

## *View Near the Borderline*

The relationship was easy, as long as I was a child. It didn't get complicated until I grew up and began to, as a therapist would say, differentiate. My mother, in turn, resisted with a raging disapproval I'd never encountered in my youth. I've only recently come to learn that Mom's anger is entirely natural—for someone with borderline personality disorder.

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"You're the only one who cares."

She grips my arm as I lean down to kiss her goodbye after a recent visit. "Nobody else cares. You're the only one I trust." I start to feel vaguely queasy. Kiss the top of my mother's head and extricate myself as gently as possible.

She continues. "Everyone else *says* they care, but you do something. Love is a verb. You're the only one who understands that. *He* doesn't understand it," she jerks her head toward my father, as if he is not within hearing distance. "He doesn't get it. Never has. He's totally clueless."

My nauseous feeling deepens, and I fish around for car keys. Try to catch Dad's eye to show him I don't agree. I needn't bother; he's zoned out in front of the computer, his fallback escape hatch.

"Okay, Mom. I gotta go. Hope you feel better."

"Well, I won't. That much is obvious. I'm getting worse, not better."

"Well... I'll be in touch." I wave to get Dad's attention and he looks up from the glowing screen. He lifts himself from the chair with a little grunt.

"Just listen to him. He sounds like an old man," she says.

"He *is* an old man, Mom. Give him a break."

"Yeah, yeah, you and your brother are always on his side. All this is so hard on *him*. Meanwhile, I'm the one who's suffering."

"I know you are, Mom. I understand."

"No you don't understand. Nobody understands."

I blow her a kiss and head toward the door.

"Walter, don't just stand there like a dime store Indian. Walk her out."

"I am, honey" says Dad.

"And don't call me honey. I know you don't mean it."

She calls after my father as we walk out: "And when you get back, go pour me a glass of wine. The pain is getting worse."

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My mother is trapped in a dark, downward spiral, largely of her own making. But I need to believe she can find some consolation, if not full recovery – no matter how briefly – before she dies. So I keep on hoping.

It is two weeks before Christmas. Nate and Bethie and I are outside, wandering from one ceiling-high evergreen to another. Our daughter, bored and impatient, slumps behind us like the preteen she is fast becoming. I try to steer her like a border collie.

“Hey, Bee! This one is pretty. Come tell us what you think.”

She drags her feet through the mulch. “Yeah, it looks fine. Let’s buy it and go,” she says in a willful monotone.

I head to an oversized camping tent to pay the cashier. It’s even colder inside the tent than out. A folding table is covered with pine roping and wreaths. I pick up a wreath and check the price tag. Twenty bucks. That’s a lot for a wreath. But if it saves Dad some hassle and makes Mom smile, it’s worth it. I ask the woman behind the cash box to add it to our bill.

After we get home, we unload the tree. After we wrangle it into the wrought iron stand, I go wash my hands and find the phone. Dial my parents on their land line, rather than Mom’s cell, in the hope of reaching my father. I’d like to ask him to meet me for coffee so I can give him the wreath. After several rings, Mom answers.

“*Why* in God’s name do you keep calling on this line?” she demands without a greeting. “You know how hard it is for me to get to this phone.”

“I was actually hoping to talk to Dad.”

“Well, he’s not here,” she says, as if it should be obvious.

I am taken aback. “I just wanted to bring-- ”

“I’m warning you!” she interrupts. “Do *not* bring over any goddamn Christmas decorations. I mean it, Zoe.”

I lack the reserves to argue. “Okay, okay. ... Will you just tell Dad I called?”

Suddenly Mom shifts gears. “That doesn’t mean you can’t come over for a visit.” Her voice is both plaintive and accusatory. “Couldn’t you just come over for a visit?”

I feel simultaneously heartsick, and trapped. The air between us swells. *Should I? Shouldn’t I?* Suddenly, it seems too risky. I don’t feel strong enough. So I hedge. Fumble out an excuse.

“I can’t, Mom. I’m sorry. It’s just – I need to get groceries, and Bethie has a cello lesson, and...”

“Fine, fine, fine.” my mother snaps, clearly offended. In case I didn’t notice the injury, she adds: “I know *you* have a life. I don’t. But you do. So... just nevermind!” She slams down the receiver.

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For days, the wreath sits on the wicker table on our front porch, where I threw it in disgust after she hung up on me. At last, I bring it inside and lay it on the couch. It radiates cold and an odor of turpentine. I go find my sewing basket, dig out some red velvet ribbon. Tie a bow and affix it to the poor, spurned decoration. I scoop up the wreath, don’t bother looking for my coat, and heave open the

front door. Take a breath against the cold and march directly across the street to our elderly neighbors, the Orwells.

Not long after retiring from a lifelong career as a tenured professor at a leading university, Henry Orwell was diagnosed with dementia. His deterioration since then has been staggering. He's gone from an erudite workaholic to a stumbling old man with sparse white stubble on his jaw. Henry strives to cover his sudden incapacity with an Old World-style aplomb. He opens their front door, sees the wreath I am extending, and sweeps one arm out as if I am the queen.

"How lovely, how lovely!" he beams. "Many thanks!"

"Merry Christmas, Henry!" I give him a quick hug, turn around and run back home though the frigid air.

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It's been three weeks since Christmas. I haven't called my parents since New Year's Day. I finally steel myself. Pick up the phone. It rings four times before my father picks up.

"Hey, Dad, how are you?"

His voice sounds blurred and thin. "Okay... I guess."

There is a pause. "How's Mom doing?" I venture.

"Not so good. She seems to be going downhill." I can't tell if these are Dad's words, or hers. He doesn't even see how often he mimics her. Out of self-preservation if nothing else, I suppose.

"Has she had those blood tests yet? The doctor wanted to send a phlebotomist out to the house."

"I know," he says. "But she doesn't want it."

I exhale like a pro golfer's swing. "I was afraid of that. Dr. Saluda called me at work to say he tried setting up the appointment with her, but Mom just shot him down."

Suddenly my mother's enraged voice bursts in. "I did *not* shoot him down!"

There is a stunned silence.

"Yes," she declares, "I'm right here on the other line." I am surprised by how unsurprised I am.

There's not a speck of apology in her tone. Then, as if he was the one who just intruded on our conversation, Mom blares through the line: "Walter, *hang up!*"

I mentally retrace my conversation with Dad. Feel the crystal ping of a clear conscience.

"I didn't say anything I wouldn't say to your face, Mom. There is no reason not to have the blood test."

"Like hell there isn't. Walter, I told you: get off the line!"

"I think I'll hang up now, sweetie," my father addresses me.

“Okay Dad. I love you.”

“Love you too.” He hangs up softly. I brace myself.

“So, Mom... why don’t you want to get the blood work? It’d be so easy.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t want to make an appointment and have someone get all ready to come to the house, then I have to cancel on them.”

“It’s not a big deal, Mom.”

“It is to me! And it is to them.”

“No it’s not. It happens all the time. You just reschedule.”

“Then what if I can’t make that appointment, either?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“I just don’t like making appointments I can’t keep.”

“If you have to cancel, you just pay them a fee – a small fee, like when I was a freelancer and a job fell through. Remember? A kill fee. It’s like a kill fee.”

Thwarted momentarily, Mom switches gears.

“And now he wants me to see a psychiatrist!”

“Well, I think that’s a good idea.”

“-- for my depression.”

“Exactly. I think it might help you.”

“You know I can’t get out to see a psychiatrist!”

“I know. But he has a psychiatrist who does house calls. And I looked her up. She’s very good, Mom.”

“We can’t afford a psychiatrist.”

I try to make my voice sound soothing. “Well, the psychiatrist doesn’t have any openings until March anyway, so it’s not an issue yet,” I tell her. “So let’s not worry about that right now. Let’s just focus on getting the blood work.”

“I told you, I don’t need any damn blood work. I already had all the tests.”

“You did? When?”

“Oh for God’s sake! I don’t know. About a year ago.”

“Well that’s a long time ago, Mom. Especially at your age.”

“You sound just like *him*. That overbearing asshole.” It takes me a moment to realize she means Dr. Saluda.

“Do you know what he told me? He said it’s worthless. When I sent him the blood test results. That’s exactly what he told me: ‘Oh well, this is worthless.’ ”

“I guess it’s too old, that’s probably all he meant.”

“Everything was fine, anyway. The test results.”

“Well, that’s good news...”

“The liver count was up, but everything else was normal – kidney, thyroid, the works.”

“I’m really glad, Mom. But that was a while ago. Things might have changed since then.”

“I’ll say things have changed! I’m even worse, if that’s possible. I feel worse now than ever.”

*God, this is exhausting, I think.*

“They could run different tests this time, Mom. They might find some better information.”

She ignores me and continues. “He thinks he’s so damn smart. Do you know what he told me? ‘I’m the best.’ That’s what he said.”

“Dr. Saluda said that?”

“What do you think, I’m lying? He told me: ‘Zoe called me, because she knows I am the best.’ ”

“Well, that *was* a bit arrogant,” I concede.

“You can’t imagine. He was so rude. So overbearing and pushy.”

My mother’s description doesn’t shim up with what I observed during the three hours Dr. Saluda spent with her just last week. Then I recall him calling me after his follow-up phone conversation with Mom. I was working on deadline when his call came through.

“Your mother is impossible!” the doctor blurted out after only a brief preamble.

“Yes, she is,” I laughed. “Try it on for 52 years.”

I try to refocus on Mom without feeding into her doc-bashing. I inhale deeply. *Once more, into the breach.*

“Okay, let’s just do the blood work first,” I try again. “Then after that –“

“There’s not going to be any ‘after that.’ I’m on the way out. I keep trying to tell you.”

“You’ve been telling me that for years, Mom.”

“Well, it’s true. Besides, this latest doctor is like all of them. He doesn’t care. *And* he’s overbearing and obnoxious.”

*Oh Lordy, here we go again...* “I tell you what. Make the appointment, and if you need to cancel it, I’ll pay the fee myself.”

“Oh don’t be an ass!” my mother explodes. “It’s not that. We have plenty of money.”

I shouldn’t say it, but I can’t resist. “Well, then maybe you *can* afford that psychiatrist,” I counter.

“Oh just give it a rest, will you?” she snaps. “No psychiatrist on earth can help me. That’s what I tried to tell what’s his name, Saliva. I said: ‘I’m miserable because I had a shitty childhood and a rotten marriage, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.’ ”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He said he didn’t give a French fried crap about my past.”

I burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny!”

“No, of course. It’s just –“

“He doesn’t care. He doesn’t listen. He just erases me. You all keep erasing me...”

Suddenly, the front door opens. Bethie bursts in. “We’re home, honey!” my daughter sings broadly. I’m sure I have a *Thank God* expression on my face.

I greet her, without bothering to move the phone far from my mouth.

“Oh, just let me go now, will you?” Mom whines.

“All right,” I say, trying to sound reluctant. “...So, you’ll let them do the blood work, right?”

“Fine, fine, fine. Yes. Goodbye!” The phone goes dead.

Bethie is radiant. She’s flushed from the cold. Her hair smells winter-sweet.

She bumps my shoulder. “Hey, what’s for dinner?”

I reach for the oven mitts. “Lasagna.”

“I *love* lasagna!” she whoops.

Our daughter hops from foot to foot, as if putting out a fire.

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