

MARGARET ATWOOD : OLD BABES IN THE WOOD. STORIES

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BAD TEETH

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I was astonished," Csilla says, "to hear you had an affair with Newman Small. He had such bad teeth!"

"Who?" Lynne says. "I don't know anyone named Newman Small."

"Sure you do. He used to write book reviews for that magazine. You know the one. In the late 1960s. It folded after five years, and I was not surprised."

"What magazine?"

"It had beavers on the front. Doing undignified things. They were drawings, not real beavers."

"What undignified things?" Lynne asks. She doesn't recall the magazine—so many magazines have come and gone—but she's always intrigued by Csilla's notion of what might be classified as undignified.

"Oh, you know. Having sex. Wearing underpants."

"It's more undignified not to wear underpants," Lynne says. "Though maybe not for beavers."

They're having tea in Csilla's backyard. It's the second COVID summer; otherwise they would be in a restaurant—or not in one, outside on a patio—but at their age you have to be careful. Csilla

spreads raspberry jam on a scone, adds whipped cream, takes a bite. "But how could you stand those teeth?" She gives a little shudder. "Wasn't it like being kissed by a crumbling stone wall?"

"You're hallucinating," says Lynne. "No such kisses took place."

Csilla's own teeth are childishly small, geometrically even, blamelessly white, and all accounted for, though she must be pushing seventy. She never tells her age, whereas Lynne flourishes hers. Clock up enough years, she's in the habit of saying, and you can dance on a table provided you can still clamber up there. You can have sex with the mailman and nobody will care. You can flush away your push-up bras—not literally, you wouldn't want plumbers involved, asking how the bra got into the toilet—but you get the idea. You don't have to hold in your stomach anymore. You can make six kinds of a fool of yourself because you're a fool just for being old. You're off the hook for almost everything.

Lynne is definitely older than Csilla, so she's more off the hook. But how old is Csilla, actually? Lynne calculates: the Hungarian Revolution took place in 1956, when Lynne herself was sixteen. Csilla was definitely alive then, since she'd been yanked out of Hungary by her velvet-gloved but nerves-of-steel mother. They'd been just two of the two hundred thousand people, give or take, who'd seized the chance to skedaddle to the lands of superior shopping malls and daytime-TV game shows. Lynne once met this legendary mother when she was still on the planet and being catered to hand and foot by Csilla. She'd had a gang of other perfumed, flinty-souled Hungarian mothers with whom she'd played card games and exchanged war stories about their respective escapes, plus grumblings about the thankless children they'd saved from the Communist salt mines. Lavender on the outside, meticulous about their coiffures and manicures and eye shadow, but pure adamant within.

Lynne has created various fantasies for this mother. She'd been the mistress of a leading apparatchik but had cheated on him and fled from his jealous temper. She'd been selling contraband American rock 'n' roll records and was on the verge of being arrested. She'd been a member of a secret resistance cell and the Stalinists were onto her. Thousands of suspected resisters had been caught and murdered, let's not forget! In one of these fantasies, the mother had seduced a border guard so that she and Csilla could gain egress. In another version, she'd shot him. In a third, she'd done both.

But according to Csilla, her mother hadn't been at all political. No secret resistance cells for her! She'd merely been nostalgic for foods of yore—some kind of Merry Widow Austro-Hungarian cuisine that had possibly existed in her youth. Schnitzels. Paprika. Goulash. *Proper* goulash. Whipped cream, Csilla would add—*real* whipped cream. All the good stuff. So she'd grabbed a suitcase and Csilla along with it, and hightailed it for the border.

The question is: What age had Csilla been then? She's been coy about that. Old enough to talk, anyway. She still has an accent. Csilla has frequently adjusted the age she was at the time of her primal uprooting: as she herself gets older and older, young Csilla grows younger and younger. Her children tease her about that. "Wait a minute, last year you were ten, now you were five?" "So, maybe you weren't even born?"

Csilla is impervious to both questioning and mockery. She simply pretends she hasn't heard, changes the subject, and forges ahead on whatever twisting narrative path suits her at the moment. She's a strategic liar, being a memoirist. She likes to roll the dice, try things out on people, see how far she can go. In another life she would have lost millions at the roulette table in Monte Carlo, then won it all back while wearing a backless silver lamé gown.

and white evening gloves and toting an ebony cigarette holder, with a sequined bag tucked under her elbow containing a pearl-handled . . . Rein yourself in, Lynne tells herself. Csilla has never smoked, in any life. Otherwise she wouldn't have such perfect teeth. Her teeth would be yellow and sporadic, her gums would be receding.

She'd gone in for suntans though, and it's showing. A little crepe, some furrows. Glamour must be paid for eventually, Lynne silently tsks. She's always been a shade umbrella person herself. Reading books out of the direct rays while others rubbed lemon juice into their hair to turn it blond and basted themselves with baby oil so they could toast to a deep golden brown.

Csilla had no need of lemon juice, being blond by rights, but she's continued to opt for a tan. It sets off her pearly teeth. If asked, she would have said, Why not enjoy the ride? It's going to end sooner or later, so better to go out with a tan. Look good in your coffin.

Underneath the fluff and schmaltz and the baroque fantasizing and the picture-perfect smiling, she's a melancholy fatalist. "Naturally," she'd said to Lynne when Lynne had called her on this a few decades ago. "Don't you know about Hungarian gloom? It's built-in."

"Have another scone," she says now. "I baked them myself."

Unlikely, thinks Lynne. Csilla is a takeout queen, not a baker. "Thanks," she says. "How're the grandkids?" Csilla has four of these, whereas Lynne has only three. Despite their youthful flightiness, expressions of disinterest in washer-dryers, and spouting of near-prehistoric feminist slogans ("A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle" and so forth), both Csilla and Lynne had got married, after all—both of them more than once. They'd

reproduced. They'd lullabied. They'd navigated diapers. They'd fallen back on casseroles, even frozen ones: made from scratch by Lynne, grabbed from the supermarket by Csilla.

Csilla dodges the grandkid diversion by not hearing it. "So, I'm doing a little archaeology on Newman Small," she says, as if thinking. "After the magazine with the sexy beavers, he got a contract job with the federal government. Advising them on some culture thing. There was more money in the culture-advising business back then, you'll remember, and Newman always knew where the blood was, he knew how to suck out a few choice clots for himself. Soviet bureaucracy, Canadian bureaucracy, it's all the same. There's a system and you work it, that was Newman Small. He denounced the system too, of course. That's the Canadian way: high-handed accusations but cash under the table. You couldn't have done such a thing with the Soviets, they'd only liquidate you."

"We like to be inclusive," says Lynne. "We like to acknowledge all viewpoints. Correction: we like to pretend to acknowledge them."

Csilla laughs but plows ahead with her fable. "Newman kept on with the book reviews though, for other outlets. Those reviews weren't bad either; he knew the right buzz words. I guess that's how you met him: the two of you got together over your book reviews."

"Csilla, I did not get together with Newman Small," Lynne says.

"Your reviews were better, though. Maybe that's why Newman Small wanted to slide into your bikini bottom. He wanted to conquer your book-reviewing power by seducing you. Maybe he thought your mastery of the form would rub off on him via his dick."

"I have never worn a bikini in my life," says Lynne indignantly. She finds this the most shocking thing Csilla has said about her so far. She's always been a strict one-piecer. Though not out of

prudery, she claims. It's just that girls with short waists should not wear bikinis. For girls, read women. The four horizontals make them look oblong, even more oblong than they are. This is a hard truth, but a truth nonetheless.

"Your flannel PJs, then. The ones with the teddy bears on them."

Lynne regrets having ever shared this personal nightwear information with Csilla. Teddy-bear flannel PJs are far beyond anything Csilla would consider wearable. They were a sort of joke, having something to do with getting cold feet as one entered the golden years. It's underhanded of Csilla to use these pyjamas against her in such a ruthless manner, but Csilla has always been ruthless.

"Wrong decade," Lynne says. "Anachronism. Those PJs date from the twenty-first century."

"Or whatever you were wearing then," says Csilla, not missing a beat. "Slenderella, remember them? In their lacy fake-satin period. I had the two-piece thing with the little jacket. The point is, how could you?" She raises her eyebrows, widens her eyes. "I know it was the 1960s and we were all doing dumb things, but Newman Small! He must have had a lot to offer in some other way to make up for his bad teeth. Was he well endowed?"

"Well endowed?" says Lynne with a laugh. "That's rather formal. What century are we in?"

"Okay, hung like a donkey."

"Csilla," says Lynne, pronouncing her words distinctly, "I did not fuck Newman Small. He's a blank in my life. I've never set eyes on him."

"Well, your first ex says you did. He remembers it very well. It's etched, he says. It was agonizing for him. It gave him recurring nightmares. Have a grape, I washed them."

"Jason? He told you that?" Lynne feels a chill run down her spine. She hasn't spoken to Jason for a while—when, exactly? At

least a year. What would make him remember an event that never happened? Has some unknown grief unsettled him? Has he fallen victim to a brain malady? Does he have Parkinson's, does he have Alzheimer's, does he have a tumour? Surely none of these things has happened: she would have heard. So why is he telling tales about things she never did, transgressions she hadn't actually committed? It's hard even for her to remember all of her actual transgressions; has Jason too got mixed up about them? Or is he just being amusingly malicious? It's not out of the question.

She pours more tea, stirs milk into it, making little circles with the teaspoon, buying time. When she's sufficiently in control of herself, she says, "Jason would never have said such a thing. It just isn't true. Why were you even talking to him?"

Lynne suspects why. Csilla is writing a book about the 1960s. She has a series going on: the social history of Canada, decade by decade. Picture books with commentary. Fashions of the era, public uproars, politicians, sports triumphs, pop stars, minor celebrities. Jason is a minor celebrity, or he was; he'd once had a radio show on which he'd interviewed other minor celebrities. Lynne too had been a minor celebrity, which is how they'd met. She'd been an award-winning poet in her extreme youth, by which she means twenty-seven. *Poet* by its nature is minor, and *award-winning* is now a common adjective: it might be applied to a beer or a cow. Many of the major celebrities of the 1960s are dead, and Lynne can barely remember who they were, let alone the minor ones. After a while everything that was once major is minor.

"Another scone?" Csilla asks. "I talk to him a lot. Jason loves a good gossip. He's been a terrific source, he's a walking encyclopedia, he's got the dirt on everybody. He knows where all the bodies are buried."

"Maybe so, but I'm not a body. He wouldn't have said that. He

may exaggerate, but he doesn't lie." Unlike you, Lynne beams at her silently; then corrects, Unlike us. "Or he doesn't lie to that extent," she adds.

"There's a wasp on your plate," Csilla says. She waves her hands around.

"You shouldn't agitate wasps. Don't bother them and they won't bother you," Lynne says. A motto from her grit-your-teeth-and-don't-be-hysterical mother.

"Which happens not to be true," says Csilla. "I have been very nice to those wasps. Last week I gave them a piece of cake all to themselves and one of them stung me."

"Ingratitude is deplorable, especially in a wasp," says Lynne. "Most people would just massacre them. You take a paper bag and put it over the nest at dusk, then spray the shit out of them. So, when and where was this sordid liaison supposed to have taken place?"

"In 1967, in Ottawa."

"Well then. More and more improbable. Nobody has affairs in Ottawa."

"Oh, they do," said Csilla. "Civil servants have them all the time. They do it out of boredom."

"But nobody goes there from somewhere else to have them. Why would they even consider it?"

"Maybe if the other person was in a wheelchair and couldn't travel easily," Csilla says. "It would show devotion."

"Not even then," says Lynne. "I was living in Whitehorse in 1967. Just for half of that year: I had a grant. Jason used to come for weekends. So I would hardly be going to Ottawa for any reason."

"You must have told Jason it was something to do with your grant. I expect you flew to Vancouver," Csilla says. "Then you took the red-eye to Toronto and changed planes. You must have taken

advantage of some cut-rate airline deal, being so young and peniless then. I admire your stamina! You must have been very keen to get there. Where did you meet Newman for your rendezvous, or is that rendezvouses? There must have been lots of them! Was it at the Chateau Laurier? Did he book you a room for when you staggered off the plane? Was he waiting there to clamp his decaying teeth onto your neck?"

"Csilla, this never happened. Never, not ever."

"You don't need to be so defensive. We all had flings then, yes? The pill had just come out. We were demonstrating our freedom. Sauce for the goose, tit for tat, all of that. Alcohol was involved, as I recall, not to mention pot. I had a miniskirt and white go-go boots. Remember?"

"I don't mind owning up to the affairs I did have," Lynne says. "And I am deeply ashamed of those flared jeans and the jacket with the Mao collar and the zip-front catsuit, if it's abject confession you're after. But I did not have an affair with someone called Newman Small. Double pinky swear, cross my heart and spit."

Csilla overlooks this reversion to childhood slang; possibly she doesn't recognize the vernacular. "Jason says you had a fight about it. He says you admitted it. He asked you if you were drunk or maybe on drugs because how else could you have even considered a man with such awful teeth? Newman Small! Jason says it fractured all aesthetic rules, and after that he no longer respected your intellect. He says it broke up your marriage."

"I'm going to call Jason. I can't believe he's been pushing this absurd story," Lynne says, levering herself out of her garden chair. "Thank you for the tea. The scones were delicious. You must tell me where you bought them."

"Oh, don't call Jason," Csilla cries. "If you make a fuss about it, he won't ever tell me anything else!"

Lynne makes her way from the shady back garden, around the side of Csilla's house and through the forsythia bushes, which need pruning, then across the lawn, which needs watering, and then down the front steps to the sidewalk. Out here the sunlight is blaring. A few more degrees of warming and we'll go up in smoke, she reflects, but maybe not till after I'm dead. Her car is two blocks away. Despite the heat she must not hurry. That way fainting lies.

She's ruminating about teeth, the teeth of her youth. No fluoridation then, not even any dental floss. Only toothpicks. Then candy sprang up all over the place after the war, like sickly sweet weeds. Not to mention ice cream and chewing gum, and soda pop. It must have been a plot on the part of dentists, to create cavities; not that they'd needed any help. She remembers herself at eight, at nine, at ten, cowering in the dentist's chair, enduring the horrible drill—more like a jackhammer—worked in those days by a pedal. The grinding sound inside her head. The pain—did they even have anaesthesia yet? There must have been something, but it didn't work very well. Then the sound—a scrunching sound like walking on Styrofoam or twenty-below snow—as the filling was packed into the excavation. A number of those fillings, grey in colour and doubtless leaking mercury straight into her brain, are still embedded in her molars. Her front teeth, however, are caps: praise the lord for implants.

Why had Csilla escaped all that? Was it true—as Lynne's mother had proclaimed—that there were two kinds of teeth, soft teeth and hard teeth, and Lynne had unfortunately inherited the soft teeth from her father's side of the family, and what couldn't be cured must be endured? Or was it that the Stalinists had kept Hungary so short of the necessities of life, such as candy, that Csilla had been spared the corroding effects of the postwar sugar bonanza?

These thoughts occupy her until she reaches her own house and is able to rush to the bathroom to deal with the effects of so much tea. She then drinks a large glass of water to counter dehydration, and sits down to arrange her thoughts. What will she say on this call to Jason that she's about to make? Is it remotely possible that Csilla and Jason are right, and she did have an affair with the mysterious foul-toothed Newman Small for reasons no one can fathom, and was so traumatized by it, and by the ensuing scene and rupture with Jason, that she's forgotten all about it? That could have happened.

If only she'd been keeping a diary: she could consult it. But life was moving so quickly back then. She'd met Csilla when? In 1968 or so? At a cut-rate party thrown by a poetry publisher, in a cellar perhaps, but the cellar of what? Not a church. A tavern, long defunct. Csilla had been wearing a brightly coloured geometric miniskirt and a huge red and orange and blue wristwatch, and, yes, white go-go boots. How many male hangers-on in the subcultural scene were in love with Csilla—with her swinging blond hair and her golden-girl tan and her sexy European accent? Many. Lynne recalls the lovelorn—fellow poets, a lot of them—confiding in her over glasses of tepid white wine or equally tepid coffee, gazing at her with dark-circled eyes and bemoaning Csilla's cruelty, as evidenced by her refusal to sleep with them. Did Csilla ever have real feelings? Was she a heartless cockteaser? Was she an ice goddess? There had to be some unnatural reason for her resistance to them.

How many, on the other hand, were in love with Lynne? She'll never know. Csilla claimed to know, however. She used to have an extensive list of the supposed adorers of Lynne that she would trot out in order to jeer at them, since these suitors were each and every one of them deficient and ridiculous, and vastly unworthy of Lynne. But how did Csilla have access to their romantic feelings? There was no way of verifying that what she said was true. Lynne

could hardly risk asking any of these young men, "Excuse me, but are you in love with me?" The word would have gone around that she was bats; even more bats than was normal, female poets being bats by definition. In any case, finding out would have been merely a matter for curiosity and ego gratification, since none of those on Csilla's list had interested Lynne: she'd read their poetry.

Some of the supposed suitors were married, older men with actual jobs, ducking out on their wives, thrill-hunting and slumming it among the counterculturals. The late 1960s was a time of big domestic breakups: the so-called sexual revolution, post-pill, pre-AIDS. Young bearded hippies everywhere, girls in maxicoats, then long flower-child skirts and granny boots, acid and weed freely available, plus—later—other substances. It was as if the 1950s ideal family had swelled up like a water balloon and then burst. Marriages were shattering like glass in a hailstorm. Men of fifty were ditching their tailored suits and throwing away their ties and denouncing the System and donning love beads, so embarrassing; while mothers of four were deciding they were really lesbians and had been all along, thus explaining their unsatisfactory sex lives. Everyone, it seems, was in search of their hidden inner identity and likely to go looking for it in bed after bed after bed. Jason included, Lynne included. So: Newman Small, sign of the times? Collateral damage? What exactly had Lynne been up to with him, him and his dental afflictions?

She lifts her landline phone—she's kept a landline, because what if extreme weather such as hurricanes or floods totals the cellphone towers, or the electricity goes off due to an ice storm and you can't recharge? Such things happen.

She opens the contacts on her cellphone and dials Jason's number. On a landline he's less likely to see that it's her. Will he pick up? Yes.

"Hello, Lynne," he says. "How are you?"

"Fine. You? Have you had COVID?"

"Not yet. You?"

"Not yet either." Lynne breathes in. "Jason." A pause. "I've just been talking to Csilla."

A pause on his end. "Yes?" he says cautiously.

"It's about this man called Newman Small."

"I expect it is," he says. Is that a laugh? Jason likes to laugh at foibles as long as they aren't his.

"Csilla says that you told her I had an affair with a man called Newman Small. In Ottawa. How could you? You know that's not true. I've never even met him!"

"I said nothing of the sort," says Jason.

"Then what did you say? You must've said something."

"Csilla told me a rambling story about some guy with bad teeth. I let her run on—she would have anyway, you know how she is—and then she asked me to confirm it."

"And did you?"

"No. I said nothing."

"She took that for a yes."

"She takes everything for a yes," Jason says. "When it suits her."

"Why didn't you tell her it isn't true?" says Lynne.

"No point," says Jason. "She believes whatever she likes, or says she does. Also, I could neither confirm nor deny. Who is this Newman Small? How do I know whether you slept with some unknown person I've never heard of? You can't disprove a negative."

"You mean you don't know who Newman Small is either?"

"Correct," says Jason. He is definitely laughing now.

"She's really out of line," says Lynne.

"This is new?"

"She wants to put it in her book. My affair with Newman Small. That series she's doing. Literati scandal of 1967."

"Tell her you'll sue her."

"I can't sue her!" says Lynne. "She's one of my best friends!"
 "Still?" says Jason.

A week later, Lynne invites Csilla to her own backyard for tea, turn and turnabout.

She doesn't serve scones and whipped cream, however. She sticks to a more Protestant menu: sliced peaches with a dollop of vanilla yogourt, and date and oatmeal energy bites from the vegan bakery around the corner. It's another hot day so Lynne has moved a pedestal fan into the garden. Csilla looks as good as ever, in a pale flowered sundress with ruffled cap sleeves. Maybe not as good as ever, Lynne silently edits. As good as possible.

After they've gone through the politenesses—who among their mutual acquaintance has been infected, who's ended up in the hospital, who has died, who has died from other causes—Lynne tackles the main topic.

"I spoke to Jason," she says. "He claims he emphatically did not tell you I had a thing with Newman Small."

"Really?" Csilla raises her eyebrows incredulously. "He said that?"

"He also said he's never heard of Newman Small."

"He hasn't?"

"No." Lynne lets this sink in, though surely Csilla knows it already. "Was there ever any Newman Small?" she then asks. "Did you just make him up? Teeth and all?"

"Does it matter?" Csilla says, smiling her perfect smile.

"Yes!" says Lynne. "It does matter."

Csilla looks down at her teacup. "But it's such a great story," she murmurs.

"No doubt. But it isn't true," Lynne says. Her tone is reproachful, earnest, severe. How has Csilla managed to make her feel

like a tedious, moralizing, beige-foundation-garmented Sunday-school teacher?

"A story isn't great because it's true," Csilla says. "It's great because it's good."

"How many people have you told this great story to?" Lynne asks. She doubts there will be a straight answer. She has a vision of herself, or a flat billboard image of herself, with the non-existent Newman Small's grinning, gap-toothed face glued onto her. She'll never get him off now. Once a story like that has been flung into the social pond, it's almost impossible to reel it back in.

"Not many. Just a few," says Csilla. A lie, without a doubt.

Lynne says nothing. She's feeling breathless. Is it rage or amazement? Why is Csilla so mendacious? Why does she invent these preposterous narratives? Because it isn't the first time. For the joy of creation? To make mischief, to stir things up for fun? To assert that life is a farce? Or for some deeper or more tenuous reason? She must know she'll get found out eventually. What does she want? A scolding? Proof that everyone's awful, including her?

"You didn't have to make him so repulsive," Lynne says. "You could have made him a hunk. But I assume you thought some sort of goblin was funnier."

"You're mad at me," Csilla says mournfully.

"Yeah, I'm sort of mad," says Lynne. "You've been making me look like an idiot. Was that the idea?"

"I guess you never want to speak to me again," says Csilla. She's looking down at the table, twiddling her teaspoon.

But how could Lynne be mad enough for that? Mad enough to never speak to Csilla again? She's too old for terminal scenes and door-slamming, she can't work up the self-righteous indignation. *You're dead to me* is what the younger generation might say. But Csilla is far from dead to her. Csilla is in fact part of her. The huge plastic watch, the white go-go boots, the outlandish fictions. The

cheap white wine, the mediocre poets, the lovelorn swains. The two of them, tumbling around like kittens, happy to have bodies, believing they were free. Feeling and causing pain. Floating for just a moment beyond the grasp of time.

"I wouldn't blame you," says Csilla. "I don't know why I'm such a shit." She's adroit at this, whatever it is: repentance, self-abasement, wiggling out of consequences? Sabotage, then escaping? It helps to be beautiful.

"Remember the time you stole a month's worth of my birth control pills and said it wasn't you?" says Lynne. "In that aqua plastic dial-pack they had then? I had to go through crap for a new supply, they were hard to get then. You ruined two weeks of my dirty love life."

"Sorry to say, I sold them. On the black market, such as it was. Well, I needed the money, and I wasn't going to sell mine!" Csilla laughs, showing her child's teeth. "I'm a shit, like I said."

After a moment, Lynne laughs too. All those days with Csilla, all those years, turning to smoke, evaporating. So soon gone. "You're my very dear old friend, and I love you," she says.

Csilla smiles, her best, most innocent, most angelic pearly-toothed smile. "Do I hear a *but*?"

"No *but*," says Lynne.