The Almost Moon

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Extract

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ONE

When all is said and done, killing my mother came easily. Dementia, as it descends, has a way of revealing the core of the person affected by it. My mother's core was rotten like the brackish water at the bottom of a weeks-old vase of flowers. She had been beautiful when my father met her and still capable of love when I became their late-in-life child, but by the time she gazed up at me that day, none of this mattered.

If I hadn't picked up my ringing phone, Mrs. Castle, my mother's unlucky neighbor, would have continued down the list of emergency numbers posted on my mother's almond-colored fridge. But within the hour, I found myself rushing over to the house where I was born.

It was a cool October morning. When I arrived, my mother was sitting upright in her wing chair, wrapped in a mohair shawl, and mumbling to herself. Mrs. Castle said my mother hadn't recognized her that morning when she'd brought the paper to the door.

"She tried to slam the door on me," Mrs. Castle said. "She screamed like I was scalding her. It was the most pitiful thing imaginable."

My mother sat, a totemic presence, in the flocked red-and-white wing chair in which she'd spent the more than two decades since my father's death. She'd aged slowly in that chair, retiring first to read books and work her needlepoint, and then, when her eyes began to fail, to watch public television from dawn until she fell asleep in front of it after her evening meal. In the last year or two, she would sit in the chair and not even bother to turn on the television. Often she placed the twisted skeins of yarn that my older daughter, Emily, still sent each Christmas, in the center of her lap. She petted them the way some old women might pet cats.

I thanked Mrs. Castle and assured her I would handle everything.

"You know it's time," she said, turning toward me on the front stoop. "She's been in the house alone an awfully long while."

"I know," I said, and shut the door.

Mrs. Castle walked down the steps of my mother's front porch with three empty dishes of various sizes she had found in the kitchen and that she claimed to be hers. I didn't doubt it. My mother's neighbors were a godsend. When I was young, my mother had railed against the Greek Orthodox church down the road, calling its parishioners, for no reason that made sense, "those stupid Holy-Rolling Poles." But it was this congregation that had often called upon its ranks to make sure the cranky old woman who had lived forever in the run-down house got fed and clothed. If occasionally she got robbed, well, it was precarious to be a woman living alone.

"People are living in my walls," she had said to me more than once, but it was only when I found a condom lying beside my childhood bed that I'd put two and two together. Manny, a boy

who occasionally repaired things for my mother, was bringing girls into her upstairs rooms. I had talked to Mrs. Castle and hired a locksmith. It was not my fault my mother refused to move.

"Mother," I said, calling the name only I, as her sole child, had the right to call her. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Bitch," she said.

The thing about dementia is that sometimes you feel like the afflicted person has a trip wire to the truth, as if they can see beneath the skin you hide in.

"Mother, it's Helen," I said.

"I know who you are!" she barked at me.

Her hands clasped the curved ends of the armrests, and I could see how hard she pressed, her anger flaring up and out at me like involuntary claws.

"That's good," I said.

I stood there a moment longer, until it felt like an established fact. She was my mother and I was her daughter. I thought we could go forward from this into our usual unpleasant encounter.

I walked over to the windows and began to draw up the metal blinds by the increasingly threadbare cloth tape that bound them. Outside, the yard of my childhood was so overgrown it was difficult to make out the original shapes of the bushes and trees, those places I had played with other children until my mother's behavior began to garner a reputation outside our house.

"She steals," my mother said.

My back was to her. I was looking at a vine that had crawled into the huge fir tree in the corner of the yard and consumed the shed where my father had once done carpentry. He had always been happiest inside that space. On my darkest days, I had come to imagine him there, laboriously sanding the round wooden globes that had replaced all his other projects.

"Who steals?"

"That bitch."

I knew she was talking about Mrs. Castle. The woman who daily made sure my mother had woken up. Who brought her the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and not infrequently cut flowers from her own yard and placed them in plastic iced-tea pitchers that wouldn't shatter if my mother knocked them over.

"That's not true," I told her. "Mrs. Castle is a lovely woman who takes good care of you."

"What happened to my blue Pigeon Forge bowl?"

I knew the bowl and realized I had not seen it for weeks. In my youth it had always held what I thought of as imprisoned food—walnuts and Brazil nuts and filberts that my father would crack and dig out with a tiny fork.

"I gave it to her, Mother," I lied.

"You what?"

"She's been so wonderful and I knew she liked it, and so I just gave it to her one day when you were napping."

Help doesn't come free, I felt like telling her. *These people owe you nothing.*

My mother looked at me. It was a horrible bottomless look. She pouted first, her lower lip jutting out and then quivering. She was going to cry. I left the room and walked to the kitchen. Whenever I came, I found good reason to spend many of the hours I was supposed to be with my mother in every room of the house but the one in which she sat. I heard the low moan begin that I'd been hearing all my life. It was a moan the notes of which were orchestrated to elicit pity. My father had always been the one to run to her. After his death, it fell to me. For more than twenty years, with greater or lesser diligence, I had been attending to her, rushing over when she called saying her heart would burst, or taking her on increasing rounds of doctors' visits as she aged.

Late in the afternoon of that day, I was in the screened-in back

porch, sweeping out the straw mat. I had left the door open a crack so that I could hear her. Then into the cloud of dust that surrounded me came the unmistakable odor of shit. My mother had needed to go to the bathroom but couldn't get up.

I dropped the broom and ran to my mother. She had not, as I may have momentarily hoped, died and suffered the resultant loosening of bowels. Dead in her own home as she might have wished. Instead, she sat in her chair, having soiled herself.

"Number two!" she said. This time, the smile was different than the smile of Bitch. Bitch had had life to it. This smile was alien to me. It held neither fear nor malice.

Often, when I recounted to my youngest, Sarah, the events of a given day, she told me that no matter how much she loved me, she wasn't going to strip and diaper me when I grew old. "I'll hire someone," she said. "I've never heard a better incentive for hitting the big time than avoiding that."

The smell had filled the room within seconds. I walked back to the porch twice to take in huge drafts of dusty air and could think of nothing else but presenting my mother in the way she would have wanted to be seen. I knew I was going to have to call the ambulance. I knew, as I had for some time, that my mother was heading out of this life, but I did not want her arriving at the hospital caked in shit. I should say I knew *she* would not want that, and so what had mattered most to her throughout her life—appearances—became what mattered most to me.

I took a final breath out on the porch and walked back to her. No longer smiling, she was agitated in the extreme.

"Mom," I said, certain as I said it that she did not recognize the name or the daughter who said it, "I'm going to help you clean up, and then we're going to make some calls." *You'll never make a call again,* I thought, and I didn't mean it cruelly. Why is it that pragmatics are so often interpreted this way? Shit is shit and truth is truth. Done.

I knelt down in front of her and looked up into her face. I hated her more than I'd ever hated anyone. Still, I reached up, as if I were finally allowed to touch a precious thing, and ran my fingers down her long silver braid. "Mom," I whispered. I said it because I knew it would be still in the air. No reverberations, no response.

But the wetness was making her unhappy. Like a snail trapped in sunlight, say—anxious to get away from an element that caused pain. I went from kneeling to half bending over. I placed my shoulders against her shoulders, careful not to put any weight on her. I leaned in like a football player on a tackle and then lifted up. She was both lighter and heavier than I'd expected.

I got her to standing with ease, but once she was upright, she collapsed in my arms. It was all I could do not to drop her, bringing both of us to the ground. As I adapted to the balance of holding her full weight, I could not help but think of my father, how year after year he carried the burden of her, apologized to the neighbors, dried her copious tears, and how this body had folded into his over and over again like so much batter until the two of them became one.

I felt like weeping myself then. We were near the end of us and of the secrets of the house. I was forty-nine and my mother was eighty-eight. My father had been dead for almost the entire lifetime of my younger child—a few months after she'd turned four. Sarah could never know the full measure of his sweetness, or play in the workshop among his thrice-glued carpentry. I thought of the mutant rocking horses rotting in the shed, and my arms, with my mother in them, weakened dangerously. How the house and my life had changed after his death.

I dragged my mother, with her trying, I could feel, to help, over to the staircase leading up to her bath. I questioned my sanity. How, I wondered, did I think this feat was possible? She had to weigh at least a hundred pounds, and despite my midlife fit-

ness regime, I had never lifted more than sixty. It was not going to work. I collapsed onto the stairs, with my mother soiled and damp on top of me.

I panted on the carpeted steps but did not give up. I was determined to clean my mother and to dress her in fresh clothes before I called the ambulance. As we lay there and her weight grew familiar, like the strange feeling of being pinned by a dozing lover, I thought of the alternatives. I could bring her to the bathroom in the back and try to wash her from the sink. There was also the kitchen. But where would I prop her up? How to hold her and wash her at the same time, not to mention the mess of water all over the floor and the potential for slipping and cracking both our skulls.

My mother began to snore. Her head tilted back over my shoulder so that I could see her ancient mottled face and neck. I looked at her cheekbones, as sharp as they had always been—almost painful now in her cadaverous flesh. *Who will love me?* I thought, and then banished this question by looking out at the birch leaves in the fading sunlight. I had been there all day. I hadn't even called to cancel at Westmore. I saw the empty space on the platform in Life Drawing 101 and the students, at their easels, staring at my absence, the useless charcoal in their hands.

I knew that if I did not move, my mother might sleep for hours, and darkness would come. I pictured my friend Natalie looking for me in the halls of the art building, vainly querying the students in class. Natalie would call my house—perhaps drive over alone or with Hamish, her son. The doorbell would ring in the empty house, and then Natalie would imagine that something must have happened to me or to Sarah or to Emily.

I lifted my arms up under my mother's arms and raised them slightly off the carpeted stairs. First one and then the other, like manipulating a life-size doll. To have controlled her as easily as that, impossible. I had to get through this without calling my

daughters. This was something to be done on my own. I twisted out from under her, and she moaned like a collapsing bag of air. I sat by her body on the stairs. The house had a weight and a force that I knew could crush me. I had to get out of there, and I thought, suddenly, of the bathtub among the rocking horses in the shed.

I left my mother dozing and turned and ran up the stairs, darting into her cluttered bedroom for blankets, and the pink powder room for towels. In the mirror over the sink, I checked myself. My eyes seemed smaller and even bluer than they had been, as if the intensity of the situation affected color and its perception. For years now I'd kept my hair so short that I could almost see my scalp. When I'd walked into my mother's house, she'd taken one glance and said, "Don't tell me you have cancer too. Everyone has cancer these days." I explained that my haircut made life easier, from exercise to gardening to work. It was the ambiguity that got to me—would she have cared if I had had cancer or would it have just been competition for her? Her intonation pointed toward the latter, but it was hard to believe this of one's own mother.

I stood at the top of the stairs with the blankets and towels. I kept at bay my realization that she would never see these rooms again and that now they would become, for me, empty shells littered with possessions. I noticed the hush in the upstairs hallway and looked at the pictures on the walls, pictures that would soon be gone. I imagined the dark squares they would leave behind them where no sun had reached for years, and the echoes that would resound from the curtainless storm windows and the thick plaster-and-brick walls. I began to sing. I sang nonsense. Cat-food commercials and childhood songs, the latter a habit that had been handed down from my mother, a way to stave off the onset of nerves. The need for noise overwhelmed me, but as I headed down the stairs, I grew quiet again. I saw that my

mother had slumped down and lay on the floor, her body on the old wine-red Persian rug.

"No, Mother, no," I said, realizing as I did so that it was more useless than talking to a dog. A dog cocked her head. A dog gave you a soulful look. My mother was a passed-out bag of bones who reeked of shit.

"Why like this?" I asked. I stood over her body with my arms full of blankets and towels, and I began to weep. I whispered a prayer that no one would knock on the door, that Mrs. Castle would not think to check on us, though right about now Manny the handyboy might help me tote and haul.

I placed the towels on the bottom stair and took my grandfather's red-and-black Hudson Bay blanket, spreading it out on the floor beside her. It extended into the dining room. Then, so the wool would not scratch, I put a white Mexican wedding blanket down on top of that. I was not thinking sanely; I was wrapping fish or making spring rolls; I was thinking, *Super Giant Mother Burrito.*

I bent down, taking air in and neutralizing my spine—thank you, Stella, at World Gym—and put my arms up under my mother's armpits.

Her eyes snapped open.

"What on earth are you doing?"

I blinked. With our faces reversed to each other, I felt she could suck my eyes into her mouth. The rest of me, like the tail of a lizard or the end of a flat noodle, would swoop in and be gone in mere seconds. I kept my arms tense. Would she ever be powerless?

"Daniel!" she brayed. "Daniel!"

"Dad's not here, Mom," I said.

She looked up at me, her face dimmed and then reignited again, like a match flaring in the dark.

"I want that bowl," she said. "Now!"

To be that close to her. To be holding on to her and to see her brain open up like that, its scrambled insides, it was all I could do to keep to my task. As she spoke about things—Emily, the "pretty baby" (Emily had just turned thirty and had babies of her own); the kudzu near her father's cabin that had to be cut back with a scythe (the cabin was on land that was at the base of the Smokies and long out of our lives); and the stealing, conniving, not-to-be-trusted neighbors—I placed her body in the blankets and made an open-ended package with her talking head sticking out. Then I rested the towels on top of her chest and breathed slowly, counting to ten before I spoke.

"We are going on a sleigh ride," I said to her. And in my fists, I balled up the two free ends of the blanket, partially lifting her body off the floor. I heaved her over the carpet of the dining room, in through the kitchen, and out the side door.

"Toot! Toot!" she said. "Toot! Toot!" And then she grew silent and stared at the outside like a child in front of flickering Christmas lights. I wanted to ask her, *When was the last time you went into your backyard? When was the last time you smelled a flower or trimmed a shrub or just sat in the rusted white iron lawn chair?*

Grief was coming heavily now. Something about being outside, being in the fresh air, away from the acrid scent of her and the mothball smell of the closed-up house. My mother lay in her blanketed cocoon on the small raised side porch, which thankfully was at least partially shielded from the next-door neighbors by vine-covered latticework.

I went down the three stairs to the cinder-block path and walked around to the back of the porch, where as a child I had sat and kicked my legs over the edge and where now my mother lay as if on a shipping-and-receiving shelf. I was sweating, but I knew by the slant of the sun at my back that it would be less than an hour before light slipped below the houses that surrounded

my mother's and left us alone in the last long night we would spend together.

I touched her treasured braid again. Some years ago her hair had passed out of its wiry stage and become soft. It had always been her crowning glory. Her brief life as a lingerie model before she met my father was one I'd envied growing up. Whatever else she was, she had been the most beautiful mother in the neighborhood, and watching her had taught me everything I knew about physical beauty. It was a bitter truth—my discovery—that daughters were not made in cookie-cutter patterns from the genes of their mothers alone. Random accidents of ancestry could blunt a nose or tip a forehead until beauty's delicate tracery gave way to an ordinary Jane.

Outside, with the air rushing over her, the fecal scent dissipated and I could think realistically again. I would not make it to the shed. What had I thought? The damage of dragging her down the three steps, of trying to heave her off the porch. And what would I fill the ancient bathtub with? Cold water from the backyard hose? The bathtub would be dirty and full of old lumber and broken bits of refuse that I would have to clean out. The last time I'd been in the shed, I'd noticed that my father's tool board, with all the ghost shapes of tools, had fallen off the wall and pitched forward against the tub. What had I been thinking?

"This is it, Mom," I said. "This is as far as we go."

She did not smile or say "bitch" or wail some final lament. I like to think, when I think about it, that by that time she was busy taking in the scent of her garden, feeling the late-afternoon sun on her face, and that somehow in the moments that had elapsed since she'd last spoken, she'd forgotten she'd ever had a child and that, for so many years now, she'd had to pretend she loved it.

I wish I could say that as my mother lay on the side porch and the wind began to pick up more and more so that the crows

clinging on to the tops of the trees took flight, that she made it easy on me. That she pointedly listed all the sins she had committed during her long life.

She was eighty-eight. The lines on her face were now the cross-hatchings of fine old porcelain. Her eyes were closed. Her breathing ragged. I looked at the tops of the empty trees. There is no excuse to give, I know, so here is what I did: I took the towels with which I had meant to bathe her, and not thinking that near the latticework or by the back fence there might stand a witness, I smashed these downy towels into my mother's face. Once begun, I did not stop. She struggled, her blue-veined hands, with the rings she feared would be stolen if she ever took them off, grabbed at my arms. First her diamonds and then her rubies briefly flickered in the light. I pushed down harder. The towels shifted, and I saw her eyes. I held the towels for a long time, staring right at her, until I felt the tip of her nose snap and saw the muscles of her body go suddenly slack and knew that she had died.