

the good daughter | Noelle Aleksandra Hufnagel

After discovering that a person's cremated remains could be turned into a reef ball and dropped to the bottom of the ocean, I called my mother. This was the kind of opportunity that, if executed properly, would allow me to finally surpass my perfect sister as the good daughter, thereby erasing a lifetime of parental disappointment and regret. This was my time to shine. Promoting aquatic life would just be an added bonus. So I took a deep breath and explained to my mother that although the process would be quite extensive, requiring most, if not all, of my artistic ability, I would craft her into a reef ball when she died. I loved her that much.

First, I would sprinkle her ashes into wet concrete as it's poured into a fiberglass mold. Before the mixture cures, usually about a month, I would be allowed to imprint special messages or drawings, all of which would be done with real class and consideration. I wouldn't just start hot glue-gunning any old thing to her reef ball, transforming it into some kind of gaudy parade float full of feathers and sequins and papier-mâché. Her reef ball would maintain a certain amount of dignity and elegance, resembling something straight out of *Martha Stewart Living* or a Macy's window display.

Afterwards, I would travel on a fishing boat alongside her reef ball, taking her out to a real nice-looking part of the ocean, one with little to no seaweed or garbage. My sister would probably get seasick and have to stay below deck, but I would take care of everything. I would even volunteer to be the one to slide my mother's reef ball teeter-totter style into the water, trying my hardest, like some kind of Olympic gold-medal diver, to get the least amount of splash as possible.

At least once a year, I would visit her out at sea. My sister would probably be too busy to come, but I would make an entire weekend out of it. I would rent a jet ski and drive in circles around her GPS coordinates. I would not, however, go so far as to dive down to see her. I would have to draw the line there. I've always been afraid of being underwater, and I don't much relish the idea of being side-by-side with random creatures of the sea,

either. Can you imagine how traumatic an experience that might be for me? Well, forget it.

Silence emanated from the other end of the phone, an unhappy kind of silence, so I offered to dive down and visit her at least once. But that was it. She was really pushing it, after all. Not even my sister would offer to risk her life swimming next to things like sea urchins and jelly fish and sharks. My mother should really be more concerned for my safety and well-being.

Still, after everything I explained I would do for her, my mother didn't thank me for going that extra mile, or commend me for my tremendous vision and overall commitment to the project. She didn't say a word. So I asked her, with genuine enthusiasm in my voice, "Now, how does *that* sound to you?"

She cleared her throat and said, real matter-of-fact, "My dear, precious child, you have got to be out of your mind. Being turned into a reef ball is quite possibly the worst thing that could ever happen to me, short of being dead, which I would have to be in order for any of these 'nice' things you would do for me to happen. So, no, thank you. I do not wish to become a reef ball. Not now, not ever. Thank you, no."

At first, my mother's reaction caught me a little off guard. But then it got me to wondering what other burial offers she must've been given behind my back. My sister probably got to her before I did, proposing something real predictable, like a shaded gravesite with a view of the park and one of those oversized marble tombstones engraved with the words: Loving Mother. Maybe she even made the promise of flowers and a few tears. How unoriginal. My mother probably loved it though, went absolutely crazy over the idea of it, declaring her, yet again, the good daughter. I never stood a chance.