

## The Blanket Plucker

Heather was shopping in a somewhat-upscale discount clothing store, fingering a blue wool sweater hand-crocheted in China, when she distinctly heard her dead mother say, “Some poor creature. Look at this beautiful work.” It was clear that her mother meant the Chinese sweatshop worker, formerly peasant, who’d crocheted this entire sweater for probably ten cents. Heather, with a catch of grief and guilt in her heart, let the arm of the sweater drop, imagining the person sitting cross-legged on the floor of her cramped apartment (a number of relatives lived there, too), working with aching eyes under a weak single light, to earn ten cents to buy her family’s rice for the week. This vision was almost enough to ruin the rest of Heather’s shopping, but she waited for the usual amnesia, and moved on to the sale rack for junior pants.

Heather’s mother had been dead for three years, but she’d taken to reminding Heather of the terrible unfairness of her shopping, eating, and electronics use. Her pliers had been forged by someone who was undersized in Vietnam, because there was not enough food to eat, and her running shoes had been glued together by children using illegal solvents. Her rugs were made by other children with arthritic fingers, or women blinded by the close work. She herself was panoplied in exploitation, dressed in the misery of a hundred other people, most of them children.

“You believe it,” her mother said. “How can you live with yourself?”

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A few weeks later, her mother, who in life had refused to use the word “asshole,” considering it hopelessly disgusting, took to calling some political candidates “Bumfuck.”

“Look at that bumfucker,” her mother said one morning, while Heather was eating her Special K and watching the news. “He’d sell his mother to get fifteen minutes on television.”

“I thought you were a Republican,” Heather said.

“He’s just another power-hungry Irish politician,” her mother added grimly.

Heather frowned at the flat-screen, and muted the eternal barrage of sound bites that flickered across the fake frames and crawls that greeted her every morning like annoying but reliable friends. She hoped her brain didn’t look like that. This is information, Heather thought. I’m staying informed. “Bug off,” she said out loud.

“So you say,” her mother said.

“I’m living in the world,” Heather said. “I’m keeping up with events.” Her mother maintained a long silence after that. Possibly, Heather thought, she was punishing Heather for not doing anything to improve the political system in the United States, although, in Heather’s own defense, she thought, she was continuously participating in the heavily addictive stream of personal information and emotionally loaded words (patriot, liberty, electable candidate, death panel) that made up her current (to her, anyway) political awareness. What did her strident mother, who had never voted for anyone her late husband didn’t vote for, want? Was Heather, in the grips of a daily overload of relevant information, supposed to live in a barrel? On an ice floe? Did you turn off the news? I think not, Heather thought huffily, waiting for her mother to return so that she could tell her off.

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Heather’s husband drove a gas guzzler, but worse than that, he spent long hours in his home office at the computer. “What’s he doing in there?” her mother suddenly said one Tuesday. “Is he watching porn?”

Heather, who was baking cookies for her daughter's third-grade fundraiser for their class trip to the Boston Aquarium, held the steak knife over the frozen roll of cookie dough and wondered if she'd actually heard a voice speak out loud. "What?" she said.

"You heard me. Is he watching porn?"

"Of course he's not watching porn," Heather said.

"What do you want to bet? You know how the Internet makes most of its money."

Heather suddenly felt guilt for her husband, not even sure what he was doing.

"Mom," she wailed desperately, sounding just like her nine-year-old daughter.

"Smut is like baiting a hook for a fish. It's like baiting a mouse trap. Humans have certain urges, they need to be controlled. So now, you think it's his fault? When he keeps saying he's too tired?"

"He doesn't."

"The flood gates are open on the human id, thanks to social networking."

"Nobody has an id any more," Heather said. "That went out in the sixties."

"So you say," her mother said. She didn't show up for a long time after that.

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Heather's daughter Whitney hates her name, she has announced at dinner, because it sounds like a boy's. "You can't even make a nickname out of it," she says. "The kids are calling me Witless."

"It's a joke," Heather's husband says.

"My name?"

"No, the witless." He grins. "They could call you witty."

“It isn’t funny, Dad!” Heather whips her arm across the table just in time to prevent Whitney from flinging the fistful of green beans in the direction of her father. Heather locks her hand around Whitney’s wrist. “Calm down and apologize.”

“You’ve given me the wrong *name!*” Whitney screams. “You were supposed to name me after Grammy!”

Heather has the sensation of cold water running down her spine, as if she’s just narrowly escaped a car crash. Is this like *The Turn of the Screw*, where her mother is inhabiting her daughter’s psyche? The name was a whispered (more like hissed) debate held long ago, in the days before Whitney-Witless was born, between Heather and her husband, in the early hours in the dark bedroom when Heather felt she was so pregnant she could sleep only propped on her elbows, and she had gone to the mat to give her daughter a non-gendered name. “You want to be called Roberta?” she says now to Whitney. “Why would you want to be called Roberta?”

“Because Grammy was cool,” Whitney says.

Heather thinks she can hear her mother chuckling in the background.

“You can’t be named after my mother,” Heather says. “It’s not a good name.”

“It’s a really good name,” Whitney says. “It’s a wonderful, fabulous name.”

“You can change it when you’re twenty-one,” Heather’s husband says. “I’ll get you a lawyer. Now apologize for the beans.”

“I apologize for the beans, but I’m not really sorry.”

Heather stares at the melted butter-substitute dripping on the tablecloth, and shining on her daughter’s small hand, which has released the beans back into the dish. She’s pained by her daughter’s miserable face. Here is beloved Whitney, feeling she’s carrying the wrong proper

noun, like a mislabeled tomato, or a strange fruit in the supermarket that Heather will inevitably buy and try to eat when it's too green..

Later in the week Heather's at the supermarket on the way home from work, in the produce section, and she remembers this bean-flinging at the dinner table.

"I never said a word to her," her mother says.

Heather ignores her.

"What's the matter with giving her a name that sounds like a girl?" her mother says, seemingly coming from the organic bananas.

"I wanted it to be gender-neutral."

"Neutral-schmootral. She's a girl. It's a different set of chromosomes. What is it with you people?"

"*Us* people?"

"Gender-neutral? Is everyone supposed to be identical? Are we reduced to one sex, one universal IQ, one college board score? One football team? Do they all need pom-poms, even the boys?"

"No!"

"In my day," her mother sniffs, "we weren't allergic to sexual tension."

Heather refuses to dignify that with an answer, and picks out a lumpy brownish-yellow fruit she can tell right now will languish in the crisper.

"You may think I'm stupid," her mother says, "but at least I didn't name you Adolph. And you should call the kid Wendy."

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When Heather gets home that night, and they are eating dinner, she says to her daughter, “I had a thought about your nickname.”

“What?” her daughter says doubtfully.

“I think we might call you Wendy.”

Her daughter chews thoughtfully. “That’s better.”

“Yeah,” Heather says. “Grammy mentioned that to me.”

“It’s definitely more like a girl,” her husband says.

Heather thinks her mother, although occasionally irritable, and apparently deceased, may be a real genius. Her mother has nothing to say that night, and she’s quiet for weeks after.

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Whenever disasters occur, Heather’s mother is nowhere around with advice. A computer crash at the office, an unwelcome, ambiguous grope from a manager from out of town, an inability to find the car insurance policy after a three mind-numbing searches of the house. A sprained back muscle from showing off in yoga class. Maternal silence. A wall. Wendy is happy with her new name, which she has written all over her new pink school notebooks. Heather’s husband has suddenly for no reason said he wants to spend less time at his computer, and has suggested they watch tantric sex videos he located online. Heather finds them interesting, and can’t wait for her back, currently quilted with Tiger Balm patches, to heal so they can try out some of the less confusing positions.

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One Sunday Heather is sitting in church, trying to follow the Liturgy, when she suddenly realizes she has to forgive everyone. It’s overwhelming. Her mother, the bullies in high school, her husband’s possible pornography. Her daughter for being rude. Even her perfect sister, who

calls once a year to find out if Heather is having more children. (So far the score is three to one, Heather loses.) Forgiveness is daunting her. Heather stands, quite stunned, during the Litany of Fervent Supplication, wondering where to begin. Help, she thinks. Help, help, help.

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A few days later Heather is at a Colonially themed gift shop, a type of store she rarely frequents, but she is looking for a birthday present for a friend. She's holding a dish towel, watching people out the window carry away their bags of purchases from the Christmas Tree Shop. "I'm leaving you now," her mother says. "I'm going back to pester your father. I never really got used to the divorce. He's got it coming to him."

"He's dead," Heather says. "You need to let it go."

Her mother doesn't answer. Heather wanders the aisles, waiting for the voice, so she can give her mother more post-marriage counseling.

"Maybe I'll be back, maybe I won't," her mother says. "I knew you'd miss me when I'm dead and gone."

"Stop it," Heather says. "Please."

"There I'd be, wheezing my last, plucking at the blanket, and you'd suddenly realize what a goldmine you'd lost. What a treasure. Then you'd be sorry."

"Ma." She waits for more conversation, and after half an hour of silence among the gimcrack quilts, bathroom figurines and wreaths made of silk Halloween foliage, she goes to the parking lot, still listening for the voice, and gets in her car. Silence. And emptiness.

On the drive home, Heather's stopped at a light, feeling quite teary, so that the road ahead is a blur, like a doctor's eyechart when the prescription is wrong in that huge machine with the clicking lenses. She blinks a lot.

“Don’t be such a crybaby,” her mother says. “I know you can do it on your own. It’s so self-centered. Where’s your backbone?”

Heather remembers her mother driving their old station wagon, and Heather’s a kid in the front seat, staring out the window while her mother listens to the radio. Music is playing, and then her mother pokes the dials, and then Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers, are guffawing about some girl’s transmission. “You ever notice?” her mother says, “the advice they give is always good?”

“Sure,” she remembers saying, possibly snidely.

“It’s all engine repair,” her mother says enigmatically. “All of it’s engine repair.”

Suddenly Heather’s driving through the intersection, the traffic’s whizzing by, she’s on her own. She thinks she hears her mother say, “Remember this, Heather. Maybe later you will. Everyone in this family has a lot of backbone. You’ve probably made me up, anyway.” Heather has the sense of an arm around her shoulder, a kiss on her cheek, and then her mother’s laugh that reminds her of a hundred nights at the kitchen table, when life seemed ordinary, and she couldn’t wait to leave home and go to college, and her mother was around to ask her what she wanted for supper. Do the dishes. Maybe do a show-and-tell with a new sweater from the store. Tell Heather it was her turn to take out the trash.