

DON McLELLAN

Mother's Day

HE HID IN THE SHADOWS at the end of the hallway and waited for her to drop into the chair facing the mirror. He'd seen it before but needed corroboration, needed to know he wasn't imagining things again. If she caught him watching he'd say he was looking for the cat.

She switched on the desk lamp and slid the hatpin from its berth in a bed of plastic flowers. Aimed its sharp end toward heaven and tapped the edge like a nurse measuring an injection. Then, eyeballing the index finger of her left hand, she drove the pin through a spot behind the nail. A Kleenex stemmed the bleeding; the crucifixion seemed to stem her fury, a temporary diversion.

He must have flinched because she glanced up at the mirror, eyes glistening with tear. Long after she was gone, long after his own fingers had stiffened, he wondered if she'd known all along of his audience.

I'll fix dinner soon, she said.

Here kitty, kitty

In its natural state my mother's mane had the lacquer sheen of a Japanese jewelry box. When liberated the locks splashed across her unhappy shoulders like rainwater. Monthly she entrusted her scalp to Tony, surname unknown, proprietor of Hair By Anthony, a gracious, perfumed soul who worked from photographs of starlets torn from magazines. His haughty companion—a somnolent Persian—sunned her royal whiskers in the shop window.

The wedding of setting shampoo and damp cat fur clung resolutely to my mother's revived bouffant. Its curious fragrance loitered for days. Gliding through our stuccoed rental on one domestic mission or another she compulsively stole glances at herself in strategically mounted mirrors.

We learned to recognize changes in my mother's personality that would accompany the makeovers. They appeared like uninvited guests, brimming with expectation. Depending on the actress she imagined she had become, as well as myriad other factors only she was aware of, my mother would mangle foreign accents or greet acquaintances with a sultry purr.

She'd take up smoking but never inhale, duck in behind an assortment of eyeglasses despite near-perfect vision. Seen her sashay to and fro in the yard, an Anthony.

Our father, on returning home from work and seeing for the first time the latest hairdo, would tactfully say nothing at all, appreciative of the few days respite it afforded him. To brother Burt and me, our mother stationed at one of the mirrors, he'd wag a head and roll amused Celtic eyes—eyes, he'd remind, in the event we'd forgotten, that had seen just about everything.

Tony's baloney, he'd guffaw. Baloney by Tony.

He was right, of course. These folic creations crumbled like sandcastles. Exhausted rings unravelled, curls drooped as miserably as the diseased limbs of trees. In a week or so my mother was again the self she had so desperately hoped to escape. The salon scent was circumvented by a festering despair. It lingered stubbornly, a vagrant after-dinner smell.

With the approach of Mother's Day, in what had become family tradition, my parents planned, on the Saturday preceding, an evening of dinner and dancing. They would launch the celebration with some Chinese food at the Honey Blossom Restaurant.

Call for reservations, will ya, hon? my mother asked. Got to be at Anthony's soon.

Though the restaurant rarely filled its dozen wooden booths, Mom always insisted on reservations. I think the gesture made her feel like someone special, my call serving as official notice that the two of them were stepping out.

I recognized the voice answering the phone. Ming's white shirts stained yellow at the armpits.

Resa-wation? he screamed. You wanna make resa-wation for Honey Bwossum?

I could hear the clamour of juggling woks, the swell of an alien chatter. Through the steam I could make out laughing oriental features.

Resa-wation? How widic-u-was!

Ming's unsmiling wife. She bullied the waitresses, pocketed all gratuities.

Un-bo-wee-bo-bul!

Grandfather. The unclipped nail of his small finger was curled superstitiously—sharp enough to claim an eye.

Ming repeated each letter of our name like he was calling a bingo card.

Okay! he bellowed. Come anytime you wike!

My father never learned how to swim, which did not disqualify him during the war for an Atlantic assignment aboard a Corvette. He acquired skills in the service that didn't transfer easily to a civilian economy, so he went to work following the armistice for the first company offering employment, a meat plant on the waterfront.

He worked in a freezer sorting animal carcasses that swung from bloodied hooks. The cold caused his face to flush as though he was suffering from permanent embarrassment. People sometimes wondered if he'd recently returned from California or Hawaii. He enjoyed being mistaken for someone wealthy enough to afford such a holiday. The rest of his body, from the neck south, sported a porcelain sheen.

Weekends he hung out at the Hastings Park Racetrack. In the off-season he made bets through a bookie, mumbling peculiar equations into the phone, pretending to talk union or hockey whenever my mother roamed within earshot. He would visit a barber-shop near Pender and Main to settle his accounts. It was his *modus operandi*.

One Sunday, in an attempt to sabotage the meet, my mother hid the car keys. Dad hadn't been paying her enough attention, a common lament. The family Plymouth sat forlornly at the curb while they revisited schisms that pre-dated my birth. When my father reached for the coin jar in the cupboard, having decided to catch a bus, he discovered it empty—her *modus operandi*.

My brother and I were also victims of this subterfuge. If my mother took a dislike to an item of clothing we favoured—a pair of bellbottoms, say, maybe a paisley shirt—it vanished. The generals of Latin America would have admired her thoroughness.

I'm going, my father vowed. You can't stop me.

Then start walkin', buster.

She followed, an obstinate virus.

From our house a brisk stroll downtown took about two hours. My father later revealed he had hoped to lose her in the crowds of Chinatown, but that his height—over six feet, toe to crown—foiled a getaway.

Noodle in a rice bowl, he said.

Why don't you tell them where you're goin', big shot? my mother reportedly hollered over tables stacked high with bok choy, ducking between the hapless torsos of barbecued poultry. Tell 'em why you're sneaking off!

She paced outside the barbershop until my father had completed his business. I can see him chuckling nervously as he tries explaining her behaviour to the others. Hear from behind an arc of steaming lather, What's with the dame?

But their censure didn't weaken her resolve. She savoured my father's discomfiture—and cursed his having been conceived every step of the way home.

He drank with old navy buddies at one of the Canadian Legion branches and foolishly denied having done so. He attempted to disguise the presence of beer on his breath with Halls Cough Drops. Tobacco fumes clung to his clothes like an invisible lint. Sometimes my mother alleged the scent of woman.

On occasion my father would take off for a few days—to where, who knows? Going AWOL guaranteed an intensified re-sumption of their conflict at some future date. The air in our house crackled in anticipation of the rematch.

Once, to regain entry, he claimed to have gone angling with friends. My mother circled him warily, dog sniffing a fire hydrant.

Lyin' bastard! she growled.

Punishment usually entailed his eviction from their bedroom. Banishment could stretch from three days to three months, depending. He appeared relieved to be sentenced to an air mattress on the living-room floor. Because Burt and I often took my father's side it was self-serve in the kitchen until hostilities were resolved. Our body weights fluctuated accordingly.

People sometimes remarked that my parents appeared to have little in common. This may have been true. But there had to be a reason they were able to co-exist under the same shingles for as long as they did. I think they understood each other quite well. I think they were joined together by the sum of their unfulfilled desires.

They were either in love or at war. Rancour seemed an aphrodisiac. There was no Switzerland. It was the one thing they seemed to agree on: the enemy of love is indifference.

My mother, in anticipation of their evening fête, had passed the afternoon moored to the dresser. Her features had been transformed by a mysterious fusion of lotion, cream and paint, the ancient alchemy of female beauty. The new hairdo balanced precariously atop her head, a plumage of swirls and frizzy ringlets, every strand tinted and teased.

Mirror, mirror on the wall

My brother appeared shortly, two pals in tow. Burt was sixteen. The tattoo of a cobra snaked up his bony arm and under a Harley Davidson T-shirt. The fuzz germinating on his chin had the consistency of pubic hair.

Home, Ma!

The walls trembled as the trio stampeded down the basement stairs.

Where the heck have you been? my mother asked sleepily. The pills the doctor said would help control her mood swings had kicked in. So had the delayed reactions.

Burt emerged from the basement moments later, a bulky paper bag tucked under an arm.

Later, Ma!

TV dinners are in the freezer, Mom said. Or you can warm up the meat loaf.

My father had promised to be home by six. A quarter past seven finds my mother positioned at the living-room window waiting for the Plymouth to slide down Mons Drive. She sucks on a Pilsner, shredding its label with swipes of her lethal crimson nails.

Better be home soon, she mutters, throttling the bottle's neck. Bloody well better.

She wears the blue dress, black heels.

By nine a half-dozen empties collide at my mother's feet. Images from a muted black-and-white TV flash across the walls. Whenever she darts to the bathroom I hear the *thwack* of a toilet seat, the tinkling of pee, a rattling of pills.

I have a morning paper route and retire early. From my bedroom in the basement I hear her racing across the floor every time a car door slams, each rap of her heels like a spike pounding through lumber. Then she moves to the telephone where she begins ordering the Legion bartenders to page my Dad.

Think I don't know he's there? she accuses. Think I don't know what he's up to?

The last sound I hear before drifting off is a bottle cap skimming across the floor, a stone skipping the surface of a pond.

Tap, tap, tap

Dad's inebriated face shoved up against the window.

Locked out, he stammers. He thinks he's whispering.

My clock radio says 2:30 a.m.

The basement door squeaks incorrigibly on opening; it runs through the house like a shiver. I find my father squatting behind a shrub, vomiting. A soft rain murmurs in the warm spring sky. Its lazy descent is visible in the glow of the streetlights.

Thanks a hell of a lot, Burt.

He slumps against the fence, bloodshot eyes listing inside their sockets. I get him inside and wrap his arms around a beam. It's kept the house upright all these years; I'm hoping it'll do the same for its current tenant until I figure out what to do.

Where's the car? I ask. Didn't drive like that, did ya?

Somewhere, he says. I fish the keys from his coat pocket.

We both hear a noise, its cause and source indecipherable. I pray it's delinquent waterpipes or clanking furnace vents or just a moan of the floorboards—anything but my mother, her resurrection.

The trickling of water makes me suppose the plumbing. This turns out to be partly true. A sigh escapes my father's lips; a gurgle of urine trickles over his steel-toed workboots. The deluge follows the uneven contours of the concrete floor, settling between my toes.

Just then the door at the top of the stairs flies open. The overhead lightbulb blazes.

That you, asshole?

Sorry, son, my Dad says.

Let's talk about it in the morning, woman! he calls up to my mother. Had a winner tonight!

Yeah, sure! she spits, slamming the door. She begins constructing a barricade with kitchen chairs.

Come on, doll! he pleads. I need sleep!

Don't you doll me! she thunders, muscling table legs across the kitchen floor. You're not sleeping in my bed!

I slip outside, rinse my feet under the garden hose. The rain is whooshing through drainpipes, gushing along the eaves, a symphonic drumming on wood, metal, plastic. House lights begin to flare up and down the street.

At the top of the stairs my father shoulders the door; it doesn't budge. My mother learned the value of a solid defence the night Burt was on acid and believed he was being eaten alive by scorpions. I remember wishing he had been.

This is my house! my father declares. Given the territory each controls, others might disagree.

Fuck you! my mother snarls. I'm calling the cops!

It's like they are not on opposite sides of a door, centimetres apart, but shouting at each other across an impregnable divide.

Whatcha gonna charge me with, huh? Breakin' curfew?

My father staggers to the back of the basement. I hear him rooting around in the toolbox, the clank and rumble of the unwanted flung aside. He reappears at my bedroom door.

This otta do the job, eh?

A double-bladed axe.

He returns to the top of the stairs and begins hacking. Chips of wood ricochet off the walls. With each swing of the blade splinters of light spill into the stairwell. He tries squeezing through the newly created entrance but is walloped with a broom.

A few more chops, the breach widens. He resumes the advance. She falls back, pelting him with dishes. Plates explode like cluster bombs. He retreats.

Still got that football helmet?

He is emboldened by its fibreglass shell, the webbed faceguard. On his next reconnaissance foray my father pokes his

fortified mug through the chasm but comes under heavy fire once more. He is pinned down by a volley of flying footwear.

Eventually my mother exhausts her ammo. A hush falls over the battlefield. The lights of our appreciative neighbors are extinguished. Sleep at last.

Puddles of blood dripping from the ceiling. Brain matter splattered across the walls. That's what I expect to find when I awake that Mother's Day, the sun peeking above a mob of TV antennas. Vapours rise from the sodden lawn in a primordial smoulder.

I discover my mother curled up in a sleeping bag on the sofa. Her crown has fallen in combat. My Dad has taken the hill; I can smell him in the bedroom. It would probably take a stick of dynamite to pry loose the helmet. I knew someone keen to light the fuse.

I strap the newspaper satchels to the handlebars of my bike and push off. When I return later that morning the sofa has been vacated. My mother's imprint has been left behind like a hand in wet cement.

A spear of light pierces the bedroom's curtained gloom. The headless helmet stands guard on a nightstand. Under the white bedsheets their sleeping bodies resemble those alabaster figurines used to illustrate encyclopedias. Legs entangled, arms entwined: a perfect fit.