother opens her eyes. There are purple circles around them. She looks pale, but not so different from usual. Hardly on the verge of death. She smiles dully at her sisters. "Oh, Sylvie. You look wonderful, just the same," they say.

Then she raises her eyes to me. "Oh, Arnie. You look terrible," she says. "That jacket. I told you to throw it away. I'll find you another. There's no reason to go around looking like a mess."

"Arnie has some good news," Nina says. "Then why does he look like a thundercloud?" says my mother. "Arnie, is something bothering you?"

Fran says, "Arnie wants to give you his heart." "I never said that," I cry. There is a pause.

"Of course, Arnie, you shouldn't. You don't need to do that for me. Really, you don't," my mother says. She looks terribly sad. The aunts' faces have gone stony. "I never expected anything from you, you know. Of course, nothing like this."

I look down at her feet, two motionless humps under the blanket. "I'm considering it, Mother. Really, I am. I want to find out more about it before I decide. That's all. It's not as simple as changing a car battery or something." I force out a laugh.

No one else laughs, but the aunts' faces melt a little. My heart is is pounding. My mother closes her eyes. "You're a good boy, Arnie," she says. "Your father would be proud."

A nurse comes in and tells us that we should let my mother rest for a while. Aunt Fran and Aunt Nina head back to the waiting room. I walk up and down the halls of dull white where patients shuffle in slow motion,

wheeling their IVs along beside them. I can feel in the floor the buzzing vibration of motors churning away somewhere in the heart of the building. I take the elevator and wander until I find a pay phone.

I call up Mandy. She picks up on the first ring. "Hi," she says. "Where have you been?"

"My mother had a heart attack this morning," I say. "I'm at the hospital."

"Oh, I knew this would happen," Mandy says. "I burned my hand on the radiator this morning, and right away I thought, uh oh, an omen. Something bad's going to happen. How old's your mother?"

"57," I say.

"Oh, that's young for a heart attack. And she wasn't fat or anything. I feel like it's my fault. I should have warned you or something."

Finally, I ask her to come to the hospital. And she says all right and hangs up. I don't need to tell her where to go. Mandy never gets lost. She never has to wait in line. Strangers on the street talk to her. Jobs fall in her lap. She's nice looking, freckles on her nose, good straight teeth. She keeps telling me that my signs indicate my life will be on a big upswing soon, and that I'm just in a transition period right now. I hope she's right.

I finally reach the lobby, and just as I do, Mandy comes bursting in the doors, beaming at me. She doesn't smile. She beams. "I knew I'd find you," she says. "How's your mother? Have you seen her?" Her breath in my face is like pine trees and toothpaste.

"Yes, she's all right for now. Come on. Let's go outside for a minute. I want to ask you something."

Outside, the afternoon is darkening to early evening. We wander in the parking lot among the cars, talking softly like we're afraid we'll wake them. It's cold. I keep looking back to see if anyone is following us.

"They say my mother's heart is bad," I tell Mandy. "She needs a new one. They want me to donate my heart. What do you think of that?"

Mandy stops, her eyes and mouth open. Wind whips her frizzy hair around her face. She looks shocked. I breathe a sigh of relief. At last, someone who can see reason.

But then she says, "Oh, Arnie. How wonderful. Can they really do that? That's so wonderful. Congratulations!"

"You mean you think I should do it?"

"Isn't technology incredible?" Mandy says. "These days doctors can do anything. Now you can share yourself, really give yourself to someone in ways you never even thought were possible before. Your mother must be thrilled."

"But it's crazy," I say.

She takes my hand in hers and looks up into my eyes. "Frankly, Arnie, I didn't think you had it in you. I'm really impressed. Really I am."

"Mandy, I thought you could be realistic about this. What about me? Do you want me dead? What am I supposed to do without a heart?"

"Oh, I'm sure they could fix you up. The important thing right now is to help your mother." She unzips my jacket and presses her hand against my chest. My heart twitches, flutters like a baby bird in her hands. "Arnie, you know what the right thing to do is. You should get back to your mother now." I watch her go, brisk, determined steps, like a schoolteacher.

I find my way back to the waiting room. Someone has mopped up the coffee. "Feel better?" Nina asks. "Made a decision yet?" Fran says.

"Yes. No. I don't know," I say. They are both quiet. Fran turns to me. "Arnie, think about this. The heart's a little thing, really. Less than a pound. It's just a muscle. You've got muscles all over the place. Can't you spare one?" She looks earnestly into my face. "Can't you spare a little bit of flesh?" And then they are crying, both of them, drops sliding down the wrinkles in their faces.

Later we go visit my mother again. She looks worse, but perhaps it's the fluorescent lights. I stand again at the foot of her bed. I can see the veins and tendons on her neck. So delicate, so close to the surface you could snip them with scissors.

"Arnie," she says softly, "you should go home and get some sleep. And shave. You look terrible. So tired. Go. I'll be here tomorrow. I'm not going anywhere."

I drive home in the dark. I go up to my apartment and turn on the lights. I want to call Mandy. Then I realize I don't want to call her at all. Usually my mother calls in the evening and tells me about TV programs and weather changes.

I turn off the lights and sit in the dark. I look at the ceiling, at the smoke detector. It has a blue light that pulses with a regular beat, like the blip on a cardiograph.

Early the next morning at the hospital, I tell the doctor, "I want to do it. Give her my heart." He gives me a long, steady look, eyes huge behind the glasses. "I think you've made the right decision. I do," he says. His eyes drop to my chest. "We can get started right away."

"But what about a transplant for me?" I say. "Don't you need to arrange that first?"

"Oh, we'll take care of that when the time comes. I want to get your heart into your mother right away before, before--"

"Before I change my mind?" I say. He hardly hears. He's already deep in his plans. He claps me on the back.

"Have you told your mother yet? Well, go tell her. And then we'll get your chest shaved and get started."

This is what I have realized. All along, I thought I'd publish a book, lots of books. Get recognition. Earn lots of money. Support my mother in style in her old age. Give her gorgeous grandchildren. I thought that was the way to pay her back for everything I owe her.

But now it looks like I have to pay my debts with my heart instead. Under these circumstances, I don't have a choice. I'm almost glad. It seems easier this way. I'll just give her a piece of muscle, and then I'll be free of her forever. All my debts paid. One quick operation will be so much easier than struggling for the rest of my life to do back to her all the things she thinks she's done for me. It seems like a good bargain.

When I tell my mother the news, she cries a little, and smiles, and says, "Oh, I didn't expect it. Oh, not for a minute. I wouldn't expect such a sacrifice from you, Arnie. I wouldn't dare to even mention such a thing. It's more than any mother could expect of her son. I'm so proud of you. I guess I did a good job of raising you after all. You've turned into such fine, good person. I worried that I may have made mistakes when I was bringing you up. But now I know I didn't."

On and on she goes. And the aunts, they cry, clutch my arms, not so tight as before. And they say they'd doubted me, but they never will again. "What a good son," they keep saying. Looking at them now, they seem smaller than they did before. Shriveled.

I call Mandy and she dashes over to the hospital. She kisses all over my face with her cherry-flavored ChapStick. She hugs me, presses her ear against my chest. She tells me she knew I'd do the right thing.

I'm feeling pretty good now. I light up a cigarette. She takes it away from me and mashes it beneath her heel.

"That belongs to your mother now," she says.

They all give me flowers. I feel like a hero. I kiss my mother's cheek. I hop on a stretcher. They wheel me out. They sedate me slightly, strip me, shave me. And then they put the mask on and knock me out good.

It's like I'm falling, falling down a deep well. And the circle of daylight above me grows smaller and smaller and smaller until it is a tiny white bird, swooping and fluttering against a vast night sky.

How does it feel to have no heart? It feels light, hollow, rattly. Something huge is missing. It leaves an ache, like the ghost of a severed limb. I'm so light inside but so heavy on the outside. Like gravity increased a hundredfold, gravity holding me to the bed like the ropes and pegs of a thousand Lilliputians.

I lie at the bottom of a pool. Up above I see the light on the surface. It wavers, ripples, breaks, and comes together again. I can see the people moving about, far above in the light. I am down here in the dark, cradled in the algae. Curious fish nibble my eyelashes.

After a while, I see a smooth, pink face above me. The doctor? "Arnie," he says. "The operation went very well. Your mother is doing wonderfully. She loves the new heart."

His words begin far away and drift closer, growing louder and louder until they plunk down next to me like pebbles. "Arnie," he calls. The pool's surface shivers. His face balloons, shrinks to a dot, then unfolds itself. "Arnie, about you. We're having a little trouble. There is a shortage of spare hearts in the country right now. We're looking for some kind of replacement. But don't worry. You'll be fine."

Later, I see Aunt Fran and Aunt Nina. They lean close. They're huge. Their faces bleed and run together like wet watercolors. "Your mother's doing so well," they call. "She loves you. Oh, she's so excited. She'll be in to see you soon."

And later it's my mother gliding in, her face pink, her hair curled. "Arnie, Arnie, you good boy," she calls. And then they wheel her out.

They leave me alone for a long time. I lie in the deep. It sways me like a hammock. There is a deep, low humming all around, like whales moaning. My mother does not visit again.

Alone in the dark, no footsteps, no click of the light switch. Then a doctor looms above me. "Your mother," he says, "is not doing well. The heart does not fit as well as we thought. It's a bit too small." He turns away and leans over again. "As for you, we're working on it. There is nothing available at the moment, but don't you worry."

And then Fran and Nina are back. "How could you?" they scream, their voices shattering the surface into fragments. "Giving your mother a bad heart. How could you? What kind of son are you? She's dying. Your mother's dying, all because of you." They weep together.

For a long time, no one comes. I know without anyone telling me that my mother is dead. It is my heart. When it ceases to beat, I know.

The doctor comes to tell me how sorry he is. "She was doing so well at first. But then it turned out the heart just wasn't enough. I tell you, though, she was thinking of you when she died. She asked for you." He sits quietly for a moment.

"We haven't managed to find a heart for you, but you'll be fine. We've shot you up full of preservatives. You'll stay fresh for a while yet." He goes away.

Aunt Fran and Aunt Nina no longer visit. Mandy? Gone. I lie, listening to the emptiness in my chest, like wind wailing through canyons.

These days the doctor comes in often to chat with me. One day he tells me a story. "You know, when your mother died, we managed to save your heart. It was still healthy. We thought about giving it back to you, but there was this little girl here, about eight years old. She needed a new heart too. Cute little blond girl. One time a basketball star came in here to visit, and there were TV cameras and photographers and everything. She was in the papers a lot. Kids were always sending her cards.

"Anyway, we decided to give her your heart. She's only a kid, after all. She's got her whole life ahead of her. Why should we deny her that? I'm sure your mother would have wanted it that way. She was such a caring, selfless woman. I'm sure, deep down, you want her to have it too, don't you?"

Of course I do.



