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BAD DREAMS

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A child woke up in the dark. She seemed to swim up into consciousness as if to a surface, which she then broke through, looking around with her eyes open. At first, the darkness was implacable. She might have arrived anywhere: all that was certain was her own self, lying on her side, her salty smell and her warmth, her knees pulled up to her skinny chest inside the cocoon of her brushed-nylon nightdress. But as she stared into the darkness familiar forms began to loom through it: the pale outline of a window, printed by the street lamp against the curtains; the horizontals on the opposite wall, which were the shelves where she and her brother kept their books and toys. Beside the window she could make out a rectangle of wool cloth tacked up; her mother had appliquéd onto it a sleigh and two horses and a driver cracking his whip, first gluing on the pieces and then outlining them with machine stitching—star shapes in blue thread for the falling snowflakes, lines of red stitching for the reins and the twisting whip. The child knew all these details by heart, though she couldn't see them in the dark. She was where she always was when she woke up: in her own bedroom, in the top bunk, her younger brother asleep in the lower one.

Her mother and father were in bed and asleep, too. The basement flat was small enough that, if they were awake, she would have heard the sewing machine or the wireless, or her father practicing the trumpet or playing jazz records. She struggled to sit up out of the tightly wound nest of sheets and blankets; she was asthmatic and feared not being able to catch her breath. Cold night air struck her shoulders. It was strange to stare into the room with wide-open eyes and feel the darkness yielding only the smallest bit, as if it were pressing back against her efforts to penetrate it. Something had happened, she was sure, while she was asleep. She didn't know what it was at first, but the strong dread it had left behind didn't subside with the confusion of waking. Then she remembered that this thing had happened inside her sleep, in her dream. She had dreamed something horrible, and so plausible that it was vividly present as soon as she remembered it.

She had dreamed that she was reading her favorite book, the one she read over and over and actually had been reading earlier that night, until her mother came to turn off the light. In fact, she could feel the book's hard corner pressing into her leg now through the blankets. In the dream, she had been turning its

pages as usual when, beyond the story's familiar last words, she discovered an extra section that she had never seen before, a short paragraph set on a page by itself, headed "Epilogue." She was an advanced reader for nine and knew about prologues and epilogues—though it didn't occur to her then that she was the author of her own dreams and must have invented this epilogue herself. It seemed so completely a found thing, alien and unanticipated, coming from outside herself, against her will.

In the real book she loved, "Swallows and Amazons," six children spent their summers in perfect freedom, sailing dinghies on a lake, absorbed in adventures and rivalries that were half invented games and half truth, pushing across the threshold of safety into a thrilling unknown. All the details in the book had the solidity of life, though it wasn't her own life—she didn't have servants or boats or a lake or an absent father in the Navy. She had read all the other books in the series, too, and she acted out their stories with her friends at school, although they lived in a city and none of them had ever been sailing. The world of "Swallows and Amazons" existed in a dimension parallel to their own, touching it only in their games. They had a "Swallows and Amazons" club, and took turns bringing in "grub" to eat, "grog" and "pemmican"; they sewed badges, and wrote notes in secret code. All of them wanted to be Nancy Blackett, the strutting pirate girl, though they would settle for Titty Walker, sensitive and watchful.

Now the child seemed to see the impersonal print of the dream epilogue, written on the darkness in front of her eyes. *John and Roger both went on to,* it began, in a businesslike voice. Of course, the words weren't actually in front of her eyes, and parts of what was written were elusive when she sought them; certain sentences, though, were scored into her awareness as sharply as if she'd heard them read aloud. *Roger drowned at sea in his twenties.* Roger was the youngest of them all, the ship's boy, in whom she had only ever been mildly interested: this threw him into a terrible new prominence. *John suffered with a bad heart. The Blackett sisters . . . long illnesses. Titty, killed in an unfortunate accident.* The litany of deaths tore jaggedly into the tissue that the book had woven, making everything lopsided and hideous. The epilogue's gloating bland language, complacently regretful, seemed to relish catching her out in her dismay. Oh, didn't you know? *Susan lived to a ripe old age*. Susan was the dullest of the Swallows, tame and sensible, in charge of cooking and housekeeping. Still, the idea of her "ripe old age" was full of horror: wasn't she just a girl, with everything ahead of her?

The child knew that the epilogue existed only in her dream, but she couldn't dispel the taint of it, clinging to her thoughts. When she was younger, she had called to her mother if she woke in the night, but something stopped her from calling out now: she didn't want to tell anyone about her dream. Once the words were said aloud, she would never be rid of them; it was better to keep them hidden. And she was afraid, anyway, that her mother wouldn't understand

the awfulness of the dream if she tried to explain it: she might laugh or think it was silly. For the first time, the child felt as if she were alone in her own home—its rooms spread out about her, invisible in the night, seemed unlike their usual selves. The book touching her leg through the blankets frightened her, and she thought she might never be able to open it again. Not wanting to lie down in the place where she'd had the dream, she swung over the side rail of the bed and reached with her bare feet for the steps of the ladder—the lower bunk was a cave so dark that she couldn't make out the shape of her sleeping brother. Then she felt the carpet's gritty wool under her toes.

The children's bedroom, the bathroom, papered in big blue roses, and their parents' room were all at the front of the massive Victorian house, which was four stories tall, including this basement flat; sometimes the child was aware of the other flats above theirs, full of the furniture of other lives, pressing down on their heads. Quietly she opened her bedroom door. The doors to the kitchen and the lounge, which were at the back of the flat, stood open onto the windowless hallway; a thin blue light, falling through them, lay in rectangles on the hall carpet. She had read about moonlight, but had never taken in its reality before: it made the lampshade of Spanish wrought iron, which had always hung from a chain in the hallway, seem suddenly as barbaric as a cage or a portcullis in a castle.

Everything was tidy in the kitchen: the dishcloth had been wrung out and hung on the edge of the plastic washing-up bowl; something on a plate was wrapped in greaseproof paper; the sewing machine was put away under its cover at one end of the table. The pieces of Liberty lawn print, which her mother was cutting out for one of her ladies, were folded carefully in their paper bag to keep them clean. *Liberty lawn:* her mother named it reverently, like an incantation—though the daily business of her sewing wasn't reverent but briskly pragmatic, cutting and pinning and snipping at seams with pinking shears, running the machine with her head bent close to the work in bursts of concentration, one hand always raised to the wheel to slow it, or breaking threads quickly in the little clip behind the needle. The chatter of the sewing machine, racing and easing and halting and starting up again, was like a busy engine driving their days. There were always threads and pins scattered on the floor around where her mother was working—you had to be careful where you stepped.

In the lounge, the child paddled her toes in the hair of the white goatskin rug. Gleaming, uncanny, half reverted to its animal past, the rug yearned to the moon, which was balanced on top of the wall at the back of the paved yard. The silver frame of her parents' wedding photograph and the yellow brass of her father's trumpet—in its case with the lid open, beside the music stand—shone with the same pale light. Lifting the heavy lid of the gramophone, she breathed in the forbidden smell of the records nestled in their felt-lined compartments, then touched the pages heaped on her father's desk: his meaning, densely

tangled in his black italic writing, seemed more accessible through her fingertips in the dark than it ever was in daylight, when its difficulty thwarted her. He was studying for his degree in the evenings, after teaching at school all day. She and her brother played quietly so as not to disturb him; their mother had impressed upon them the importance of his work. He was writing about a book, "Leviathan": his ink bottle had left imprints on the desk's leather inlay, and he stored his notes on a shelf in cardboard folders, carefully labelled—the pile of folders growing ever higher. The child was struck by the melancholy of this accumulation: sometimes she felt a pang of fear for her father, as if he were exposed and vulnerable—and yet when he wasn't working he charmed her with his jokes, pretending to be poisoned when he tasted the cakes she had made, teasing her school friends until they blushed. She never feared in the same way for her mother: her mother was capable; she was the whole world.

In their absence, her parents were more distinctly present to her than usual, as individuals with their own unfathomable adult preoccupations. She was aware of their lives running backward from this moment, into a past that she could never enter. This moment, too, the one fitted around her now as inevitably and closely as a skin, would one day become the past: its details then would seem remarkable and poignant, and she would never be able to return inside them. The chairs in the lounge, formidable in the dimness, seemed drawn up as if for a spectacle, waiting more attentively than if they were filled with people: the angular recliner built of black tubular steel, with lozenges of polished wood for arms; the cone-shaped wicker basket in its round wrought-iron frame; the black-painted wooden armchair with orange cushions; and the low divan covered in striped olive-green cotton. The reality of the things in the room seemed more substantial to the child than she was herself—and she wanted in a sudden passion to break something, to disrupt this world of her home, sealed in its mysterious stillness, where her bare feet made no sound on the lino or the carpets.

On impulse, using all her strength, she pushed at the recliner from behind, tipping it over slowly until it was upside down, with its top resting on the carpet and its legs in the air, the rubber ferrules on its feet unexpectedly silly in the moonlight, like prim, tiny shoes. Then she tipped over the painted chair, so that its cushions flopped out. She pulled the wicker cone out of its frame and turned the frame over, flipped up the goatskin rug. She managed to make very little noise, just a few soft bumps and thuds; when she had finished, though, the room looked as if a hurricane had blown through it, throwing the chairs about. She was shocked by what she'd effected, but gratified, too: the after-sensation of strenuous work tingled in her legs and arms, and she was breathing fast; her whole body rejoiced in the chaos. Perhaps it would be funny when her parents saw it in the morning. At any rate, nothing—*nothing*—would ever make her tell them that she'd done it. They would never know, and that was funny, too. A private hilarity bubbled up in her, though she wouldn't give way to it; she didn't

want to make a sound. At that very moment, as she surveyed her crazy handiwork, the moon sank below the top of the wall outside and the room darkened, all its solidity withdrawn.

The child's mother woke up early, in the dawn. Had her little boy called out to her? He sometimes woke in the night and had strange fits of crying, during which he didn't recognize her and screamed in her arms for his mummy. She listened, but heard nothing—yet she was as fully, promptly awake as if there had been some summons or a bell had rung. Carefully she sat up, not wanting to wake her sleeping husband, who was lying on his side, with his knees drawn up and his back to her, the bristle of his crew cut the only part of him visible above the blankets. The room was just as she had left it when she went to sleep, except that his clothes were thrown on top of hers on the chair; he had stayed up late, working on his essay. She remembered dimly that when he got into bed she had turned over, snuggling up to him, and that in her dream she had seemed to fit against the shape of him as sweetly as a nut into its shell, losing herself inside him. But now he was lost, somewhere she couldn't follow him. Sometimes in the mornings, especially if they hadn't made love the night before, she would wake to find herself beside this stranger, buried away from her miles deep, frowning in his sleep. His immobility then seemed a kind of comment, or a punishment, directed at her.

The gray light in the room was diffuse and hesitant. Even on sunny days, these rooms at the front of the flat weren't bright. She had been happy in this flat at first, in the new freedom of her married life, but now she resented the neighbors always brooding overhead and was impatient to move to a place they could have all to themselves. But that would have to wait until he finished his degree. She eased out from under the warmth of the blankets. Now that she was thoroughly awake she needed to pee before she tried to sleep again. As she got out of bed, her reflection stood up indefatigably to meet her in the gilt-framed mirror that was one of her junk-shop finds, mounted in an alcove beside the window, with a trailing philodendron trained around it. The phantom in the baby-doll nightdress was enough like Monica Vitti (everyone said she looked like Monica Vitti) to make her straighten her back in self-respect; and she was aware of yesterday's L'Air du Temps in the sleepy heat of her skin.

In the hall, she listened at the door of the children's room, which stood ajar—nothing. The lavatory was chilly: its tiny high window made it feel like a prison cell, but a blackbird sang liquidly outside in the yard. On the way back to bed, she looked into the kitchen, where everything was as she'd left it—he hadn't even made his cocoa or eaten the sandwich she'd put out for him, before he came to bed. His refraining made her tense her jaw, as if he had repudiated her and preferred his work. She should have been a painter, she thought in a flash of anger, not a housewife and a dressmaker. But at art college she'd been overawed by the fine-arts students, who were mostly experienced grown men, newly returned from doing their national service in India and Malaya. Still, her

orderly kitchen reassured her: the scene of her daily activity, poised and quiescent now, awaiting the morning, when she'd pick it up again with renewed energy. Perhaps he'd like bacon for his breakfast—she had saved up her housekeeping to buy him some. His mother had cooked bacon for him every morning.

When she glanced into the lounge, her shock at the sight of the chairs thrown about was as extreme as a hand clapped over her mouth from behind. The violence was worse because it was frozen in silence—had lain in wait, gloating, while she suspected nothing. Someone had broken in. She was too afraid in the first moments to call out to her husband. She waited in the doorway, holding her breath, for the movement that would give the intruder away; it was awful to think that a few minutes ago she had gone unprotected all the way down the lonely passageway to the lavatory. Then, as her panic subsided, she took in the odd specificity of the chaos. Only the chairs were overturned, at the center of the room; nothing else had been touched, nothing pulled off the shelves and thrown on the floor, nothing smashed. The lounge windows were tightly closed—just as the back door had surely been closed in the kitchen. Nothing had been taken. Had it? The wireless was intact on its shelf. Rousing out of her stupor, she crossed to the desk and opened the drawer where her husband kept his band earnings. The money was safe: three pound ten in notes and some loose change, along with his pipe and pipe cleaners and dirty tobacco pouch, the smell of which stayed on her fingers when she closed the drawer.

Instead of waking her husband, she tried the window catches, then went around checking the other rooms of the flat. The kitchen door and the front door were both securely bolted, and no one could have climbed in through the tiny window in the lavatory. Soundless on her bare feet, she entered the children's bedroom and stood listening to their breathing. Her little boy stirred in his sleep but didn't cry; her daughter was spread-eagled awkwardly amid the menagerie of her stuffed toys and dolls. Their window, too, was fastened shut. There was no intruder in the flat, and only one explanation for the crazy scene in the front room: her imagination danced with affront and dismay. Chilled, she returned to stand staring in the lounge. Her husband was moody, and she'd always known that he had anger buried in him. But he'd never done anything like this before—nothing so naked and outrageous. She supposed he must have got frustrated with his studies before he came to bed. Or was the disorder a derisory message meant for her, because he despised her homemaking, her domestication of the free life he'd once had? Perhaps the mess was even supposed to be some kind of brutal joke. She couldn't imagine how she had slept through the outburst.

This time, for once, she was clearly in the right, wasn't she? He had been childish, giving way to his frustration—as if she didn't feel fed up sometimes. And he criticized her for her bad temper! He had such high standards for everyone else! From now on, she would hold on to this new insight into him, no

matter how reasonable he seemed. Her disdain hurt her, like a bruise to the chest; she was more used to admiring him. But it was also exhilarating: she seemed to see the future with great clarity, looking forward through a long tunnel of antagonism, in which her husband was her enemy. This awful truth appeared to be something she had always known, though in the past it had been clouded in uncertainty and now she saw it starkly. Calmly and quietly she picked up each chair, put back the cushions, which had tumbled onto the carpet, straightened the goatskin rug. The room looked as serene as if nothing had ever happened in it. The joke of its serenity erupted inside her like bubbles of soundless laughter. Nothing—*nothing*—would ever make her acknowledge what he'd done, or the message he'd left for her, although when he saw the room restored to its rightful order, he would know that she knew. She would wait for him to be the first to acknowledge in words the passage of this silent violence between them.

In the bedroom, she lay down beside her husband with her back turned; her awareness of her situation seemed pure and brilliant, and she expected to lie awake, burning at his nearness. There was less than an hour to wait before she had to get up again; she'd got back into bed only because her feet were cold and it was too early to switch on the electric fire in the kitchen. But almost at once she dropped into a deep sleep—particularly blissful, as if she were falling down through syrupy darkness, her limbs unbound and bathing in warmth. When she woke again—this time her little boy really was calling out to her—she remembered immediately what had happened in the night, but she also felt refreshed and blessed.

A young wife fried bacon for her husband: the smell of it filled the flat. Her son was eating cereal at the table. Her husband was preoccupied, packing exercise books into his worn briefcase, opening the drawer in his desk where he kept his pipe and tobacco, dropping these into the pocket of his tweed jacket. But he came at some point to stand behind his wife at the stove and put his arms around her, nuzzling her neck, kissing her behind her ear, and she leaned back into his kiss, as she always did, tilting her head to give herself to him.

When the bacon was ready, she served it up on a plate with fried bread and a tomato and poured his tea, then went to find out why their daughter was dawdling in the bedroom. The girl was sitting on the edge of her brother's bunk, trying to pull on her knee-length socks with one hand while she held a book open in front of her eyes with the other. Her thin freckled face was nothing like her mother's. One white sock was twisted around her leg with its dirty heel sticking out at the front, and the book was surely the same one she had already read several times. The child was insistent, though, that she needed to start reading it all over again, from the beginning. Her mother took the book away and chivvied her along. ♦

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In the Shadow of a Fairy Tale

By Leslie Jamison
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When she was 6, my stepdaughter, Lily, told me that her favorite character in "Cinderella" was the evil stepmother. This wasn't entirely surprising. During play dates, Lily often liked to play orphan, writing down long lists of chores: *dichs* (dishes); *moping* (mopping); *feeding* (the fish). She and a friend liked to drink something they called pepper water, which was ordinary tap water they pretended their cruel orphan-handlers had made undrinkable. Maybe it was thrilling to stage her own mistreatment, to take power over the situation of powerlessness she had imagined. Maybe she just liked a virtuous reason to dump water on the floor. When I asked Lily why Cinderella's stepmother was her favorite character, she leaned close to me and whispered, like a secret, "I think she looks *good*."

For all her cruelty, the evil stepmother is often the fairy-tale character most defined by imagination and determination, rebelling against the patriarchy with whatever meager tools have been left to her: her magic mirror, her vanity, her pride. She is an artist of cunning and malice, but still — an artist. She isn't simply acted upon; she acts. She just doesn't act the way a mother is supposed to. That's her fuel, and her festering heart.

In many ways, fairy tales — dark and ruthless, often structured by loss — were the stories that most resembled Lily's life. Her mother died just before her 3rd birthday, after a 2½-year struggle with leukemia. Two years later, Lily got a stepmother of her own — not a wicked one, perhaps, but one terrified of being wicked.

I wondered if it was comforting for Lily to hear stories about fairy-tale children who had lost what she had lost — unlike most of the kids at her school, or in her ballet classes, whose mothers were still alive. Or perhaps it brought the stories dangerously near, the fact that she shared so much with them. Maybe it peeled away their protective skins of fantasy, made their pepper water too literal, brought their perils too close. When I read her the old fairy tales about daughters without mothers, I worried that I was pushing on the bruises of her loss. When I read her the old fairy tales about stepmothers, I worried I was reading her an evil version of myself.

I sought these tales avidly when I first became a stepmother. I was hungry for company. I didn't know many stepmothers, and I especially didn't know many stepmothers who had inherited the role as I had inherited it: fully, overwhelmingly, with no other mother in the picture. Our family lived in the aftermath of loss, not rupture — death, not divorce. This used to be the normal way of being a stepmother, and the word itself holds grief in its roots. The Old English "steop" means loss, and the etymology paints a bleak portrait: "For stepmoder is selde guod," reads one account from 1290. A text from 1598 says, "With one consent all stepmothers hate their daughters."

The fairy tales are obviously damning: The evil queen from "Snow White" demands the secret murder of her stepdaughter after a magic mirror proclaims her beauty. The stepmother from "Hansel and Gretel" sends her stepchildren into the woods because there isn't enough to eat. Cinderella sits amid her fireplace cinders,

sorting peas from lentils, her ash-speckled body appeasing a wicked stepmother who wants to dull her luminosity with soot because she feels threatened by it. It's as if the stepmother relationship inevitably corrupts — it is not just an evil woman in the role but a role that turns any woman evil. A "stepmother's blessing" is another name for a hangnail, as if to suggest something that hurts because it isn't properly attached, or something that presents itself as a substitutive love but ends up bringing pain instead.

The evil stepmother casts a long, primal shadow, and three years ago I moved in with that shadow, to a one-bedroom rent-controlled apartment near Gramercy Park. I sought the old stories in order to find company — out of sympathy for the stepmothers they vilified — and to resist their narratives, to inoculate myself against the darkness they held.

My relationship with Charles, Lily's father, held the kind of love that fairy tales ask us to believe in: encompassing and surprising, charged by a sense of wonder at the sheer fact of his existence in the world. I uprooted my life for our love, without regret. Our bliss lived in a thousand ordinary moments: a first kiss in the rain, over-easy eggs at a roadside diner in the Catskills, crying with laughter at midnight about some stupid joke he would make during an "American Ninja Warrior" rerun. But our love also — always — held the art and work of parenting, and much of our bliss happened on stolen time: that first kiss while the sitter stayed half an hour late; those diner eggs on a spontaneous road trip possible only because Lily was staying with her grandmother in Memphis; our hands clamped over our mouths during those fits of midnight laughter so we wouldn't wake up Lily in the next room. This felt less like compromise and more like off-roading, a divergence from the scripts I'd always written for what my own life would look like.

I approached the first evening I spent with Lily as a kind of test, though Charles tried to stack the deck in my favor: He decided we would get takeout from the pasta place Lily liked, then spend the evening watching her favorite movie — about two princess sisters, one with a touch that turned everything to ice. That afternoon, I went to find a gift at the Disney Store in Times Square — not only a place I had never been but a place I had never imagined going. I hated the idea of bribing Lily, trading plastic for affection, but I was desperately nervous. Plastic felt like an insurance policy.

The clerk looked at me with pity when I asked for the "Frozen" section. I suddenly doubted myself: Was it not a Disney movie? The clerk laughed when I asked the question, then explained: "We just don't have any merchandise left. There's a worldwide shortage."

She was serious. They had nothing. Not even a tiara. Or they had plenty of tiaras, but they weren't the right tiaras. I scanned the shelves around me: Belle stuff, "Sleeping Beauty" stuff, Princess Jasmine stuff. There had to be other movies Lily liked, right? Other princesses? There was a moment when I considered buying something related to *every* princess, just to cover my bases. I had some vague realization that the low-level panic in the back of my throat was the fuel capitalism ran on. On my cellphone, I was on hold with a Toys "R" Us in the Bronx. On my way out, I spotted something shoved into the corner of a shelf. It looked wintry. It had ice-blue cardboard packaging: a sled.

I cannot even tell you my relief. My sense of victory was complete. The sled came with a princess, and also maybe a prince. (A Sami ice harvester, I would learn.) The set came with a reindeer! (Named Sven.) And even a plastic carrot for him to eat. I tucked the box under my arm protectively as I walked to the register. I eyed the other parents around me. Who knew how many of them wanted this box?

I called Charles, triumphant. I told him the whole saga: the clerk's laughter, the *worldwide shortage*, the frantic phone calls, the sudden grace of glimpsing pale-blue cardboard.

"You won!" he said, then paused. I could hear him deciding whether to say something. "The princess," he asked, "what color is her hair?"

I had to check the box. "Brown?" I said. "Sort of reddish?"

"You did great," he said after a beat. "You're the best."

But in that beat, I could hear that I had the wrong princess.

Charles wasn't criticizing; he just knew how much a princess could mean. He had spent the last two years knee-deep in princesses, playing mother and father at once. The truth of the wrong princess was also the truth of unstable cause and effect: With parenting, you could do everything you were supposed to, and it might still backfire, because you lived with a tiny, volatile human who did not come with any kind of instruction manual. The possibility of failure hung like a low sky, pending weather, over every horizon.

In "The Uses of Enchantment," the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim makes a beautiful argument for the kinds of reckoning that fairy tales permit: They allow children to face primal fears (parental abandonment) and imagine acts of rebellion (defying authority) in a world reassuringly removed from the one they live in. Enchanted woods and castles are so conspicuously fantastical, their situations so extreme, that children don't need to feel destabilized by their upheavals. I wondered if that was still true for Lily, whose loss lived more naturally in fairy tales than other places. It can be a fine line between stories that give our fears a necessary stage and stories that deepen them — that make us more afraid.

In an 1897 letter to the editor in Outlook, a high-circulation turn-of-the-century American lifestyle magazine, one reader laments the effects of reading "Cinderella" to young children: "The effect or impression was to put stepmothers on the list of evil things of life." But in our home, it was less that "Cinderella" put stepmothers on an evil list and more that the story raised the question — with a kind of openness that might have been impossible otherwise — of whether stepmothers belonged there. Often, Lily used the figure of a fairy-tale wicked stepmother to distinguish our relationship from the one we had just read. "You're not like her," she would say. Or when it came to the stepmother she admired from "Cinderella," she was generous: "You look better than her anyway."

I wondered if claiming the stepmother as her favorite was another version of playing orphans — a way of claiming the source of fear and taking some control over it. Did she worry I would turn cruel? Did she love me fiercely so I wouldn't? I wondered if it helped her to see us reflected and distorted by a dark mirror, if these more sinister versions of our bond made her feel better about our relationship — or gave her permission to accept what might feel hard about it. I actually found a strange kind of comfort in the nightmare visions of mean stepparents I found in popular media — at least I wasn't cruel like them. It was a kind of ethical schadenfreude.

In many ways, these stories my family inherited mapped imperfectly onto ours. In fairy tales, the father-king was often duped and blind. He had faith in a woman who didn't deserve it. His trust, or his lust, permitted his daughter's mistreatment. Charles was like these fairy-tale fathers in only one way: He trusted me from the beginning. He believed I could be a mother before I believed it. He talked openly about what was hard about parenting, which made it feel more possible to live in love and difficulty — love *as* difficulty. He knew what it meant to wake day after day, choose three possible dresses, pour the cereal, repour the cereal after it

spilled, wrestle hair into pigtails, get to school on time, get to pickup on time, steam the broccoli for dinner. He knew how much it meant to learn the difference between the animated ponies with wings and the animated ponies with horns and the animated ponies with both — the alicorns. He knew what it meant to do all that, and then wake up and do it all over again.

My relationship with Lily, too, was not like the story we inherited from fairy tales — a tale of cruelty and rebellion — or even like the story of divorce-era popular media: the child spurning her stepmother, rejecting her in favor of the true mother, the mother of bloodline and womb. Our story was a thousand conversations on the 6 train or at the playground in Madison Square Park. Our story was painting Lily's nails and trying not to smudge her tiny pinkie. Our story was telling her to take deep breaths during tantrums, because I needed to take deep breaths myself. Our story began one night when I felt her small, hot hand reach for mine during her favorite movie, when the Abominable Snowman swirled into view on an icy mountain and almost overwhelmed the humble reindeer.

That first night, when we sang songs at bedtime, she scooted over and patted the comforter, in the same bed where her mother spent afternoons resting during the years of her illness, directly below the hole Charles had made — angrily swinging a toy train into the wall — after a telephone call with an insurance company, a hole now hidden behind an alphabet poster. "You lie here," Lily told me. "You lie in Mommy's spot."

If the wicked stepmother feels like a ready-made archetype, then its purest, darkest incarnation is the evil queen from "Snow White." In the Brothers Grimm tale from 1857, she asks a hunter to bring back her stepdaughter's heart. After this attack fails (the hunter has a bleeding heart of his own), the stepmother's aggression takes the form of false generosity. She goes to her stepdaughter in disguise, as an old beggar crone, to offer Snow White objects that seem helpful or nourishing: a corset, a comb, an apple. These are objects a mother might give to her daughter — as forms of sustenance, or ways of passing on a female legacy of self-care — but they are actually meant to kill her. They reach Snow White in the folds of her new surrogate family, where the seven dwarves have given her the opportunity to be precisely the kind of "good mother" her stepmother never was. She cooks and cleans and cares for them. Her virtue is manifest in precisely the maternal impulse her stepmother lacks.

The evil stepmother is so integral to our familiar telling of "Snow White" that I was surprised to discover that an earlier version of the story doesn't feature a stepmother at all. In this version, Snow White has no dead mother, only a living mother who wants her dead. This was a pattern of revision for the Brothers Grimm; they transformed several mothers into stepmothers between the first version of their stories, published in 1812, and the final version, published in 1857. The figure of the stepmother effectively became a vessel for the emotional aspects of motherhood that were too ugly to attribute to mothers directly (ambivalence, jealousy, resentment) and those parts of a child's experience of her mother (as cruel, aggressive, withholding) that were too difficult to situate directly in the biological parent-child dynamic. The figure of the stepmother — lean, angular, harsh — was like snake venom drawn from an unacknowledged wound, siphoned out in order to keep the maternal body healthy, preserved as an ideal.

"It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all good," Bettelheim argues, "but it also permits anger at this bad 'stepmother' without endangering the good will of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person." The psychologist D.W. Winnicott puts it more simply: "If there

are two mothers, a real one who has died, and a stepmother, do you see how easily a child gets relief from tension by having one perfect and the other horrid?" In other words, the shadow figure of the fairy-tale stepmother is a predatory archetype reflecting something true of every mother: the complexity of her feelings toward her child, and a child's feelings toward her.

Even if Lily didn't split her ideas of motherhood into perfect absence and wicked presence, I did — assigning precisely that psychic division of labor. I imagined that her biological mother would have offered everything I couldn't always manage: patience, pleasure, compassion. She would have been *with* Lily in her tantrums. She wouldn't have bribed her with ridiculous amounts of plastic. She wouldn't get so frustrated when bedtime lasted an hour and a half, or else her frustration would have the counterweight of an unconditional love I was still seeking. I knew these self-flagellations were ridiculous — even "real" parents weren't perfect — but they offered a certain easy groove of self-deprecation, comforting in its simplicity. A woman mothering another woman's child, Winnicott observes, "may easily find herself forced by her own imagination into the position of witch rather than fairy godmother."

In a study called "The Poisoned Apple," the psychologist (and stepmother) Elizabeth Church analyzed her interviews with 104 stepmothers through the lens of one particular question: How do these women reckon with the evil archetype they stepped into? "Although their experience was the opposite of the fairy-tale stepmothers," she reported, insofar as "they felt powerless in the very situation where the fairy-tale stepmothers exerted enormous power," they still "tended to identify with the image of the wicked stepmother." She called it their poisoned apple: They felt "wicked" for experiencing feelings of resentment or jealousy, and this fear of their own "wickedness" prompted them to keep these feelings to themselves, which only made them feel more shame for having these feelings in the first place.

Folk tales often deploy the stepmother as a token mascot of the dark maternal — a woman rebelling against traditional cultural scripts — but the particular history of the American stepmother is more complicated. As the historian Leslie Lindenauer argues in "I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960," the figure of the American stepmother found her origins in the American witch. Lindenauer argues that the 18th-century popular imagination took the same terrible attributes that the Puritans had ascribed to witches — malice, selfishness, coldness, absence of maternal impulse — and started ascribing them to stepmothers instead. "Both were examples of women who, against God and nature, perverted the most essential qualities of the virtuous mother," Lindenauer observes. "Moreover, witches and stepmothers alike were most often accused of harming *other* women's children."

The stepmother became a kind of scapegoat, a new repository for aspects of femininity that felt threatening: female agency, female creativity, female restlessness, maternal ambivalence. By the late 18th century, the stepmother was a stock villain, familiar enough to appear in grammar books. One boy was even injured by his dead stepmother from beyond the grave, when a column above her tombstone fell on his head. The particular villainy of the stepmother — the duplicity of tyranny disguised as care — enabled colonial rhetoric that compared England's rule to "a stepmother's severity," as one 1774 tract put it. In an article that ran in Ladies' Magazine in 1773, on the eve of the American Revolution, a stepdaughter laments her fate at the hands of her stepmother: "Instead of the tender maternal affection … what do I now see but discontent, ill-nature, and mal-a-pert authority?" The stepmother offers bondage cunningly packaged as devotion.

But the American popular imagination hasn't always understood the stepmother as a wicked woman. If it was true that she was an 18th-century gold digger — a latter-day witch — then it was also true that she was a mid-19th-century saint, happily prostrate to the surge of her own innate maternal impulse. In the Progressive Era, she was proof that being a good mother was less about saintly instincts and more about reason, observation and rational self-improvement. You didn't have to have a biological connection — or even an innate caregiving impulse — you just had to *apply* yourself.

When I interviewed Lindenauer about her research, she told me that she was surprised to discover these vacillations, surprised to find the figure of the virtuous stepmother showing up in the very same women's magazines that had vilified her a few decades earlier. She eventually started to detect a pattern. It seemed as if the stepmother found redemption whenever the nuclear family was under siege: in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, or when divorce emerged as a social pattern in the early 20th century. The stepmother became a kind of "port in the storm," Lindenauer told me. "It's better to have a stepmother than no mother at all."

The golden era of the American stepmother archetype — the summit of her virtue — was the second half of the 19th century, during and after the Civil War, when sentimental novels and women's magazines were full of saintly stepmothers eager to care for the motherless children who stumbled into their laps. In Charlotte Yonge's 1862 novel, "The Young Step-Mother; or, a Chronicle of Mistakes," the young stepmother Albinia is portrayed as a woman with a surplus of good will, just waiting for people with needs — read: grief — deep enough to demand the deployment of her excess goodness. Her siblings worry about her marrying a widower with children, afraid she will become a kind of indentured servant, but the novel reassures us that "her energetic spirit and love of children animated her to embrace joyfully the cares which such a choice must impose on her." When her new husband brings her home, he apologizes for what he is asking from her. "As I look at you, and the home to which I have brought you, I feel that I have acted selfishly," he says. But she won't let him apologize. "Work was always what I wished," she replies, "if only I could do anything to lighten your grief and care."

With the children, Albinia says everything right: She is sorry they have her in place of their mother. They can call her Mother, but they don't have to. Although the novel is subtitled "A Chronicle of Mistakes," Albinia doesn't seem to make many. When I read in the novel's epigraph, "Fail — yet rejoice," it felt like a lie and an impossible imperative at once. In fact, the entire voice of the saintly stepmother felt like an elaborate humblebrag. She knew she would always be second — or third! or fifth! or 10th! — but she didn't care. Not one bit. She just wanted to be useful.

I thought I would be glad to discover these virtuous stepmothers, but instead I found them nearly impossible to accept — much harder to stomach than the wicked stepmothers in fairy tales. My poisoned apple wasn't the wicked stepmother but her archetypal opposite, the saint, whose innate virtue felt like the harshest possible mirror. It would always show me someone more selfless than I was. These stories forgot everything that was structurally difficult about this kind of bond, or else they insisted that virtue would overcome all. This is why fairy tales are more forgiving than sentimental novels: They let darkness into the frame. Finding darkness in another story is so much less lonely than fearing the darkness is yours alone.

I punished myself when I lost patience, when I bribed, when I wanted to flee. I punished myself for resenting Lily when she came into our bed, night after night, which wasn't actually a bed but a futon we pulled out in the living room. Every

feeling I had, I wondered: *Would a real mother feel this?* It wasn't the certainty that she wouldn't, but the uncertainty itself: How could I know?

I had imagined that I might feel most like a mother among strangers, who had no reason to believe I wasn't one, but it was actually among strangers that I felt most like a fraud. One day early in our relationship, Lily and I went to a Mister Softee, one of the ice cream trucks parked like land mines all over the city. I asked Lily what she wanted, and she pointed to the double cone of soft serve, the biggest one, covered in rainbow sprinkles. I said, *Great!* I was still at the Disney Store, still thrilled to find the sled set, still ready and willing to pass as mother by whatever means necessary, whatever reindeer necessary, whatever soft-serve necessary.

The double cone was so huge that Lily could barely hold it. Two hands, I would have known to say a few months later, but I didn't know to say it then. I heard a woman behind me ask her friend, "What kind of parent gets her child that much ice cream?" I felt myself go hot with shame. This parent. Which is to say: not a parent at all. I was afraid to turn around. I also wanted to turn around. I wanted to make the stranger feel ashamed, to speak back to the maternal superego she represented, to say: *What kind of mother? A mother trying to replace a dead one.* Instead I grabbed a wad of napkins and offered to carry Lily's cone back to our table so she wouldn't drop it on the way.

As a stepparent, I often felt like an impostor — or else I felt the particular loneliness of dwelling outside the bounds of the most familiar story line. I hadn't been pregnant, given birth, felt my body surge with the hormones of attachment. I woke up every morning to a daughter who called me Mommy but also missed her mother. I often called our situation "singular," but as with so many kinds of singularity, it was a double-edged blade — a source of loneliness and pride at once — and its singularity was also, ultimately, a delusion. "Lots of people are stepparents," my mother told me once, and of course she was right. A Pew Research Center survey found that four in 10 Americans say they have at least one step relationship. Twelve percent of women are stepmothers. I can guarantee you that almost all these women sometimes feel like frauds or failures.

In an essay about stepparents, Winnicott argues for the value of "unsuccess stories." He even imagines the benefits of gathering a group of "unsuccessful stepparents" in a room together. "I think such a meeting might be fruitful," he writes. "It would be composed of ordinary men and women." When I read that passage, it stopped me dead with longing. I wanted to be in that meeting, sitting with those ordinary men and women — hearing about their ice-cream bribes, their everyday impatience, their frustration and felt fraudulence, their desperate sleds.

In the methodology portion of her "Poisoned Apple" study, Church admits that she disclosed to her subjects that she was also a stepmother before interviewing them. After an interview was finished, she sometimes described her own experiences. Many of her subjects confessed that they had told her things during their interviews that they had never told anyone. I could understand that — that they somehow would feel, by virtue of being in the presence of another stepmother, as if they had been granted permission to speak. It was something like the imagined gathering of unsuccessful stepparents, as if they were at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a church basement, taking earned solace in the minor triumphs and frequent failures of their kind: a kind of kin.

The decision to call the stepmother Mother, or the decision not to call her Mother, is often a dramatic hinge in stories about stepmothers, a climactic moment of acceptance or refusal. In a story called "My Step-Mother," published in The Decatur Republican in 1870, a young girl regards her new stepmother with

skepticism. When her stepmother asks her to play a song on the piano, trying to earn her trust and affection, the girl decides to play "I Sit and Weep by My Mother's Grave." But lo! The stepmother is undeterred. She not only compliments the girl on her moving performance; she shares that she also lost her mother when she was young and also used to love that song. The story ends on a triumphant note, with the daughter finally calling her Mother, an inverted christening — child naming the parent — that inaugurates the "most perfect confidence" that grows between them.

For Lily, calling me Mother wasn't the end of anything. The day after Charles and I married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel — just before midnight on a Saturday, while Lily was having a sleepover with her cousin — Lily asked almost immediately if she could call me Mommy. It was clear she had been waiting to ask. I remember feeling moved, as if we had landed in the credits at the end of a movie, the soundtrack crescendoing all around us.

But we weren't in the credits. We were just getting started. I was terrified. What would happen next? What happened next was pulling into a 7-Eleven for snacks and feeling Lily tug on my sleeve to tell me she had an "adult drink" at the laser-tag birthday party and now felt funny. She didn't want me to tell her dad. It was like the universe had sent its first maternal test. Was she drunk? What should I do? If I was going to let myself be called Mommy, I had to be prepared to deal with the fallout from the laser-tag birthday party. Charles eventually deduced that she had had a few sips of iced tea.

It felt less as if I had "earned" the title of mother — the way it has figured in so many sentimental stories, as a reward for behaving the right way and defying the old archetypes — and more as if I had landed in the 1900 story called "Making Mamma," in which 6-year-old Samantha layers a dressmaker's dummy with old fabric in order to make a surrogate mother for herself. It was as if Lily had bestowed a deep and immediate trust in me — unearned, born of need — and now I had to figure out how to live inside that trust without betraying it.

Once I stepped into the costume of a well-worn cultural archetype, I got used to hearing other people's theories about my life. Everyone had ideas about our family without knowing anything about our family. One woman said our situation was easier than if I had a terrible ex to compete with; another woman said I would be competing with the memory of Lily's perfect biological mother forever. When I wrote about a family vacation for a travel magazine, the editor wanted a bit more pathos: "Has it been bumpy?" she wrote in the margins of my draft. "What are you hoping for from this trip? A tighter family bond? A chance to let go of the sadness? Or … ?? Tug at our heartstrings a bit."

I realized that when this editor imagined our family, she envisioned us saturated by sadness, or else contoured by resistance. More than anything, I liked her "Or … ??" It rang true. It wasn't that every theory offered by a stranger about our family felt wrong; it was more that most of them felt right, or at least held a grain of truth that resonated. Which felt even more alarming, somehow, to be so knowable to strangers.

But every theory also felt incomplete. There was so much more truth around it, or else something close to its opposite felt true as well. I rarely felt like saying, *No, it's nothing like that*. I usually wanted to say: *Yes, it is like that. And also like this, and like this, and like this*. Sometimes the fact of those assumptions, the way I felt them churning inside everyone we encountered, made stepmotherhood feel like an operating theater full of strangers. I was convinced that I was constantly being dissected for how fully or compassionately I had assumed my maternal role.

I only ever found two fairy tales with good stepmothers, and they were both from Iceland. One stars a woman named Himinbjorg, who helps her stepson through his mourning by helping him fulfill the prophecy his mother delivered to him in a dream: that he will free a princess from a spell that had turned her into an ogre. By the time he returns from his mission victorious, the royal court is ready to burn Himinbjorg at the stake, because everyone is convinced that she is responsible for his disappearance. What I read as her selflessness moved me. She is willing to look terrible in order to help her son pursue a necessary freedom. I worried that I cared too much about proving I was a good stepmother, that wanting to seem like a good stepmother might get in the way of actually being a good stepmother. Perhaps I wanted credit for mothering more than I wanted to mother. Himinbjorg, on the other hand, is willing to look like a witch just to help her stepson break the spell he needs to break.

Then there was Hildur. Hildur's husband had vowed never to marry after the death of his first queen, because he was worried that his daughter would be mistreated. "All stepmothers are evil," he tells his brother, "and I don't wish to harm Ingibjorg." He is a fairy-tale king who has already absorbed the wisdom of fairy tales. He knows the deal with stepmoms.

But he falls in love with Hildur anyway. She says she won't marry him, though — not unless he lets her live alone with his daughter for three years before the wedding. Their marriage is made possible by her willingness to invest in a relationship with his daughter that exists apart from him, as its own fierce flame.

The closest thing Lily and I ever had to an Icelandic castle was a series of bathrooms across Lower Manhattan. Bathrooms were the spaces where it was just the two of us: the one with wallpaper made from old newspapers, the one where she insisted that people used to have braids instead of hands, the one at a Subway with a concrete mop sink she loved because it was "cool and simple."

Bathrooms were our space, just as Wednesdays were our day, when I picked her up from school and took her to the Dunkin' Donuts full of cops at Third Avenue and 20th before I rushed her to ballet, got her suited in her rhinestone-studded leotard and knelt before her tights like a supplicant, fitting bobby pins into her bun. At first, I expected an Olympic medal for getting her there only two minutes late. Eventually I realized that I was surrounded by mothers who had done exactly what I'd just done, only they had done it two minutes faster, and their buns were neater. Everything that felt like rocket science to me was just the stuff regular parents did every day of the week.

But those afternoons mattered, because they belonged to me and Lily. One day, in a cupcake-shop bathroom in SoHo — a few months before Lily, Charles and I moved into a new apartment, the first one we would rent together — Lily pointed at the walls: pink and brown, decorated with a lacy pattern. She told me she wanted our new room to look like this. Ours. She had it all planned out. In the new place, Daddy would live in one room, and we would live in the other. Our room would be so dainty, she said. She wasn't even sure boys would be allowed. This was what Hildur knew: We needed something that was only for the two of us.

A few months later, reading Dr. Seuss's "Horton Hatches the Egg" to Lily in that new apartment, I felt my throat constricting. Horton agrees to sit on an egg while Mayzie the bird, a flighty mother, takes a vacation to Palm Beach. Mayzie doesn't come back, but Horton doesn't give up. He sits on a stranger's egg for days, then weeks, then months. "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant," he repeats. "An elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent!"

When the egg finally hatches, the creature that emerges is an elephant-bird: a bright-eyed baby with a small, curled trunk and red-tipped wings. Her tiny trunk made me think of Lily's hand gesticulations — how big and senseless they got, like mine — and how she had started to make to-do lists, as I did, just so she could cross things off. But she also had a poster of the planets in her bedroom, because her mom had loved outer space, and she was proud to say she always had her "nose in a book," just as her grandmother told her that her mother always had. She has two mothers, and she always will.

For me, the stakes of thinking about what it means to be a stepmother don't live in statistical relevance — *slightly more than 10 percent of American women might relate!* — but in the way stepparenting asks us to question our assumptions about the nature of love and the boundaries of family. Family is so much more than biology, and love is so much more than instinct. Love is effort and desire — not a sentimental story line about easy or immediate attachment, but the complicated bliss of joined lives: ham-and-guacamole sandwiches, growing pains at midnight, car seats covered in vomit. It's the days of showing up. The trunks we inherit and the stories we step into, they make their way into us — by womb or shell or presence, by sheer force of will. But what hatches from the egg is hardly ever what we expect: the child that emerges, or the parent that is born. That mother is not a saint. She's not a witch. She's just an ordinary woman. She found a sled one day, after she was told there weren't any left. That was how it began.

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What My Mother and I Don't Talk About

by Michele Filgate

https://longreads.com/2017/10/09/what-my-mother-and-i-dont-talk-about/

Our mothers are our first homes, and that's why we're always trying to return to them. To know what it was like to have one place where we belonged. Where we fit.

My mother is hard to know. Or rather, I know her and don't know her at the same time. I can imagine her long, grayish-brown hair that she refuses to chop off, the vodka and ice in her hand. But if I try to conjure her face, I'm met instead by her laugh, a fake laugh, the kind of laugh that is trying to prove something, a forced happiness.

Several times a week, she posts tempting photos of food on her Facebook page. Achiote pork tacos with pickled red onions, strips of beef jerky just out of the smoker, slabs of steak that she serves with steamed vegetables. These are the meals of my childhood; sometimes ambitious and sometimes practical. But these meals, for me, call to mind my stepfather; the red of his face, the red of the blood pooled on the plate. He uses a dishtowel to wipe the sweat from his cheeks; his work boots are coated in sawdust. His words puncture me; tines of a fork stuck in a half-deflated balloon.

You are the one causing problems in my marriage, he says. *You fucking bitch*, he says. *I'll slam you*, he says. And I'm afraid he will, I'm afraid he'll press himself on top of me on my bed until the mattress opens up and swallows me whole. Now, my mother saves all of her cooking skills for her husband. Now, she serves him food at their farmhouse in the country and their condo in the city. Now, my mother no longer cooks for me.

***

My teenage bedroom is covered in centerfolds from *Teen Beat* and faded inkjet printouts of Leonardo DiCaprio and Jakob Dylan. Dog fur tumbleweeds float around when a breeze comes through my front window. No matter how much my mother vacuums, they multiply.

My desk is covered in a mess of textbooks and half-written letters and uncapped pens and dried-up highlighters and pencils sharpened to slivers. I write sitting on the hardwood floor, my back pressed against the hard red knobs of my dresser. It isn't comfortable, but something about the constant pressure grounds me.

I write terrible poems that I think, in a moment of teenage vanity, are quite brilliant. Poems about heartbreak and being misunderstood and being inspired. I print them out on paper with a sunset beach scene in the background and name the collection "Summer's Snow."

While I write, my stepfather sits at his desk that's right outside my bedroom. He's working on his laptop, but every time his chair squeaks or he makes any kind of movement, fear rises up from my stomach to the back of my throat. I keep my door closed, but that's useless, since I'm not allowed to lock it.

Shortly after my stepfather married my mother, he made a simple jewelry box for me that sits on top of my dresser. The wood is smooth and glossy. No nicks or grooves in the surface. I keep broken necklaces and gaudy bracelets in it. Things I want to forget.

Like those baubles in the box, I can play with existing and not existing inside my bedroom; my room is a place to be myself and not myself. I disappear into books like they are black holes. When I can't focus, I lay for hours on my bottom bunk bed, waiting for my boyfriend to call and save me from my thoughts. Save me from my mother's husband. The

phone doesn't ring. The silence cuts me. I grow moodier. I shrink inside of myself, stacking sadness on top of anxiety on top of daydreaming.

***

"What are the two things that make the world go 'round?" My stepfather is asking me a question he always asks. We are in his woodworking shop in the basement, and he's wearing his boots and an old pair of jeans with a threadbare t-shirt. He smells like whiskey.

I know what the answer is. I know it, but I do not want to say it. He is staring at me expectantly, his skin crinkled around half-shut eyes, his boozy breath hot on my face.

"Sex and money," I grumble. The words feel like hot coals in my mouth, heavy and shame-ridden.

"That's right," he says. "Now, if you're extra, extra nice to me, maybe I can get you into that school you want to go to."

He knows my dream is to go to SUNY Purchase for acting. When I am on the stage, I am transformed, and transported into a life that isn't my own. I am someone with even bigger problems, but problems that might be resolved by the end of an evening.

I want to leave the basement. But I can't just walk away from him. I'm not allowed to do that.

The exposed light bulb makes me feel like a character in a noir film. The air is colder, heavier down here. I think back to a year before, when he parked his truck in front of the ocean and put his hand on my inner thigh, testing me, seeing how far he could go. I insisted he drive me home. He wouldn't, for at least a long, excruciating half hour. When I told my mom, she didn't believe me.

Now he is up against me, arms coiled around my back. The tines of the fork return, this time letting all the air out. He talks softly in my ear.

"This is just between you and me. Not your mother. Understand?"

I don't understand. He pinches my ass. He is hugging me in a way that stepfathers should not hug their stepdaughters. His hands are worms, my body dirt.

I break free from him and run upstairs. Mom is in the kitchen. She's always in the kitchen. "Your husband grabbed my butt," I spit out. She quietly sets down the wooden spoon she is using to stir and goes downstairs. The spoon is stained red with spaghetti sauce.

Later, she finds me curled up in the fetal position in my room. "Don't worry," she says. "He was only joking."

***

On an afternoon a few years earlier, I step down from the school bus. The walk from the end of my block to my driveway is always full of tension. If my stepfather's tomato red pickup truck is in the driveway, it means I have to be in the house with him. But today there is no truck. I am alone. Deliciously alone. And on the counter, a coffee cake my mother baked, the crumbled brown sugar making my mouth water. I cut into it and devour half of the dessert in a couple of bites. My tongue begins to tingle, the first sign of an anaphylactic reaction. I'm used to them. I know what to do: Take liquid Benadryl right away and let the artificial cherry syrup coat my tongue as it puffs up like a fish, blocking my airway. My throat starts to close.

But we only have pills. They take a lot longer to dissolve. I swallow them and immediately throw up. My breath comes only in squeaky gasps. I run to the beige phone on the wall. Dial 911. The minutes it takes the EMTs to arrive are as long as my 13 years on Earth. I stare into the mirror at my tear-stained face, trying to stop crying because it makes it even harder to breathe. The tears come anyway.

In the ambulance on the way to the emergency room, they give me a teddy bear. I hold it close to me like a newborn baby.

Later, my mother pushes the curtain aside and steps next to my hospital bed. She's frowning and relieved at the same time. "There were crushed walnuts on the top of that cake. I baked it for a coworker," she says. She looks at the teddy bear still cradled in my arms. "I forgot to leave a note for you."

***

I've spent enough time in Catholic churches to know what it means to sweep things underneath the carpet. My family is good at that, until we're not. Sometimes our secrets are still partially visible. It's easy to trip over them.

The silence in the church isn't always peaceful. It just makes it more jarring when the tiniest noise, a muffled cough or a creaky knee, echoes throughout the sanctuary. You can't be wholly yourself, there. You have to hollow yourself out, like a husk.

In high school, I'm the opposite. I'm too much myself, because the too muchness is a way of saying *I'm still here. The me of me, and not the me he wants me to be*. Anything can set me off. I run out of biology class multiple times a week, and my teacher follows me to the girls room, pressing tissues that feel like sandpaper to my cheek. I hang out in the nurse's office whenever I can't handle being around other people.

***

Here's what silence sounds like after he loses his temper. After I, in a moment of bravery, scream back at him: *You're NOT my father*.

It sounds like an egg cracked once against a porcelain bowl. It sounds like the skin of an orange, peeled away from the fruit. It sounds like a muffled sneeze in church.

***

Good girls are quiet.

Bad girls kneel on uncooked rice, the hard pellets digging into their exposed knees. Or at least that's what I'm told, by a former coworker who went to an all-girls Catholic school in Brooklyn. The nuns preferred this kind of corporeal punishment.

Good girls don't disrupt the class.

Bad girls visit the guidance counselor so frequently that she keeps an extra supply of tissues just for them. Bad girls talk to the police officer who is assigned to their high school. They roll the tissues in their hands until they crumble like a muffin.

Good girls look anywhere but in the police officer's eyes. They stare at the second hand on the clock mounted on the wall. They tell the officer: "No, it's okay. You don't need to talk to my stepfather and mother. It will just make things worse."

***

Silence is what fills the gap between my mother and myself. All of the things we haven't said to each other, because it's too painful to articulate.

What I want to say: *I need you to believe me. I need you to listen. I need you.*

What I say: nothing.

Nothing until I say everything. But articulating what happened isn't enough. She's still married to him. The gap widens.

***

My mother sees ghosts. She always has. We're on Martha's Vineyard and I'm stuck at home with my younger brother; a de facto babysitter while the adults go out for fried clams and drinks. It's an unusually cool August night and the air is so still, like it's holding its breath. I'm next to my brother on the bed, trying to get him to fall asleep. Suddenly I hear someone, some *thing*, exhale in my ear. The ear turned away from my brother. The windows are closed. No one else is there. I shriek and jump off of the bed.

When my mother walks through the door, I tell her right away.

"You've always had an overactive imagination, Mish," she says, and laughs it off, like a wave temporarily covering jagged shells on the beach.

But a few nights after we leave the island, she confides in me.

"I woke up one night and someone was sitting on my chest," she says. "I didn't want to tell you while we were there. I didn't want to scare you."

I sit in my writing spot on the floor in my bedroom that night, the red knobs of the dresser pressing into my spine, and I think about my mother's ghosts, about her face, about home. Where the TV is always on, and food is always on the table. Where dinners are ruined when I'm at the table, so my stepfather says I have to eat on my own. Where a vase is thrown, the shattering like soft but sharp music on the hardwood floor. Where my stepfather's guns are displayed behind a glass case, and his handgun is hidden underneath a stack of shirts in the closet. Where I crawl on my knees through the pine trees, picking up dog shit. Where there's a pool, but neither my mother nor I know how to do anything more than doggy paddle.

Where my stepfather makes me a box, and my mother teaches me how to keep my secrets inside.

Now I buy my own Benadryl and keep it on me at all times. These days, my mother and I mostly communicate via group text messages along with my older sister, in which my mother and I reply to my sister, who shares photos of my niece and nephews. Joey in his Cozy Coupe, grinning at the camera while he holds on to the wheel.

One day, I tried to reach out.

I'm going to Nana's this weekend. Maybe you can come down and visit me while I'm there?

She didn't respond.

I text rather than call her because she might be in the same room as him. I like to pretend he doesn't exist. And I'm good at it. She taught me. Like with the broken baubles in my old jewelry box, I just close the lid.

I wait for a text reply from her; some excuse about why she can't get away. When Nana picks me up from the train station, I secretly hope my mother is in the car with her, wanting to surprise me.

I check my messages and think about disjointed collages I used to piece together out of old *National Geographics*, *Family Circles*, and Sears catalogs; an advertisement for Campbell's tomato soup pasted next to a leopard, attached next to half of a headline, like *Ten Tips For*. Even as a child, I was comforted by the not-finishing, the nonsensicalness of the collages. They made me feel like anything was possible. All you had to do was begin.

Her car never appeared in the driveway. A message never appeared on my phone.

My mother's country house, two hours away from my hometown, was built by a Revolutionary War soldier with his own hands. It's haunted, of course. Several years ago, she posted a photo on Facebook of the backyard, lush and green, with tiny orbs appearing like starlight.

"I love you past the sun and the moon and the stars," she'd always say to me when I was little. But I just want her to love me here. Now. On Earth.

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