

Glenys Collis

## I WAS NEARLY THE DEATH OF MY MOTHER

Have you ever heard the story of the Mexican moon-goddess, Coyolxauhqui? Her mother, the earth-goddess, was sweeping the floor one day, the fate of all earth-mothers everywhere, I dare say, when she was lightly brushed with a down feather. This caused her to become pregnant. (Let that be a lesson to us all. I have now excluded all sweeping from my list of household chores, but never mind, on with the story.) The moon-goddess, who had an extraordinarily prudish and judgemental turn of mind, took very great umbrage indeed at this, but perhaps her shock and humiliation can be explained by the fact that she already had four hundred brothers and the thought of one more was just the last straw.

Anyway, she drummed up support from her vast army of brothers and together they set out to kill poor Mama in order to avenge the disgrace she had brought on the family through her passion for clean floors. However, just as she was about to receive the fatal attack from her loving but outraged family, her son, Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun, was born, emerging from the womb fully equipped with shields and darts. He chopped off his horrible sister's head and threw her down the mountain, watching her lose her arms and legs along the way. He then went on to finish off his four hundred brothers at the same time. I don't know what happened to the poor mother in the end. I hope she was able to lie down somewhere in a cool, dark chamber of her pyramid with a towel over her brow. I'm sure she never deserved such appalling children.

But then most mothers never do deserve their appalling children. I know my mother doesn't deserve me. She tells me so all the time.

My mother has written to me twice a week since I have come to live in France. She doesn't think France is a very safe or good place to be. I have promised her that I will never go to Marseilles where, even at the age of forty, I am bound to be snatched up by white-slave-traders.

I write to her about my students and my school and I tell her about Montpellier which is all curves and arches, winding streets, watery reflections. I tell her how it is sheened with streams, ponds and lakes as if invaded by the Camargue and how the water mirrors the woolly skies and the bare bones of the trees. I tell her how dusk flows out from the carved woodwork when doors open.

I do not tell her about Jean-Marc, or about our apartment with its red-tiled floor and its large white bed. I say nothing of passion and sweetness. Nothing at all of love.

She tells me all about Rosa and the terrible trouble she has had with Mrs Mountford's lodger (who on *earth* is Mrs Mountford?). Graham and Edna McKillop's granddaughter, Phoebe, has moved into a house with the school teacher and turned the town on its head, or at least mother's corner of it. I know none of these people — about whom my mother seems to be obsessed and writes each week — their problems with mice or weevils or cold sores or leaking roofs. These lucky souls seem to know no worse than these minor irritations, or at any rate they are wise enough to make sure that my mother doesn't get to know about any passing incest, domestic violence or adultery (except of course the probable fornication of Phoebe and the school teacher).

Then at the end of each letter comes the little barb, the little remembrance of things past:

P.S. Sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child.

My mother was forty-six when I was born. I was her only child. She told me she attributed her growing rotundity to menopause because she had long given up all thought of pregnancy. And in all those years of waiting she had had plenty of time to decide what the child of her dreams would look like and how she would behave and how she would be the envy of all those mothers of less pretty, less popular children. She knew exactly why the children of her friends and her sisters behaved so badly. There was no way that she would make the same mistake with hers.

My mother is small and prim and has the habit of opening her eyes wide when she speaks so that the listener is treated to a sudden glow of violet, although her features have grown more shadowy with the years, and nearly half a century with my silent father has pulled her lips back into thin lines. She is a religious woman, but her God, alas, has no sense of humour at all.

She grew up in a family which thrived on grudges. Her mother and sisters collected resentments as a hobby. They preserved them carefully and stored them away on the shelves of their memories to be brought out as good as new whenever the moment arose.

It is dangerous for such women to have children. It gives their pained feelings, their offended sensibilities, their insistence on other people's guilt, far too much to feed on.

*And I was nearly the death of my mother.*

What exaggeration! What unnecessary over-dramatization! My mother is

indomitable. Most mothers are. No matter how angry they make us, no matter how sweet and subtle our revenge, they have the ultimate, the sharpest and shiniest of weapons — the sword whose tip is mortally dipped in the venom of guilt.

A few days before I came away, I sat in a restaurant in Richmond, with my best friends. Somewhere between the lemon-grass chicken and the Vietnamese pancakes, I asked them what they had ever done to be the death of their mothers. There was a silence — part shocked, part bemused. Lucille, who really doesn't like her mother very much, shook it off as a joke. Mothers always declaim loudly that their children break their hearts, she said. But that is all part of the mother-package and nobody believes it, not even the mothers. Lucille thought that her mother was much more likely to be the death of her than the other way around. Lucky Lucille! Moira and Elinor would admit to nothing, and indeed why should they? They are model mothers themselves and I couldn't see either of those wise, gentle and tolerant women being the death of anyone.

Amy confessed to having asked her mother not to meet her at the airport when she returned after three years in England. At the age of forty-one she still needed to assert her independence. I admired her courage but could never have faced the tiny pieces of forgiveness her mother would break off, like the icing from a cake, to put in her hand from time to time for the rest of her life.

Janet thought she had probably broken her mother's heart when she sailed away to Europe, blithe and carefree, with never a second thought, the day after her brother's marriage, leaving her mother alone and suddenly bereft of two children all at once.

So there were three of us, guilty of moral murder of one degree or another; four of us really, for despite what Lucille said, I am sure her mother would have complained of a broken heart from time to time. But none of them had failed their mothers as I had. They had married, and all in white, too.

My greatest sin was being unable to find a good husband and have a lovely white wedding with bridesmaids and confetti and the bride's mother in blue and tears. By the time I was seventeen I was neither popular nor going steady. I was not beautiful or madly desired or any of the things my mother would have me be. Having no experience of boys, I was terrified of them. I hated the awful silences while I beat about trying to think of things to talk about. My voice was stitched up with shyness and self-consciousness. My mother said crossly that I was not trying hard enough.

As I became more and more short-sighted, the necessary trip to the optometrist

was put off until it became a battle-ground between my mother and my father. Father, reasonably enough, was all for my being able to see. Mother was eventually beaten down but warned me only to wear my glasses at school:

"Glasses can put a boy off, you know."

Indeed the catalogue of advice and admonishment was endless:

"Keep your back straight."

"Hold your tummy in."

"Do you know you've got a pimple on your chin?"

"I wish you would have a perm for my sake." (Curls seemed to her to be a cure-all, but my hair absolutely refused to oblige.)

"Let me buy you a tighter lace-up girdle. You must still be able to get them somewhere."

"I think you're getting a pimple on your forehead as well."

"For heaven's sake, girl, go on a diet. She looks like a pumpkin, doesn't she, Elsie? She'll never get a boyfriend with a figure like that."

"For the last time, GET A PERM!"

Oh dear! I was a girl who did not fit into a neat little file marked "DAUGHTER." She could not rejoice in me. Wrong child!

The air was thick with my mother's wishes and fears for me and I allowed my skin to be peeled off to meet her needs.

All my birthday and Christmas presents were for my glory box; towels, doilies, table cloths, sheets, everything was part of the storehouse in preparation for that great festival of marriage. Most of it ended up in the Brotherhood Op Shop. I wonder if it started the cycle all over again for some other plain and hapless daughter. She bribed me with the heirlooms that I would be given if I married before the age of twenty-one. But it was all in vain.

Marriage — what a doleful fate it seemed. My mother was strong before me but weak before my father. Marriage meant fitting her life around my father's whims. It meant having no money of her own and having to beg for the money for a new hat or a pair of stockings. It meant not being allowed to learn to drive a car; being too afraid to stay in the house on her own at night; being shouted at if meals were not on time or cooked exactly to her husband's liking; it meant never travelling anywhere alone.

Love was a turkey gobbler and I wanted none of it. No wonder I was nearly the death of my mother. She believed you could love any man eventually if you

really put your mind to it. Of course you must trick the man into falling in love with you first and for this the externals are all-important. You had to be slim as a pencil, torture your hair with rollers and perms, your hips with corsets, your stomach with diets. While whittling down your waistline, you had, at the same time, to whittle down your personality, your individual needs.

"I don't want you to go to university, darling. Men don't like clever women."

"Nursing would be a much nicer profession for a girl, if you MUST have a career. You might meet a doctor." (I might have met a doctor, too, if I became one myself, but Mother thought women doctors were too coarse to be attractive.)

I have failed my mother miserably. Having a daughter did not bring her the joy she expected. She found too soon that daughters can be a recalcitrant lot.

Except for only having had one child, she really had a great deal in common with that Mexican earth goddess. All my life she has scrubbed and cleaned and muttered. (I am very sure the earth goddess did a lot of muttering, too. You would, with four hundred and two ungrateful children.) She irons the sheets, the towels, the socks, the underpants. She polishes the old bleached boards of the front verandah. She cannot find the time to read or sew or knit. She compensates by doing the unnecessary superbly.

The sad voice of her disillusionment and disappointment has chased me down the slippery tunnel of my life. She has become an ever-present reproach with a faded face. But now I have had my revenge.

I will write to her tonight and tell her that the thick trunks of the tightly pruned trees are already full-bellied with their new Spring leaves; that the Place is swimming in a green light and the three stone Muses under my window are cavorting in a rosy glow, very pleased with themselves, very ironic.

I will not tell her that Jean-Marc and I make love in the milky half-light of the early sunshine. I won't tell her, either, of how we married three months ago in a tiny Romanesque church, the stone mellowed to honey in the evening air, with our friends who came home with us afterwards to sing and drink the wine of the Côtes du Rhône and to laugh with us through the night without the help of bridesmaids or flower-girls or the bride's mother, for that matter, weeping in a pale blue hat. Our love is not the love she nagged about down the years. The stars in the dusty sky at Kaniva are not the stars freezing in the navy-blue Montpellier night. I will not tell her that we spent our honeymoon in Marseilles. How I would love to tell her *that!*

I am no better than that Mexican moon-goddess. I, too, am an absolutely

appalling daughter. Did Coyolxauhqui, before she was beheaded, ever apologise to her mother for her malice and unkindness? Or did she, like me, fear that she would have forgiveness thrown at her, like a slap in the face? As she skittered across the sharp rocks that lined the mountainside, did she ever feel the lightest flicker of remorse or sympathy for her mother? Was there the softest tremor of remorse or guilt? Did she know that daughters never get away with such things? Did she care, anyway?

I pity all mothers. We daughters are nearly the death of them all, sometime or other.

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