

MOTHERS

It was predictable as prejudice.

'You're early,' she said.

Mark whispered words I could not quite hear but I guessed he would probably have said something like, 'If we'd been late, that would have been wrong too.'

He might also have added, 'That mother of yours...'

And he would have left the rest of the sentence unsaid but understood.

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'We're not quite ready for you.'

'That's alright, Mum,' I said, 'we're here to see you not to worry about whether the dinner's on the table or still in the oven.'

'Well, I worry about these things.'

There was silence and there were years and years between us.

'Someone's got to,' she said at last.

I was about to rejoin the old and never ending battle between us but Mark saved the day so far.

'It's alright,' he said, 'it's what parents do, it's what old people do, worry, I mean.'

He reached for my hand and squeezed it.

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She was a dog with a bone kind of woman, that mother of mine, and I was her bone.

Mark said, 'She looks well, Paul.'

I knew he was lying.

My mother was bent double with the weight of generations on her back, both those gone by and those before her now.

I thought she looked like she was trying to describe a circle with her body, her head restless and facing the floor, leading the rest of her hunched frame like a boxer's

jab. It was disconcerting, not being able to see her mouth when she spoke, her words spinning to the ground and then rebounding upwards, sometimes at strange angles.

'Is the coffee ready yet, Mervyn?'

Her raised voice was an old crone's screech.

The crown of her head was almost hairless. She might have been a monk had red hair dye been permitted in monasteries.

'Nearly, sweetheart.'

Mervyn's voice travelled strongly from the cramped kitchen of my mother's mobile home. He was my stepfather whose own son had hanged himself twenty years ago. Mervyn was responsible for all the catering arrangements and would be in trouble once we had gone for not having the meal ready early, just in case.

He had not yet come to greet us.

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Our monthly visits had become wrapped in a ritual of our own making.

First, we were either early or late, depending on the traffic, and on whether or not I had snapped at Mark and caused an argument because I was on edge about seeing my mother, but we were always wrong whenever we arrived. Next, came the exchange of gifts.

'Sit down, Mum,' I said, with as much authority as I could muster.

'Come on, Mervyn,' Mark said, 'let's be seeing you at last.'

My mother did not like my lover's easy familiarity with her husband.

'He's like you,' she said to me in a whispered voice that was all husk and no kernel, 'he doesn't know lines exist for a purpose and shouldn't be crossed.'

I knew what she meant, for once in my life, almost found myself in agreement with my mother.

'He's got no respect for his elders or his betters.'

'That's not true, though...'

I stopped myself just in time.

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Mark's family were big on giving presents.

'Here you are, Mervyn,' he said, 'I know you like these.'

'You shouldn't do that,' my mother snapped, her words like crocodile's teeth.

She never used Mark's name.

'Look at him already,' she said, 'great fat lump that he is.'

My stepfather had already unwrapped the first butterscotch and he smiled at my mother as he popped the sweet into his mouth. He had his ways of dealing with her, I thought, good ways, the fruits of experience, but I wished he had remembered to put in his teeth.

'You'll spoil your dinner then,' my mother said, having lost the battle but having determined she would later win the war.

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'There's one here, too, from Doreen, Gladys.'

Mark's voice was like sunshine bent on breaking through cloud, however thick the cover.

It was one reason I loved him.

He was also brave enough to call my mother by her name. I loved him for that, too, though I also feared for him for that piece of mischief.

Doreen was his mother and a gentle soul. We had called in at her flat on the way to my mother's as we knew she would have a gift for her. 'Wrap it up for me please, darling,' she said to Mark. 'It's not much...'

'But it's the thought that counts.'

Mark grinned, revealing his perfect white teeth that I also loved. He made a profession of completing his mother's sentences.

'It's not much, Gladys,' he said now to my mother.

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'What is it, sweetheart? What's Doreen got for you there?'

Mervyn's voice was insistent, understanding the challenge the gift presented to his wife's charity, but unwilling to let it pass.

'It's nothing much,' my mother muttered, 'just some smellies.'

'Nice?'

'Yes,' she said, but I could see the agreement was choking her.

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I had hoped to let this part of the story pass without comment but I guess my behaviour, as much as hers, demands an explanation of sorts.

'Mum,' I said, 'just let it be.'

'I can't,' she said, 'I'm sorry, but I can't.'

I should have left it there but all the old anger and resentments were rising in me like a broken open grave of bones, all fractured and dry, but wanting somehow to reconnect and live again.

She had, after all, said she was sorry.

Mark and Mervyn had retreated into the shadows and left the ground between us free for the fight they knew was coming.

'What is it, Mum, that Doreen's supposed to have done?'

She was silent, brooding, so I answered my own question.

'Well, I'll tell you, then, Mum, she's done precisely nothing wrong.'

'Hasn't she?'

My mother's voice was soft but not gentle. It was like a voice that had been crushed to make it pliable.

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What had happened was this.

It was unbelievably stupid.

My mother and stepfather were on holiday and passing near to where Mark and I had set up home together. It was also near to where Doreen had moved once her husband had died. My mother had a gift for Mark's mother, a pot of Christmas hyacinths. It was a big deal for her and I was not there to smooth the rites of passage.

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I forget now where I was, maybe some convention or other, but I didn't know she was coming and so I wasn't there. Mark, I'm sure was charming, and he had even taken a day off work when he heard I couldn't be with my mother. He would have smiled his white teeth smile and called her Gladys. He took them out to lunch and got carried away. He showed them where we had first met, even pointed out the chairs we had sat in on that first date, but was sensible enough not to tell them how we had held hands beneath the table as we devoured the fish and chips and each other with our eyes and later with our mouths.

It had all taken too much time.

I won't take them to see my mother now, Mark thought, even though she's bought them both a little something. It won't matter. They can see my mother another time, anytime.

And my mother never said a word about the pot of pink hyacinths in the boot of Mervyn's new car.

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'It's the least she could have done,' my mother said, at last, 'invited us to her home.'

I could feel Mark shrinking further into the corner of the room but I had to defend him. It's what lovers do for one another, isn't it?

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'After all the hospitality we've shown her, in spite of...'

My mother's words filled the battleground between us with sticks and stones but I was grateful at least that she had not finished her sentence.

It left at least a possibility of peace between us.

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'I told you, Mum, a thousand times, Doreen was expecting you.'

'That's what you say.'

My mother's body was now bent treble as she rose from the chair. Her words went down to hell and back and the strands of her ridiculous red hair were blown back as texts and subtexts rebounded past her head and on to my ears.

'For Christ's sake, Mum, Mark's mum even had a present waiting there for you.'

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I left them there, slamming the caravan door behind me.

I was not proud of doing that but the walk cleared my head.

It wasn't even that difficult to understand.

Of course, my mother was jealous of Doreen.

'Yes, Mum,' I had said over and over, 'I do see her more than you.'

Silence, always silence at this point, awaiting my repeated explanation.

'We live nearer to Doreen for a start, it's easier...'

'That's it, isn't it? You care more about her than me?'

There was a pleading to her voice, an unattractive whine, a tone of voice that had worked its magic over the years and seen her get her own way a million times, with me, with my father, before he left her, and with the world.

'And what about him, your...?'

She could not bring herself to use the word partner, let alone lover.

'Your...friend?'

'No, Mum,' I said, 'it's just that Doreen's on her own now, and you've got Mervyn.'

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I opened the door and understood my mother was taking advantage of my absence.

'What do you think, then, about all those immigrants, all those blacks taking our jobs?'

She might just as well have been asking Mark what he thought about all those queers taking our sons from their mothers.

She was not unintelligent, my mother.

'Hello,' I said, 'and what are you all talking about?'

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There was a time, before I met Mark, when I was married, when I had shouted at her, when I had said she could get out if she made one more racist remark, that this was my house, and if she wanted to be allowed to visit her grandson ever again, she must keep her unpleasant and unacceptable opinions to herself.

This, though, was her house.

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When I met Mark, he shrugged his shoulders and said it was just another of those generational things, the racism.

'It'll pass,' he said.

'Yeah, but not in her lifetime,' I said.

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We ate the dinner Mervyn had burned in almost complete silence but, by the time the sweet was served, there were the beginnings of normal conversation making a comeback.

Mark asked my mother if she had won anything at the whist recently, and I asked Mervyn how his latest betting system was doing.

We agreed on a date for our next visit and my mother said thank you for the flowers, and Mervyn grinned a toothless grin and patted the packet of butterscotch that sat beside his empty plate.

And then my mother said something that brought tears to my eyes as Mark drove us back home.

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'You know,' she said, 'I've been thinking lately a lot about the last war.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Yes,' she said, you know, about Dennis.

'Okay,' I said.

I whispered to Mark that Dennis was the bomber pilot who was shot down over Dresden and that he had been engaged to be married to my mother.

'I know,' Mark said, 'you told me.'

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'Yes,' she said, 'I don't know if I told you but we were planning to emigrate to South Africa when the war ended.'

'You told me,' I said, but I hope not unkindly.

'Well,' she said, and I noticed her head was more erect than I remembered for some time, and the words were travelling directly across the table instead of rebounding from the floor, 'I've been thinking, as I said.'

I looked sideways to my left and wondered if all this talk about the past was upsetting Mervyn but I saw he was fast asleep.

'Yes,' she said again, and paused, as if for effect.

I reached out and squeezed Mark's hand beneath the table.

She looked at me, my mother, and her eyes were shining.

'I was wondering what would have happened if Dennis hadn't been killed, and then I realised...'

'Yes?' I said.

'Yes,' she said, 'and then I remembered...'

I felt Mark's hand in mine and loved the rough, sandy feel of his fingers. I was not really paying proper attention to my mother's words. I was thinking about the way Mark loved me, about the long drive home, about Mervyn's dead son hanging there in the garage, and how I was a slave to unruly thoughts.

I was wondering why my mother's eyes were shining like that.

'Yes,' she said, 'and then I realised, if I'd married Dennis, I wouldn't have had you for my son.'

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It was only when we were back home again, and after Mark had said he was sorry about the time he had failed to take my mother to visit his mother and that all old people were utterly inexplicable, that I understood the potential ambiguity in my mother's shining eyes and in her parting words.