

Trying to reason with Mam is like catching crabs. She's expert at scuttling sideways burying herself in irrelevance if she doesn't like the truth. Today I am well rehearsed. My practised arguments echo in my head as the front door squeals my arrival. I call out to let her know I am not the burglar she's always expecting. I catch the excitement in her voice. My stomach tips at this, and at the ominous bouquet of red roses shrinking the hall table. Fearing that I'm too late, already on the losing side, I push open the door fast.

There is no-one else in the over stuffed room and I breathe again. Mam's on the pink mobile I bought her last visit, more animated than I've heard her for years. Hope of pinning down that butterfly mind dwindles further. She's stretched out on the gaudy pink chaise - the one she coveted after seeing that film with Marilyn Monroe. She's Marilyn blonde again and wearing the full makeup palette. Mouthing a cherry red kiss, she waves, her voice becomes a shade too bright.

"Will you speak of the devil - she's here now. Just this minute in the door"

Pointing at the phone to assure me that she is not talking to thin air, she mouths.

"Guess who?"

Scared it's him on the other end, I charge too early.

"Why Mam? After all this time. Why would you even think of having him...?"

She side scuttles fast.

"It's your Auntie May. You remember Auntie May from over Dublin way don't you?"

She ignores my stare and informs May.

“Of course she remembers you.” Back to me. “She wants a word with you love.”

She holds out the phone. Catching her eye I shake my head.

“I’ve nothing to say to her.”

She fires her first attack then distracts with a volley of irrelevance.

“The man is sick - you’d not have me turning my back on him now?” Back to the phone. “Just a minute May.” Back to me. “Don’t be leaving your coat on the chair Shauna - the cat will...” Back to May “Yes I will have a word” Back to me “hang it in the hall”

It’s phone tennis.

“Make a pot of tea love.”

“I’ll go and make it ... while you’re saying goodbye to her then.”

Big mascara eyes reproach me.

“He’s nowhere to go. You’d not see him on the streets would you?”

She interprets my stare.

“Wasn’t May saying that just because you pay my rent you can’t tell me what to do.”

“May is talking out of her arse.”

It’s an impulsive salvo followed by a swift escape to the kitchen. She yells after me.

“You know I don’t like the language” and, in the same breath, “I’m not having the sugar this week - there’s tablets. In the drawer. And don’t forget the Garibaldi’s.”

The kitchen is hot, a casserole simmers and she has cleaned the worktops. A check behind the door and there's the pink frilly apron that shouts 80's, resting smug on the hook. The omens are stacking up like a precarious Jenga. Practising arguments in my head, I try to pull out the pieces that won't collapse the pile. Mam has entered fantasy land and my logical weapons shrivel there. I boil inside along with the kettle which starts its shrill whistle. Her voice rises above it.

"The Garibaldis are in the tin with the puppy holding the red heart." then she murmurs to May "I love that tin. Didn't he buy me that on holiday. *Because you hold my heart Didi* he told me."

She has embraced her Mills and Boon romance - the one where the dedicated woman nurses the dying man back to health with love and casseroles. This bubble won't be an easy pop. She shouts a reminder.

"Don't forget the tea cosy Shauna." Then to May "do you mind how he fussed over doing the tea right, bless him."

And I am remembering the tea pot just missing Mam's head and smashing against that wall. After punching the air a few times, I pick up the tray and return to the living room.

"Didn't I go straight to see him Sunday after you called in? Broke my heart seeing him in that bed."

I rattle the cups in feeble protest.

"Fancy that cow turning her back on him - would see him homeless. No, love, of course you can't. You've enough with your mother. A good sister you've been to him May. Sure, this is where he wants to be. Wasn't it me he asked for after all these

years? He said he'd kept looking for me in all those women but not one of them could..."

She sees my face and stops. "I'll speak to you later May. "No, no I won't let her... I won't! Haven't I got his room ready and waiting for him?"

She hangs up and here comes the sideways crab scuttle.

'Have I switched this thing off then love? I was just telling May that I am still getting used to it. Her son, you remember Sean, has bought her one too and to think all I used to get your Nan was a box of chocolates."

"Mam just..."

"May showed me how to get my number up on it when she called round last week. Such a surprise after all this time - I hardly recognised her. Sure you were only ten when..."

"Why Mam?"

My voice doesn't even register. She's talking fast now. Running along her trenches, ducking her head, believing she can outrun the coming conflict. It's an old manoeuvre.

"May showed me how to do the messages. Your Father's got one too. He sends me lovely words. Didn't he ask about you straight away? He heard you'd got the degree all the way over in London - so proud he was. I told him how well you're doing with that job and little Sian. He can't wait to meet her"

Folding my arms against a sudden chill, I want to scream that he will never meet my daughter. Staring at her not knowing how to speak so she will hear but she sees something in my face.

“You’d not understand Shauna. You didn’t know him in the day. When we first met. Oh the love we had!. How he made me tremble with...”

And I find some words.

“Oh yes I do remember how he made you tremble Mam!”

Now she wears the mule face. She starts sorting a box at her feet, refusing to meet my eyes. It’s the old wicker box I used to keep my toys in, now half full with her ornaments. She strokes a figurine of a couple entwined with roses and sighs.

“He needs me Shauna.”

“Have you forgotten Mam?” The words catch in my throat. Don’t cry - you’re an adult for fuck’s sake.

“The bruises, the pain, the hospital beds and always the ‘never agains’ and always the guilty gifts would follow”

She rummages in the box again as I point.

“That one was for your dislocated shoulder”

“This is different Shauna! If you only could see him. He’s so thin and so desperate. Will you believe it - that bitch he was with won’t have him back.”

That’s the one I see in Casualty who scuttles round like a little mouse with regular black eyes, cut lips or arm in plaster who always insists she’s accident prone. *It’s just clumsy I am. No no. Everything’s just fine.* Amazed, I cheer her decision.

“Well good for her”

Mam claps her hands over her chest and throws her head back closing her eyes . The gesture is pure Jean Harlow.

“He sent for me. Me! Out of all the women he’s been with, it’s me he turns to. Ah Shauna, he’s changed”

Those are the trigger words.

“He’s changed? That was your mantra Mam. Every time. *Ahh but he has changed. It won’t happen again. He’s sorry. He’s on his knees.* And the next night you’d be on your knees fending off his fists and feet. Then would come the flowers. The champagne. The chocolates. The sexy nightie *because you are so sexy Didi.*”

She’s not listening, her face glows, lost in her dream. My chest is tight and I can’t breathe. The room is too hot. Turning away, I open a window and look at my reflection to remind me I am all grown up now. Behind me, Mam’s voice is fervent. The misremembered past is winning.

“You’ll not believe what he did when he saw me. Didn’t the man struggle up off that hospital pillow and didn’t he start to sing to me? That lovely one - you know - from the film.” And, starring in her Hollywood scenario, she sings. “*Love is a many splendoured thing...*”

I march among my jumbled thoughts but find no words to penetrate her dream. She reaches her grande finale.

“True love’s a many splendoured thing” adding “And didn’t everyone on that ward applaud him.”

I am turning, shouting, trying to dislodge her fantasy.

“ And I remember a different voice, different words. How about - *you frigid freak don't turn your back ...you've asked for it you slut - trapped a man in marriage - now you'll open your legs when I say so*”

I scare myself as I hear him in my head. And now the flood is coming, unstoppable.

“And back you went every time - *Ahh see the swollen eyes on the man! My soul is bruised my Didi.* Would that be the sole on the foot that folded your ribs?”

She is speeding down that lane and I can't catch her.

“That crazy man sang it outside my window at three in the morning - your Grandad gave him such a beating and told him to stay away from me. He wrote poetry - did you know that? I kept all his poems and didn't he just send me one yesterday - on the phone would you believe.”

Sitting opposite her I take her hands struggling to find the right words, to gently destroy the myth again. But she is in my head, shrinking me. I am a child, holding her hand in another hospital waiting area, terrified she is going to die, hoping that this time she means it - that she is leaving and taking me with her. Words are backing up in my throat and I feel their disorder, searching amongst them for the softest ones. She beats me to the draw and pulls out a memory.

“You must remember, didn't he write the little verses and stories for you? You used to giggle. I would hear you upstairs at bed time. You loved your bedtime stories.” She reaches into the wicker basket and holds out the Cindy doll with her impossible waist and long legs. She pushes it into my hands with all the old jealousy.

“He spoiled you rotten!”

I am hating myself again. Holding the longed for doll - the price for my childhood silence. Feeling the shame take over, almost believing again that I am to blame I look away from her pouting lips and my throat frees the trapped words and rockets them - heat seeking missiles.

“I won’t come near this place again. I won’t bring Sian anymore. I will protect her.”

She won’t meet my eyes.

“You were so brave Mam! You threw him out - protected me.”

She holds up both hands. We are eye to eye at last. There is no dent in her defences. And then ... she fires her weapon of mass destruction, blasting through the years of her deceit, crushing the wall around that buried chamber where I had always known her lies. Her mouth twists. Her words fly.

“Didn’t he leave me because of you? You and your lies! Wasn’t May just saying you’d go dragging it all up again. Don’t you look like that my girl. You know the damage you did with your fantasies. You were a wicked girl to make so much trouble. He loved you and you broke the man. May always said he would never have left me! You drove him away. Into the arms of all those sluts.”

I disintegrate.

Putting on my coat, a machine drives my motions - left arm in - right arm in - button from the bottom, as I back away from the flames searing from her mouth. She turns from me and begins to pour the tea shaking her head, no holes in her belief.

“And do you know what? The man forgives you. How does that sit with you? It ought to be you begging God and your father for forgiveness.”

The salvo hits my back as I turn away for the last time, admitting what I have always known - there was no protection here. The machine drives my legs toward the door. She raises her voice.

“Did you not hear that? Your father, that wonderful man, he forgives you. And didn't I still stay and look after you?”

As I close the door she sighs and gets the final line before the credits roll.

“And didn't she go and forget the Garibaldis.”

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