

## Adult Children

Even when I was a little kid, not much more than a toddler, I knew there was something, well, *different* about my mother. She did things that set her apart from everyone else, acted and spoke in a manner that made people nervous, uncomfortable. But I wouldn't have said she was crazy, not back then. That would have been disloyal, disrespectful. She was my mom. She wasn't crazy, despite what others might have thought and said.

So what if she spouted off about Jews and space aliens and JFK and the power company (they were all connected somehow), wandered around naked most of the time, refusing to cover up for the meter guy or the Jehovah's Witnesses who once (and only once) dropped by for a chat? My friends wondered why I never invited them over. I made excuses. I don't know if I was sparing them...or myself.

I tried to keep her public appearances to the minimum, conveniently forgetting to tell her about parent-teacher meetings or upcoming school events. From a very early age I acted as her unofficial agent in dealings with the outside world. Did grocery runs, paid our utility bills, cashed checks for her. It was better that way. For both of us.

My mother has never been shy about sharing her *theories* and once you get her going, well, she's pretty hard to stop. She just keeps yakking and yakking at you, pinning you to the spot with her flesh-eating eyes while she expounds on some odd fact she's dredged up or invented.

Helen calls her "a giant, sucking black hole"--she absorbs everything and everyone around her, permitting nothing to escape, not even light. She distorts reality, ignores supposedly immutable laws of space and time. She's a walking singularity.

I pick up the phone and it's like she's *right there*, a physical presence in the room with me, already in mid-rant and, my God, that *voice*, like a high speed drill going right through my skull.

"--that *bitch* across the hall has been stealing my mail again. And I don't want to hear any more excuses. I'm gonna call the cops on her, see how she likes that..."

Well, for one thing, Audrey--my completely nutty mother Audrey McWhirter, 53, self-styled social activist, spokesperson for lost causes and eco-terrorist--rarely gets anything by way of mail that isn't addressed to "Occupant". Six months ago I arranged with the post office to re-direct everything to our place. She was doing things like signing up for credit cards and blowing her money on junk on the Shopping Channel. Hitting the booze quite hard back then too but I thought she'd been easing off of late.

And I'd met the neighbour in question, Florence Harding, and found her a charming woman. Very tolerant as well, putting up with the occasional threatening letter stuffed in her mailbox, not to mention one bizarre episode when my mother tailed her for *hours*, exhibiting classic stalking behavior. Why *she* hasn't called the cops on *Audrey* is beyond me.

I had explained the situation to Florence, of course, and was relieved when she immediately sympathized. Her own mother had had to be institutionalized because of senile dementia.

"I'm afraid it hasn't quite reached that point with Audrey," I said and I must have sounded wistful because Florence looked at me with real sympathy.

"Don't give up hope," she counseled and we both smiled.

Poor Florence.

According to my mother, she's a bug-eyed space alien, a serial killer, a whore, a spy sent by the government, an assassin...and now, apparently, a notorious mail thief.

"My paper, even my fucking paper," Audrey splutters.

"Paper? Since when do you get a newspaper, mom?" More bloody money down the drain.

It turns out she's talking about a free neighbourhood rag that lists garage sales, announces bar mitzvahs and covers the local community beat with its team of highly committed, muck-raking journalists. Their pictures on the editorial page, everyone looking fat, sick or wired.

I promise her I'll find out what happened to her priceless copy of the *Bulletin*. I promise I'll have the police run another background check on Florence.

And then, just like that, she forgets all about it and starts acting coy with me, asking if I'm really, *really* busy and if I am, well, forget it, maybe some other time...

I sigh and just then Helen wanders in for an apple from the bowl on the counter. She gives me a quizzical look. I mouth Audrey's name and make imploring gestures but she backs out of the kitchen, refusing to involve herself in any potential strangeness.

Abandoning me in my time of need.

Audrey gets lonely. Only Audrey isn't like the rest of us and can't just say, "Son, I really miss you, why don't you pop by and we'll haul out the old photo albums and shoot the bull for awhile." That kind of intimacy--and honesty--is beyond her.

For one thing, she *never* invites me to her place. Won't set foot over here either. A big believer in personal space. Not into touching or, God forbid, hugging. I can't for the life of me remember a kiss before bedtime, a word of praise, a smile of encouragement. A universe of one. It isn't her fault. You can't blame her for being sick.

"Say, mom, I've got an idea: why don't we meet for coffee somewhere."

She thinks about it. Hems and haws and finally decides it's okay. Only how about Tony's? It *has* to be Tony's. They know her there. Are used to her antics. Some places aren't so understanding: security guards firmly escorting her outside, not so subtle threats, non-imaginary bruises...

She once tried to interest a semi-famous lawyer in taking her case (*pro bono*, of course). I had to call the guy's law office and explain. He still thought her rights were being violated, that no public venue should be allowed to deny her entry. I told him how she had been arrested for stripping on a downtown street corner to protest global warming. I described the time it took three police officers to drag her out of the fountain at the Midtown Mall. Urinating in the water right there in front of everyone, a symbolic statement about pollution caught on security cameras, horrified shoppers shielding their children's eyes...

The attorney countered by saying it was part of the price we pay for living in a free society.

I was polite but in retrospect I should have told him to shove it. How would he have felt if it was *his* mother who made the evening news--wrapped in a blanket, shooting everyone the finger, still raving as they wrestled her into the back of a police van?

I never got a chance to ask him that. He said he had a call to take on another line. He promised to keep in touch.

There's no one else, just her and me. Grandparents, distant cousins, relatives, forget it. I should be so lucky.

I don't even know who my father is (was?) or the circumstances that led to my conception. It's a taboo subject, guaranteed to set her off.

She did tell me at one point that there had been a marriage. There's no official certificate or paperwork, no evidence. Only my mother's vague recollection of a hasty, ill-planned wedding, some two-bit justice of the peace, the records probably misfiled or lost.

Not a lie, exactly. The thing is...even she doesn't know any more. It's all mixed up in her mind, truth and fiction, reality and fantasy.

"I paid the price for my sins," she's remarked on more than one occasion, "and that was you." Not being cruel about it, just stating a fact.

*Where had they met?*

*What was she like back then?*

*What was the attraction?*

She's putting on weight again. Smelly, her hair downright scary. Acting hyper, talking fast with lots of big hand gestures. I make a note to call Doc Mortenson about her meds again. Has he seen her like this?

He'll say she's being uncooperative. Refusing to take care of herself. Audrey has lousy eating habits, a junk food junkie, chips and peanuts and Cheezies with lots of gut-rotting pop to wash it down. Never mind what it does to her digestion and body chemistry. She only trusts packaged, mass-produced food. Harder to tamper with. Anonymous. *Safe*. Do you realize what they're spraying on fresh fruit and vegetables nowadays? The chemicals and insecticides? Etc., etc.

Audrey's up at the counter, watching as Tony's wife pours her coffee. Tony and Emily are really good about it. They even let her come into the back so she can see them preparing her food.

She doesn't like to be waited on--if she wants something, she waves her hand to get their attention. Otherwise she's to be left alone. A low maintenance customer. Sitting in the corner, talking to herself. Coffee, lots of cream, lots of sugar. Gruff but always conscientious about leaving a tip, whatever she can afford at that moment.

Audrey brings her coffee back to the table, sits down and then a familiar ritual, as old as my memory. She tips her cup slightly, allowing the top millimeter or so to flow down the side and pool on the saucer. There are all kinds of toxins in that surface layer, she'll tell you all about it if you ask. It comes from the cream, the crap they're feeding or

injecting into cows nowadays. Steroids, hormones, antibiotics, weird genes. Mutant milk.

I never bat an eye through the whole thing. Seen it a million times. As long as she keeps her clothes on, everything's hunky dory.

"How's Nancy?" she asks, suddenly quick and sharp, eyes flashing with self-awareness, malign intelligence.

"You mean Helen?"

"Whatever," she snaps impatiently, "you know who I mean."

"I went out with a Nancy back in high school. Nancy Gilchrist. Remember her? You liked her. She used to bring you brownies."

"I remember, I remember." Frustrated at being corrected. "Don't make a big deal out of it. Just a slip of the tongue."

"*Helen's fine.*"

"Still no sign of any kids, huh?"

Smile. *Smile.* "Not yet. Taking our time. You know, not rushing things. The way we look at it, we're both young so what's the hurry?"

"Huh," she grunts. "She doesn't want kids. Too much trouble."

I have to take a couple of deep breaths. Audrey has met Helen a grand total of three times and *never* talks to her when she phones, just asks for me. So she has no way of knowing. Somehow picking it up on her crazy radar.

"It's not like that, mom," I insist, trying to make light of it. "She'll change her mind. Once she starts hearing that ol' biological clock ticking..."

She doesn't believe it.

To be honest, neither do I.

*Well, what about adoption?*

*Taking on someone else's problems and mistakes? Uh uh, no thanks.*

*Okay, how about--*

*I don't want to talk about this right now. Can't you see I'm not in the mood? Just get off my back would you, Herman?*

Audrey slurps her poisoned coffee, smirking at my discomfort. Once again she's proven her power over me. She likes to say *Son, I've known you since before you were born*. I'm suddenly desperate to get out of there, away from her and she can see that too. Now I'm vulnerable. It turns out all she wants is some extra money. She's blown her pogy check and now finds herself short.

Supposedly she's been borrowing off Ed, her landlord, and wants to pay him off. Maybe it's true, maybe not.

Then she amends her story, telling me a girl down the hall is in trouble, her pothead boyfriend has bolted, taking their rent money with him. Now she's on the verge of being evicted so, in fact, the money is *really* intended for her--

Lies.

Fantasies.

*Welcome to Audrey's World.*

She settles for forty dollars. Part of the game. She's broke and scared, knows that without money you're nobody, you cease to exist. *She* won't put it that way. To Audrey that would be disconcertingly close to the truth.

She'll lose the money.

She'd give it away to the first bum she sees.

She'll buy a bottle of expensive champagne and stash it in the back of the closet, saving it for the end of the world.

Order five extra-large pizzas and leave four to rot on the kitchen counter.

She snatches the two twenties from me, examining the bills with obvious pleasure. "That's great, Herman. This'll come in handy. I'll put it to good use."

I give the money gladly. If it brings her some peace of mind, preserves the illusion of independence a little while longer, so much the better. In the meantime, monitor her from afar. Call Mortenson every once in awhile to check on her progress.

Helen says I'm a very dutiful son but I'm not so sure.

I do the bare minimum. I play my role. I listen and I do not condemn. I act not out of love but a sense of responsibility. Helen doesn't see the difference but, then again, she wouldn't...

Florence calls, sounding flustered, out of sorts. Trouble at *Astoria Terrace*. Audrey passed out in her apartment and some wieners boiled dry on the stove. The smoke got to her pretty good before the building's super used his master key to open the door and aired the place out.

"Is she okay?"

"Well, she's pretty shook up, Herman. Still loaded but she knows she's done wrong. Can you...maybe it would be a good idea if you popped by and, um, kind of helped smooth things over..." She waits. "Are you still there?"

"Has she been asking for me?"

Florence is too honest to lie. "I know she'd appreciate you coming over and dealing with this. The super isn't too happy right now." Whispering the last part.

I picture the scene and, truth be known, don't want to get involved.. Plus it's nearly ten o'clock. Helen's already in bed, reading. I'll have to go in and explain that Audrey's been at it again.

*Good grief.*

I say I'll be right over. Don't think too long or hard about it. Not giving myself time to come up with a plausible excuse. Go in to tell Helen. She doesn't seem surprised. Wants to know if maybe this isn't the last straw. We both know what she means. I say I don't know.

And I truly don't.

I can smell smoke as I walk up to the building. The front doors are propped open with cinderblocks and the smell gets worse the further down the hallway I go. The door to Audrey's apartment is open and I could see Ed Gephardt, her landlord, stomping around with a nasty look on his face.

Fortunately Florence is there and greets me with obvious relief, taking my arm and steering me off to the side. She nods toward the bedroom. "I think she's pretty embarrassed about all the fuss and trouble." She shakes her head. "Try to make her understand--these things happen. So she decided to tie one on, big deal."

With my forty dollars.

And I can see where she's been blowing her modest monthly stipend. The walls are covered with posters of endangered species, Greenpeace symbols, misty-eyed seals. Glossy magazines were scattered everywhere, dozens of issues of *Nature*, *National Geographic*, *Equinox*, *Discover*...

I step carefully through the mess, heading for the bedroom. Florence runs interference on Ed so Audrey and I can be alone for a while.

She's on the bed with a damp cloth draped over her eyes. She looks awful, her skin oily, her face aging before my eyes, like one of those time lapse films of a dying flower.

"Hey, kiddo," she calls weakly, the Voice diminished, robbed of its potency. "Heard you talking out there."

"Seems like you've gotten yourself in a spot of trouble." I can't resist a dig: "That evil, conniving bitch Florence called and told me I'd better haul my butt over here and bail you out." I'm standing by the bed, very close to her. I could reach out and touch her hair.

"Stinks in here, don't it?" It's the only acknowledgment of her predicament she'll make. "Oughtta open some windows, air things out." Then, without missing a beat, she's dismissing me. "You should get home. Nancy'll be missing you."

I look back through the doorway. Ed has stationed himself just outside and signals he wants a word with me. Florence comes up and stands next to him, her face one big question mark. By now Helen will be sleeping, oblivious to my absence, not giving one good goddamn if I'm there beside her or not.

"Tell 'em I forgot about those stupid wieners," my mother commands, pulling the cloth away, fierce now that she's cornered. "They're trying to make a big deal out of it. And *don't* let 'em boot me out. Tell Ed I'll sue their asses off and I'm dead serious too. You tell 'em."

I promise I'll do what I can. She wants reassurance so I give it to her. I'll remember to thank Florence for her concern. I'll smooth things over with Ed, maybe slip him a few bucks to cover any smoke damage.

I also come to the decision that I'll keep working on Helen about having a baby. Take a tougher stand, put my foot down, tell her there's never going to be a better time than now.

I honestly believe I will make a good father. I want the chance to *try*. I know our children will be beautiful and happy and brilliant.

I can see them in my mind's eye, a boy and a girl, and they always seem to be laughing.

*End*