MARGARET ATWOOD: OLD BABES IN THE WOOD. STORIES (2023)

MY EVIL MOTHER

✦

"You're so evil," I said to my mother. I was fifteen, the talk-back age.

"I take that as a compliment," she said. "Yes, I'm evil, as others might define that term. But I use my evil powers only for good."

"Yeah, tell me another," I replied. We were having an argument about my new boyfriend, Brian. "Anyway, who gets to say what's good?"

My mother was in the kitchen, grinding something in her mortar. She often ground things in her mortar, though sometimes she used the Mixmaster. If I said, "What's that?" she might say, "Garlic and parsley," and I'd know she was in *Joy of Cooking* mode. But if she said, "Look the other way" or "What you don't know won't hurt you" or "I'll tell you when you're old enough," I'd realize there was trouble in store for someone.

She was ahead of her time with the garlic, I feel compelled to mention: most people in our kind of neighbourhood hadn't found out about it yet.

Our neighbourhood was on the northern margin of Toronto, one of many cities that were rapidly expanding over farm fields and drained swamps, wreaking havoc with the vole populations and flattening burdocks as they went. Out of the bulldozed mud had sprouted postwar split-levels in tidy rows, each with a picture window—ranch style, with flat roofs that hadn't yet begun to leak in the winters. Those who lived in these houses were young moderns, with children. The fathers had jobs, the mothers not. My mother was an anomaly: no visible husband, no job exactly, though she did seem to have a means of support.

Our kitchen was large and sunlit, with a canary-yellow linoleum floor, a breakfast nook, and a white dresser with rows of blue plates and bowls. My mother had a thing for blue in tableware; she said it warded off any evil eyes intent on ruining the food.

Her eyebrows were plucked into two incredulous arches, as was almost still the fashion. She was neither tall nor short, neither plump nor thin. In everything, she took care to imitate the third choice of Goldilocks: just right. That day she was wearing a flowered apron—tulips and daffodils—over a shirtwaist dress with small white and pastel-green stripes and a Peter Pan collar. Cuban heels. Single strand of pearls, wild, not cultured. (*Worth it,* she said. *Only the wild ones had souls.*)

Protective colouration, she called her outfits. She looked like a dependable mother from a respectable neighbourhood such as ours. As she worked at the kitchen counter, she might have been demonstrating a jiffy recipe in *Good Housekeeping* magazine—something with tomato aspic, this being the mid-1950s, when tomato aspic was a food group.

She had no close friends in the vicinity—"I keep myself to myself," she'd say—but she performed the expected neighbourly duties: presenting tuna-noodle casseroles to the sick, taking in the mail and newspapers of those on vacations so their houses

wouldn't be targeted by burglars, babysitting the occasional dog or cat. Though not the occasional baby: even when my mother offered, parents of babies hesitated. Could they have picked up on her invisible but slightly alarming aura? (Invisible to others; she claimed that she herself could see it. Purple, according to her.) Maybe they were afraid they'd return to find their infant in a roasting pan with an apple in its mouth. My mother would never have done such a thing, however. She was evil, but not that evil.

Sometimes women in distress—they were always women—would come over to our house, and she would make them a cup of something that might have been tea, sit them at the kitchen table, and listen, scanning their faces, nodding silently. Did money change hands? Is that how she made her living, at least in part? I couldn't swear to it, but I have my suspicions.

I'd see these consultations going on as I trudged upstairs to do my homework. Or homework was my cover story; I was just as likely to be painting red nail polish on my toes, or examining my mirrored face for flaws—too sallow, too zitty, too chipmunk-toothed—or applying a thick layer of deep-red lipstick and admiring my pouty reflection, or whispering to Brian over the hall telephone. I was tempted to eavesdrop on what my mother was saying, but she could always tell when I was doing it. "Big ears," she would say. "Off to bed! Beauty sleep!" As if mere sleep would make me more beautiful.

Then the kitchen door would close, and the murmuring would resume. I'm sure my mother gave these troubled women a chunk of advice, at the very least, though it might also have been a mysterious liquid in a jar. She kept a supply of such jars in the refrigerator. The goop in them was of different colours, and they were none of my business. Neither was the herb garden at the back of our house, in which nothing was labelled and everything was off limits, though I was occasionally allowed to pick flowers from the

benevolent decoy ornamentals placed strategically here and there and to stick them into a vase. My mother had no interest in such frilly, girly decorations herself, but she was content to indulge me.

"That's lovely, my pet," she would say absentmindedly.

"You didn't even look at it!" I would whine.

"Yes, I did, my treasure. It's very aesthetic."

"I was watching! Your back was turned!"

"Who says you need eyes for seeing?"

To which I had no answer.

The percentage of husbands in our neighbourhood who developed coughs or broke their ankles, or who, on the other hand, were promoted at their offices, was probably no higher than elsewhere, but my mother had a way of hinting at her own influence on these events, and I believed her, despite the nagging doubts of common sense. I also resented her: she thought she was so clever! Nor would she tell me how she'd done it. "That's for me to know and you to find out," she'd say.

"Nobody actually likes you," I'd thrown at her during one of our standoffs. "The neighbours think you're a loony." I'd made this up while suspecting it was probably true.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Don't you care what they say about you?"

"Why would I care about the tittle-tattle of the uninformed? Ignorant gossip."

"But doesn't it hurt your feelings?" My own feelings were frequently hurt, especially when overhearing jokes about my mother in the high-school girls' washroom. Girls of that age can be quite sadistic.

"Hurt, fiddlesticks! I wouldn't give them the satisfaction," she'd said with a lift of her chin. "They may not like me, but they respect me. Respect is better than like."

I disagreed. I didn't care about being respected—that was a

schoolteacher thing, like black lace-up shoes—but I very much wanted to be liked. My mother frequently said I'd have to give up that frivolous desire if I was going to amount to anything. She said that wanting to be liked was a weakness of character.

Now—now being the day of our fight over Brian—she finished grinding and scraped the contents of her mortar into a bowl. She stuck her finger into the mixture, licked it—so, not deadly poison after all—then wiped her hands on her flowered apron. She had a stash of such aprons, each with a seasonal theme—pumpkins, snowflakes—and at least five crisp, striped shirtwaist dresses.

Where had she acquired those flowered aprons and shirtwaist dresses and the string of real pearls? She wasn't known to go shopping, not like other mothers. I never knew how she got anything. I'd learned to be careful what I myself wished for, because whatever it was might materialize, and not in a form that fulfilled my hopes. I already regretted the pink angora sweater with the rabbit-fur collar and pompoms I'd received on my last birthday, despite having mooned over its image in a magazine for months. It made me look like a stuffed toy.

She covered the bowl of mushed-up garlic and parsley mixture with a little red plastic hat and set it aside. "Now," she said, "you have my full attention. Who gets to say what's good? I do. At the present moment, good is good for *you*, my treasure. Have you tidied your room?"

"No," I said sulkily. "Why don't you like Brian?"

"I have no objection to him as such. But the Universe doesn't like him," she said serenely. "She must have her reasons. Would you like a cookie, my pet?"

"The Universe isn't a person!" I fumed. "It's an it!" This had come up before.

"You'll know better when you grow up," she said. "And a glass of milk, for solid bones."

I still believed that my mother had some influence over the Universe. I'd been brought up to believe it, and it's hard to shake such ingrained mental patterns. "You're so mean!" I said. I was, however, eating the cookie: oatmeal raisin, baked yesterday, one of her staples.

"The opposite of 'mean' is 'doormat,'" she said. "When you're tidying your room, don't forget to collect the hair from your hairbrush and burn it. We wouldn't want anyone malignant getting their claws on that."

"Like who would bother?" I asked, in what I hoped was a contemptuous tone.

"Your gym teacher," she said. "Miss Scace. She's a mushroom collector, among other things—or she was in the old days. Some disguise! Gym teacher! As if I'd be fooled by that!" My mother wrinkled her nose. "It takes so much energy to keep her at bay. She flies around at night and looks in your window, though she can't get in, I've seen to that. But she's been poaching my mushrooms."

I wasn't in love with my gym teacher, a stringy woman with a chicken neck who was given to hectoring, but I couldn't picture her gathering toxic mushrooms by the light of the full moon, as I knew they ought to be gathered. She definitely had an evil eye—the left one, which wasn't entirely in sync with the right—but she lacked the heft of my mother. As for flying, that was bonkers. "Miss Scace! That old biddy! She's not even . . . She couldn't even . . . You're so crazy!" I said. It was something I'd overheard at school: *Her mother's so crazy.*

"Crazy is as crazy does," she replied, unperturbed. "Let's not duck the subject. Brian must go. If not off the planet, out of your life."

"But I like him," I said plaintively. The truth: I was besotted

with him. I had his picture in my wallet, taken in a train-station photo booth, with a lipstick kiss covering his tiny, surly black-and-white face.

"I dare say," said my mother. "But the Universe doesn't care who we like. He was dealt the Tower. You know what that means: catastrophe!" My mother had read Brian's Tarot cards, though not with him present, of course. She'd made one of her pressure-cooker pot roasts and invited him to dinner—a suspect act in itself, which he must have known since he frowned the whole time and answered her perky inquiries in monosyllables—and saved an uneaten corner of his apple pie crust as the link between him and the Invisible World. The pie-crust corner was placed beneath an overturned tray; she'd laid out the cards on the tray bottom. "He's going to be in a car accident, and I don't want you in the death seat at the time. You need to cut him off."

"Can't you stop it? The car accident?" I asked hopefully. She'd stopped a couple of other looming disasters that had been threatening me, including an algebra test. The teacher had thrown his back out just in time. He was absent for three whole weeks, during which I'd actually studied.

"Not this time," said my mother. "It's too strong. The Tower plus the Moon and the Ten of Swords. It's very clear."

"Maybe you could mess up his car," I said. Brian's car was a mess anyway: third-hand and no muffler, plus it made strange clanks and bangs for no reason. Couldn't she just cause the car to fall apart? "Then he'd have to borrow another car."

"Did I say it has to be his own car?" She handed me the glass of milk she'd poured, sat down at the kitchen table, placed both her hands on it, palms down—drawing energy from the Earth, as I knew—and gave me the benefit of her direct green-eyed stare. "I don't know which car it will be. Maybe a rental. Now do as I tell you. The long and short of it is: if you dump Brian he won't die;

but if you don't then he will—and most likely so will you. Or else you'll end up in a wheelchair."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Queen of Hearts. That's you. You wouldn't want his blood on your hands. The lifelong guilt."

"This is nuts!"

"Go ahead, ignore my advice," she said placidly. She stood up, snapped her fingers to release the excess Earth energy, then took some hamburger out of the fridge along with a plate of mushrooms she'd already chopped. "Your choice." She spooned the garlic mixture into the meat, broke an egg into it, added dried breadcrumbs and the mushrooms: meatloaf, it would become. I wish now that I'd got the recipe. Then she began mixing in everything with her hands—the only proper way to do it, according to her. She made biscuit dough like that too.

"There is absolutely no way of proving any of this!" I said. I'd been on the high-school debating team that year, until Brian had said it was a brainy thing to do. For a girl, he meant. Now I pretended to disdain it, though I'd secretly taken up the study of logic and was keen on the scientific method. Did I hope for an antidote to my mother? Probably.

"You wanted that pink angora sweater, did you not?" she said.

"So?"

"And then it appeared."

"You probably just bought it."

"Don't be silly. I never just buy things."

"Bet you did! You're not the Easter Bunny," I said rudely.

"This conversation is over," she said with chilling calm. "Change the sheets on your bed, they're practically crawling, and pick those dirty clothes up off the floor before they fester. Panties are not carpets."

"Later," I said, pushing the limit. "I've got homework."

"Don't make me point!" She lifted one hand out of the bowl: it was covered with niblets of raw flesh, and pink with blood.

I felt a chill. I certainly didn't want any pointing going on; pointing was how you directed a spell. People used to get hanged for pointing back in the old days, my mother had told me—or else they were barbecued. Death by burning at the stake was very painful, she could testify to that. There were laws against pointing, once upon a time. If you pointed at a cow and it got sick, everyone knew you were neck-deep in the Black Arts.

I flounced out of the kitchen with as much defiance as I dared. I'm not sure I'd remember now how to flounce—it's an accomplishment, though not one you hear of teenage girls practising nowadays. They still pout and sneer, however, just as I did.

I moped off to my room, where I made the bed as sloppily as I could, then gathered up several days' worth of my shed clothes and stuffed them into the laundry hamper. We had a new automatic washing machine, so at least I wouldn't be put to work at the old wringer-washer tub.

I did collect the hair from my hairbrush and set fire to it in a red glass ashtray I kept for that purpose. My mother would be sure to conduct a hairbrush inspection, which would include the wastebasket, to check that I hadn't shirked. Until a year ago my mother had worn her long, red-gold hair in an elegant French roll, but then she'd cut it off with the poultry shears—the Kim Novak look, she'd said. There had been a conflagration in the kitchen sink—she did practise what she preached, unlike some parents—and the house had stunk like a singed cat for days. *Singed cat* was her term. I'd never smelled a singed cat, but she had. Cats regularly got singed in the old days along with their owners, according to her.

There was no sense in going toe-to-toe with my mother. Nor could I try sneaking around: she had eyes in the back of her head,

and little birds told her things. Brian would have to be given up. I had a weep about that: goodbye, Old Spice shaving-lotion aroma and the scents of cigarettes and freshly washed white T-shirts; goodbye, heavy breathing in movie theatres during the dance numbers in musicals; goodbye, feeding Brian the extra fries from my hamburger, followed by greasy, potato-flavoured kisses . . . He was such a good kisser, he was so solid to hug, and he loved me—though he didn't say so, which was admirable. Saying it would have been soft.

Later that evening, I phoned to tell him our Saturday-night date was cancelled. He wasn't pleased. "Why?" he said.

I could hardly tell him that my mother had consulted some old cards with weird pictures on them and predicted he would die in a car crash if he went out with me. I didn't need to fuel any more school rumours about her; there were more than enough as it was. "I just can't go out with you," I said. "I need us to break up."

"Is there another guy?" he asked in a menacing tone. "I'll punch his face in!"

"No," I said. I started to cry. "I really like you. I can't explain. It's for your own good."

"I bet it's your crazy mother," he said. I cried harder.

That night I crept out into our backyard, buried Brian's picture under a lilac bush, and made a wish. My wish was that I would somehow get him back. But wishes made out of earshot of my mother did not come true. According to her, I lacked the talent. Perhaps I might develop it later—grow into it, as it were—but it could skip a generation, or even two. I hadn't been born with a caul, unlike her. Luck of the draw.

The next day at school there were whisperings. I tried to ignore them, though I couldn't help hearing the odd phrase: *Cuckoo as a clock. Addled as an egg. Crazy as a box of hair. Mad as a sack of hammers.* And the worst: *No man in the house, so what can you expect?* Within a week, Brian was going out with a girl called Suzie, though he still shot reproachful glances in my direction. I comforted myself with versions of my own saintly unselfishness: because of me, Brian's heart was still beating. I'm not saying I didn't suffer.

Several years later, Brian became a drug dealer and ended up on a sidewalk with nine bullets in him. So maybe my mother had got the main event right, but the time and the method wrong. She said that could happen. It was like a radio: nothing amiss with the broadcast end, but the reception could be faulty.

No man in the house described our situation. Of course, everyone has a father—or, as they would say nowadays, a sperm provider, fatherhood in the old sense of paternity having fallen into disrepute—and I had one too, though at that date I wasn't sure this father was still what you'd call "alive." When I was four or five, my mother told me she'd changed him into the garden gnome that sat beside our front steps; he was happier that way, she said. As a garden gnome he didn't need to do anything, such as mow the lawn—he was bad at it anyway—or make any decisions, a thing he hated. He could just enjoy the weather.

When I was wheedling her over something she'd initially denied me, she'd say, "Ask your father," and I'd trot out and hunker down beside the garden gnome—hunker just a little, as he wasn't much shorter than me—and stare into his jovial stone face. He appeared to be winking.

"Can I have an ice-cream cone?" I'd plead. I was sure that he and I had a pact of sorts—that he would always be on my side, as opposed to my mother, who was on her own side. It gave me a warm feeling to be with him. It was comforting.

"What did he say?" my mother would ask when I went back in.

"He said I can." I was almost sure I'd heard a gruff voice mumbling from within his grinning, bearded stone face.

"Very well, then. Did you give him a hug?"

"Yes." I always hugged my father when he'd allowed something marginally forbidden.

"Well done. It's nice to say thank you."

This fantasy had to be given up, naturally. Well before the time I was fifteen, I'd heard the other, supposedly real version: my father had deserted us. According to my mother he'd had urgent business elsewhere, though at school they said he'd run away, unable to tolerate my mother's craziness, and who could blame him? I was jeered at for his absence; it wasn't usual in that decade for fathers to be missing, not unless they'd been killed in the war. "Where's your father?" was annoying, but "*Who's* your father?" was insulting. It implied my mother had generated me with someone she didn't even know.

I brooded. Why had my father abandoned me? If he was still alive, why didn't he at least write to me? Hadn't he loved me even a little?

Though I no longer believed that my father was a garden gnome, I did suspect my mother of having transformed him in some other way. I'm ashamed to say that I went through a period of wondering if she'd done him in—with mushrooms or something ground in a mortar—and had buried him in the cellar. I could almost see her lugging his inert body down the stairs, digging the hole—she'd have had to use a jackhammer to get through the cement—then dumping him in and plastering him over.

I inspected the cellar floor for clues and found none. But that proved nothing. My mother was very clever: she'd have taken care to leave no traces.

Then, when I was twenty-three, my father suddenly turned up. By that time, I'd finished university and left my mother's house. My departure was not amicable: she was bossy, she was spying on me, she was treating me like a child! Those were my parting words.

"Suit yourself, my pet," she'd said. "When you need help, I'll be here. Shall I donate your old stuffed animals to charity?"

A pang shot through me. "No!" I cried. In our clashes I inevitably lost my cool, and a shard of dignity along with it.

I was determined not to need help. I'd found a job at an insurance company, on a low rung, and was sharing a cheap rented house west of the university with two roommates who had similar peasant-level jobs.

My father made contact by sending me a letter. He must have got my address from my mother, I realized later, but since I was in one of my phases of not speaking to her I didn't ask her about that. It seemed to me she'd been getting crazier. Her latest thing—before I'd put her on hold—had been a scheme to kill her next-door neighbour's weeping willow tree. I wasn't to worry, she'd said: she'd do it by pointing, at night, so no one would see her. This would be in revenge for something about running over a toad on a driveway, and anyway, the willow roots were getting into the drains.

Avenging a toad. Pointing at a tree. Who could handle that kind of thing, in a mother?

At first I was surprised to get my father's letter. Then I found that I was angry: Where had he been? What had taken him so long? I answered with a note of three lines that included the house phone number. We spoke, a terse, embarrassed exchange, and arranged

to meet. I was on the edge of cutting him off, telling him I had no interest in seeing him—but this would not have been true.

We had lunch at a small bistro on Queen Street that served authentic French food. My father chose the restaurant, and I was impressed despite myself. I'd been intending to disapprove of him in every way.

My father asked if I would like some wine; he would not be having any himself, he said. Although I now considered myself a sophisticated young working girl and had taken to drinking at parties and on dates, I stuck with Perrier on this occasion; I needed a clear head and some self-control. Although I was very curious about my father, I was also furious—but I didn't want to upbraid and denounce him before I'd heard his excuses for the shabby way he'd ignored me.

"Where have you been all these years?" was my first question. It must have sounded accusing.

My father was a pleasant-looking older man, fairly tall, neither obese nor cadaverous—nothing out of the ordinary, which was a disappointment; when you've spent your infancy believing your father has been magically transformed, there are expectations. He had hair, though less than he must once have had. Some of it was grey; the rest was the same dark brown as my own. He was wearing a good suit and an acceptable tie, ultramarine with a small geometric pattern in maroon. His blue eyes were like mine, and so were his thickish eyebrows. He raised these eyebrows now, which gave him an open, candid look. He smiled tentatively. I recognized that smile, which was like my own. I could see why he might have felt overpowered by my mother.

"Part of the time I was in prison."

"Really?" I said. Suddenly he was more interesting. Whatever else, I hadn't expected prison. "What for?"

"Impaired driving. I almost killed someone. Not that I could

remember doing it. I was blackout drunk." He looked down at the table, on which there was now a wicker basket containing thick slices of bread, both rye and white. "I'm an alcoholic." His voice was oddly neutral, as if he were talking about someone else. Was he sorry for the damage he'd done?

"Oh," I said. How to respond? By this time I knew several people who had problems with liquor, but none of them admitted it.

He must have sensed my nervousness. "That was a long time ago. I don't drink anymore. At all. I went through the steps."

"Oh," I said again. I wasn't sure what he was talking about. The steps? "But where do you live?" I asked. Did he have a home? Was he one of those people you sometimes saw on the street, collecting money in cups? HUNGRY SPARE CHANGE? No, because here we were in this tactful restaurant—his treat—preparing to eat a glamorous lunch. There was nothing homeless about his tie.

"I live here," he said. "In this city. I'm married; I have two children. Two other children," he added apologetically. He knew I would feel betrayed by this information, and I did.

He'd walked away from me, he hadn't looked back, he'd been living a whole other life. I felt instantly jealous of these half-siblings I'd never met.

"But what do you . . . But how do you . . ." I wanted to ask if he had a job, but wouldn't that be rude? What kind of a job could you get with a run-over person and a prison term on your record?

He guessed what I wanted to say. "I couldn't go back into my old job," he said. "I used to be in sales and marketing; now I'm in social work. I volunteer at prisons, as well. I counsel people like me—about being an alcoholic and how to pull yourself out of it."

I was relieved: not only would he not become a responsibility for me—someone I'd have to tend—but he was at least partly a virtuous person. I hadn't inherited a totally rotten set of genes.

"Mother told me she'd turned you into a garden gnome," I said.

"The one beside our front steps. To explain why you weren't there. That was her story when I was four."

He laughed. "She used to say I'd be better off as a garden gnome," he said. "I'd cause less harm and be more amusing."

"I really believed it. I used to ask you for ice cream and things."

"Did I give you some? The ice cream?"

"Yes," I said. "You always did." Foolishly, I began to sniffle. Inside my head I heard my mother's voice: *Never let anyone see you cry.*

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said. He extended his hand across the table as if to pat me, thought better of it, withdrew it. "When you were little. Your mother decided I should leave, and the way I was then, I'm sure it was the right choice. She said I had a weak character. Hopelessly weak."

"She says I have a weak character too," I said. "She says I have no backbone. She says I don't have the sense God gave a goose."

He smiled. "Two of a kind then. But I'm sure you have a backbone. You're out on your own, I see." Not with my mother was what he meant.

"You've got a backbone too," I said generously. "You were able to . . ."

"Stop drinking? I had a lot of help. But thank you."

All this time we'd been having our lunch. Foie gras to begin with—I'd never had it and was instantly seduced—and then omelettes. I'd never had a proper omelette before, either: only dry, overcooked ones.

"You did get the birthday presents I sent?" he asked, once we'd reached the choux à la crème. "And the cards? Once you were older—once I was on my feet again?"

"Birthday presents?" I said. "What birthday presents?"

He looked dismayed. "Well, for instance. The bicycle when you

were eleven, and that pink angora sweater when you were, what? Fourteen? Fifteen? Your mother said you had your heart set on it."

"That was from you?" My mother was right: she hadn't bought it. But I was right too: she wasn't the Easter Bunny.

"She said you loved it." He sighed. "I guess she never told you it came from me. I suspected something like that because you never sent thank-you notes. She must have thought I'd contaminate you." He sighed again. "Maybe that was best. She was very protective of you, and she always had strong views."

I'd like to say that this lunch was the beginning of a warm, close relationship with my father, but it wasn't. It seemed I wasn't very good at warm, close relationships at that time. My boyfriends didn't last, even when they weren't nixed by my mother. I'd developed a habit of discarding them before they could do the same to me. I said I wanted to meet his other family—especially my two half-sisters, who were almost in their teens and had cute blond pigtails in the pictures he showed me—but he wasn't up to that. He'd never told his second wife about me, and he feared repercussions; he didn't want to upset the applecart, he said.

He especially didn't want my mother to encounter his new wife, and I didn't blame him: Who knew what she might get up to? I pictured her bringing a booby-trapped gift, something she'd ground up and put in a jar; or else she might point, and apples would fly off the applecart as if exploding, figuratively speaking. She'd have her reasons for whatever mischief she caused, of course—she'd be acting for the greater good, or for my good, or the Universe would have firm opinions about what was needed—but I no longer trusted her reasons. She wouldn't really care about the greater good, she'd just be showing off. Gratifying herself. That was my twenty-three-year-old view of her.

So over the next years we kept our distances, my father and I.

We had lunch once in a while, furtively, as if we were spies. "Don't let her get the better of you," he said once. *Her* always meant my mother.

"Why did you break up?" I asked him.

"Well, as I told you, she basically kicked me out."

"No, but really. Did you want to go?"

He looked down at the table. "It's hard living with someone who's always right. Even when it turned out that she was. It can be . . . alarming."

"I know," I said. I felt a wave of sympathy for him; "alarming" was mild. "Did she make you burn your hair?"

"Did she make me what-my-what?" He laughed a little. "That's a new one on me. What exactly . . . ?"

"Never mind," I said. "So why did you marry her? If you found her so difficult and scary?"

"Not scary, exactly. Let's say complex. She could be very enjoyable at times. Though unpredictable."

"But why did you?"

"She put something in my drink. Sorry. Bad joke."

My father died earlier than many. He'd had cancer—he'd told me about it, so at least I had advance warning. Still, it was a loss: now I would no longer have my own unique secret, a corner of my life that my mother hadn't managed to pry open and judge. I'd kept watch on the death notices, since I knew I wouldn't be notified by the family. The other family. The family that wasn't secret.

I went to the funeral, which was well attended by many people I didn't know, and sat at the back, far away from the official mourners. My mother came as well; she was dressed theatrically in black, which by that time nobody wore to funerals anymore. She even

had a veil. I was married by then and had two children of my own, both daughters. My mother and I had had a major breach after the birth of the first one: she'd come to the maternity ward while I was in labour, bearing a gift of something orange in a jar for me to rub on my stretch marks, and announced that she wanted to cook the placenta so I could eat it.

"Are you insane?" I'd never heard of such a disgusting thing. It's old hat by now, of course.

"It's a traditional practice. It fends off malevolence. Have you been burning your hair combings, my pet—the way I taught you? That nasty old Miss Scace has been lurking around. She's always wanted to harm you, just to get back at me. I saw her just now outside the preemie window, pretending to be a nurse. She's addicted to disguises. In the old days she'd dress up like a nun."

"Miss Scace, my high-school gym teacher? That's not possible, Mother," I said carefully, as if explaining to a five-year-old. "Miss Scace died years ago."

"Appearances can be deceptive. She only looks dead."

You can see why I might have wished to keep my young children at a safe distance from their grandmother. I wanted them to have a normal childhood, unlike mine.

I'll say a word here about my husband, a lovable individual who has improved with time. I don't have to tell you that I held him at several arms' lengths from my mother during what I will quaintly refer to as our courtship period. I imagined him getting one earful of her and hightailing it for the nearest international flight, so alarmed would he have been. But that encounter had needed to take place sometime, since—through some means unknown to me but that may have involved Tarot cards—she'd become aware of his existence. The Universe had no objection to him, she'd told me: if anything, he was well aspected, with Jupiter looming large

and the Kings of Cups and Diamonds prominent. She was looking forward to meeting him. "No hurry," she'd say to me, which meant there was.

I softened him up with anecdotes, which I packaged as lighthearted and jokey. The hair burning, the glop in the jars, the pointing, the cards, even my father as a garden gnome—these were harmless eccentricities. No one took them seriously, I said: not my mother, and certainly not me. My husband-to-be said my mother sounded like good fun and doubtless had a sense of humour. "Oh yes." I laughed, my palms sweating. "Such a sense of humour!"

You'll notice I said nothing to him about Miss Scace. That slice was truly wacko. I trusted him to be understanding, but not as far as airborne, mushroom-poaching Miss Scace was concerned. Life would be calmer if my mother and my significant other could at least tolerate each other.

Finally they met: tea at the King Edward Hotel in downtown Toronto, arranged by me. I didn't think my mother would kick up in such a genteel atmosphere, and she didn't. Nothing untoward happened. My mother was polite, warmish, attentive; my husband-to-be was deferential, attuned, subdued. I did catch her sneaking a look at his hands—she'd want to get a peek at his heart line, to see if he was likely to go off the rails and start fornicating with secretaries—but she was discreet about it. Aside from that, she acted the part of a nice middle-class mother, of an outmoded variety. My husband-to-be was a little disappointed: he'd been led to expect something less orthodox.

My father's funeral took place during an interval of peace with my mother, so when I spotted her in her black dress and veil, I moved over to sit beside her. I was speaking to her again: speaking to her went in cycles. She would upset me, I would cut her off, I'd relent, there would be peace, then she'd cross the line once more.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She was crying a little, rare for her.

"He was my sweetheart," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "I drove him away! We were so much in love. Once upon a time." Mascara was running down her cheeks, and I wiped it away. Since when had she started wearing mascara? More importantly, when had she started crying in public? Was she getting soft?

It was true: she was indeed getting soft, but not in a good way.

Now that I'd been alerted to the possibility, I noted the signs with dismay—they were proliferating with unsettling rapidity, almost as if she were dissolving. The mascara phase was over nearly as soon as it had begun: outer beauty was no longer a concern, she said. Gone were the freshly ironed shirtwaist dresses. In fact, gone was the iron: my mother never ironed anything anymore. Taking the place of the starched dresses and the no-nonsense Cuban-heeled shoes was a succession of outsized T-shirts, not always clean, paired with jogging pants and an array of clumsy, orthopaedic-looking sandals. Her gnarled toes poked out the fronts of these sandals, their nails thickened and yellowish. I wondered if she was having trouble cutting them. Worse: I wondered if she was even remembering to cut them.

Was she still grinding things in her mortar? I wasn't sure. Several jars were growing whiskery mould in her fridge. By now I was conducting twice-weekly fridge inspections, to make sure she didn't give herself food poisoning from eating fermenting leftovers.

Her pressure cooker was long gone: she said she'd discarded it after Miss Scace had caused it to blow up. Her iron frying pans were rusting. Her pots had been cleaned—not very effectively—and stored away, though I found one in the backyard with three

inches of algae-clogged water full of mosquito larvae. "It's a birdbath," she said. The backyard itself was a jungle: no more neat borders, no more herbs. The prevailing weed was sow thistle.

I asked her why she wasn't cooking anymore.

She shrugged. "Too much trouble. And who would I cook for?"

I became increasingly worried about her. I'd phone her at suppertime to check that she was eating. "Are you having dinner?"

A pause. "Yes."

"What is it?"

Another pause. "Something."

"Is it in a can?"

"More or less."

"Are you sitting down?"

"None of your business."

So she was snacking—eating in bits and pieces, like a teenager foraging. I brought her a noodle casserole. "You can heat it in the toaster oven," I said.

"There was a fire." She didn't seem too worried about that.

"In the toaster oven?"

"Yes."

"When was it? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I put the fire out, so why would I tell you? It was that Miss Scace. She started it."

"Oh, for heaven's sakes!"

"Don't concern yourself, my pet. This time I'm winning."

I finally pried the full backstory out of her. She and Miss Scace had been at war for centuries, through several incarnations. They'd once been friends but had fallen out over a young man. Four hundred years ago, give or take, they'd begun to have battles in the air at night. Not on brooms, she added: that cliché about flying brooms was just a superstition. Then Miss Scace had ratted my

mother out to the authorities for witchcraft, and the outcome had been fiery, and then terminal. According to my mother, her heart had refused to burn, so they'd had to incinerate it separately; the same had been true of Joan of Arc, she added proudly. Miss Scace had been at the bonfire and had jeered.

"I should have tattled on her first," she said. "But I thought it was dishonourable. A betrayal of our traditions."

"What happened to the young man?" I asked. There was no use talking to her about inventions or delusions: she would just clam up. And if I said I didn't believe her, there would be a fracas.

"Scace used him up," said my mother.

"What do you mean 'used him up'?"

"For her depraved sexual purposes," said my mother. "Night after night."

"Are we talking about the same Miss Scace?" I simply couldn't picture it. Miss Scace, in the gymnasium, coaching the girls' basketball team, with her umpire's whistle and her skinny legs below her pleated gym outfit. Flat-chested Miss Scace, in health class, scrambling for euphemisms while explaining the menstrual cycle. Sex was unmentionable then: officially it did not exist. "Surely not," I said firmly.

"She looked different in the old days," said my mother. "A lot more enticing. She had whalebone stays and cleavage. She painted her face with arsenic."

"Arsenic?"

"It was the style. Anyway, she wore him out. Sucked the marrow right out of his bones. Then, when he was exhausted, she stole his penis."

"What?" Penis theft was something new: that piece of lore hadn't come up when I was in high school.

"She must have been annoyed that it no longer worked. One

morning he looked down and it was gone. I expect she'd pointed at it when he was asleep. She was keeping it in a cedar box with some other penises she'd stolen; she was feeding them on grains of wheat. That's the usual method of tending penises."

I took firm control of myself. "Why was she doing that?" I asked cautiously. "Collecting penises?"

"Some people collect stamps, she collected penises. Many of us did in those days. Anyway, he consulted me—through a clairvoyant, of course, as I was no longer in that earthly incarnation. I told him to complain to the authorities, so he did, and she was forced to give the penis back."

"And reattach it, I suppose."

"Naturally, my pet. But that wasn't the end of it. She had to give all the other penises back as well—she'd collected the penises of some very important men, I can tell you! One of them was a baron. And then they burned her anyway. Served her right."

"And here you are," I said.

"That's true. Here we are. But there aren't any authorities anymore. Or not that kind."

"Do you mind me asking . . . Are you and Miss Scace still fighting in the air? At night?"

"Oh yes," she said. "Every night. That's why I'm so tired all the time."

The image of my mother in her baggy T-shirts and lumpy sandals wrestling in midair with Miss Scace, still possibly with her umpire's whistle around her neck, was too much for me. I was tempted to laugh, but that would have been cruel. "Maybe you should call it quits," I said. "Declare a truce."

"She'd never do that. Venomous old hag."

"It's bad for your health," I said.

"I know, my pet." She sighed. "For myself I wouldn't care. But

I'm doing it for you, as I always have. And the girls, of course. My granddaughters. I wouldn't want her to harm them. Maybe one of them has inherited the talent, so it won't be wasted."

It was high time we returned to so-called reality. "Have you paid your heating bill?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't need any heat," she said. "I'm immune to the cold."

Her decline was now rapid. Shortly after this, she broke her hip—falling out of the air onto a chimney, she whispered to me—and had to be taken to the hospital. I tried to consult with her about her future: after they fixed the hip she'd go to a rehab place, then to a nice assisted-living facility . . .

"None of that will be needed," she said. "I won't leave the hospital in this body. It's all been arranged."

The arrangements included congestive heart failure. Final scene: I'm at her hospital bedside, holding her fragile, thick-veined hand. How had she become so little? She was hardly there at all, though her mind still burned like a blue flame.

"Tell me you were making it up," I said. Now that I was asking directly and not in anger—a thing I'd never exactly done before—surely she would admit it.

"Made what up, my treasure?"

"The hair burning. The pointing. All of it. It was like my father being a garden gnome, wasn't it? Just fairy tales?"

She sighed. "You were such a sensitive child. So easily wounded. So I told you those things. I didn't want you to feel defenceless in the face of life. Life can be harsh. I wanted you to feel protected, and to know that there was a greater power watching over you. That the Universe was taking a personal interest."

I kissed her forehead, a skull with a thin covering of skin. The protector was her, the greater power was her, the Universe that took an interest was her as well; always her. "I love you," I said.

"I know, my treasure. And did you feel protected?"

"Yes," I said. "I did." This was somewhat true. "It was very sweet of you to invent all that for me."

She looked at me sideways out of her green eyes. "Invent?" she said.

And so I come to the end. But it's not the end, since ends are arbitrary. I'll close with one more scene.

My elder daughter is now fifteen, the talk-back age. A tug-of-war is going on: she wants to go running, in the dark, with some jock I've barely set eyes on. Running! Girls didn't used to run, except at track and field. They ambled, they strolled. To run would be undignified and lollopy; who knew about sports bras back then?

My daughter is wearing skin-tight pants and a stretchy top; her arms are bare, with three temporary tattoos on each, all of them birds and animals. She claims she'll make them permanent once she's eighteen. I've explained the difficulty of removal should one change one's mind later, but to no avail.

"No running in the dark," I insist. "It's too dangerous. There are prowlers."

"You're not the boss of me! There are fucking streetlights!"

No use at all to say *Vulgar language* or even *Potty mouth*. That horse bolted long ago. "Nevertheless. And with your, your friend . . . Boys can get carried away."

"Carried away, fuck! We'll be *running*! It's not like he's a rapist! I mean, he can be a bit of a dick, but . . ."

Bit of a dick? A mild diagnosis, in my opinion. "I'm saying no."

"You're such a bitch!"

"Don't make me point," I say. I'm beginning to get angry.

"What? Don't make you *point*?" She rolls her eyes, laughs. "Fuck my life! What's *pointing*?"

"It's a hex thing," I say, straight-faced. "You wouldn't like the results."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" She sneers. "A hex thing! Are you insane?"

"Your grandmother was a witch," I say, as solemnly as I can.

This brings her up short. "You're shitting me! You mean, like, really?"

"Really," I say.

"Like, what kind of witch things did she do?"

She's not altogether convinced, but I have her attention. I drop my voice to a confiding whisper. "I'll tell you when you're old enough," I say, evading the immediate pitfall. "But no running at night, not until you're ready. Witches can see things at night that other people can't see. Dead people, for instance. If you're not instructed and prepared, it can be scary."

"I'm not a witch, though," she says uncertainly. She's considering the options.

"You may not realize it yet," I say. "Your grandmother believed the talent is passed on. It can skip a generation. I'm sure you'll grow into it. When that happens, you must be very, very careful. You mustn't abuse your power."

She hugs herself. "I feel cold."

She's thrilled. Who of her age would not be?