

# Mother Love



by Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz



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**published by  
Unlikely Books  
[www.UnlikelyStories.org](http://www.UnlikelyStories.org)  
New Orleans, Louisiana**

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## **Acknowledgements**

These stories first appeared (or were reprinted) in the following publications, some in slightly different form:

*MiPoesias, SKiVE, Sunspinner, FRIGG, 3711 Atlantic, Passenger May, taint magazine, Gator Springs Gazette, Long Story Short, Salt River Review, The Fiction Warehouse, Megaera, Unlikely Stories, Small Spiral Notebook, Pindeldyboz, Rearview Quarterly, Outsider Ink and SEGUE.*



## **MoonPies**

Again, I tell him to shut up.

“Somebody’s gonna come in. You want that?” I ask. “Do you?” Maybe he wouldn’t mind a few more whops against his head, but mine’s had enough. “Sleep, Justin,” I plead. “Please.”

But he continues from his bunk beneath me. “He’s a freakin’ idiot,” he says.

“Don’t say bad words,” I remind.

“I didn’t say fuckin’,” Justin corrects me.

I give my mattress a pound when Justin’s voice cuts through the dark again.

“She’s so stupid.”

“Shush,” I say.

“She’s a stupid bitch, like he said.”

I tell Justin to take it easy. “Hey,” I remind him. “She’s our mom.”

He’s quiet again and then it’s me that can’t take the silence. I say, “You don’t understand.”

I’ve been telling him that for awhile now. I try to make it sound like in those years when it was just me and Mom, or maybe even before that — when it was just her — that something happened and that’s the

reason for it all. The way she is. But really, I don't understand it either.

I'm about to say something else when the door jerks open.

"You two need to shut up," our mom says.

"Yes, Mommy Dearest," Justin responds.

If we're okay with her, she'll say, "And don't call me Mommy Dearest or I'll beat your asses," and then we'll all laugh.

A dark figure standing in the doorway, she tells us, "Shut the fuck up" and snaps the door shut.

From his bed, Justin is about to say something more. But, as I turn toward the wall, I tell him, "You heard her: Shut the fuck up."

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Justin falls to sleep. I can't. Not until their voices travel down the hallway to her bedroom. The headboard starts knocking against the wall. I don't know if he's banging her or banging her head. Then, maybe to comfort me, she giggles and I can relax a little. It's okay to sleep. For now, we're safe.

Justin's gonna have half his face swollen tomorrow morning, but mostly he's upset about the MoonPies.

Mom got paid today and when she and Ted came back from the grocery store, they had their staples: the cigarettes, the beer and peanut brittle; there was cereal and milk, bacon, a carton of eggs and pounds of hamburger to keep me and Justin; but there were no MoonPies.

When Justin was a baby, he drove Mom crazy with his crying. One time, him on her hip, she plowed through the kitchen cabinets, looking for something. She found a stray MoonPie, broke off a piece and shoved it into his mouth.

Justin sucked at it, the marshmallow and chocolate smearing around his lips. He grinned. He shut up.

So every grocery trip, Justin gets MoonPies,

though Mom's been forgetting lately.

"She didn't forget his beer," Justin had whined earlier. "And he's an idiot."

"A fuckin' idiot," I told him so he'd know I was on his side.

"Not like my dad."

"Nope," I agreed. "Not like your dad."

Sam was Justin's dad. Justin never got a chance to know him 'cause he split or our mom told him to leave before my brother was born. Sometimes, Justin wants to hear the stories about Sam; how he taught me to make rockets with the empty toilet paper rolls; how he insisted on telling me a story every night before I went to sleep; how he waited, open arms, at the end of the slide.

The stories make him happy. Me, as well. I don't know anything about my dad. He split or our mom told him to leave before I was born.

What I've never told Justin is that he's here, not because of Sam, but because of freakin' George Washington.

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I came home from school and Mom was sitting on the couch, a cigarette trembling between her fingers, the ash close to an inch long. Something was up. We were too poor for her to waste a menthol.

She bit her lip.

"Just say it," I blurted. Were we being kicked out of the mobile home? Where we going to be without water again? Was she putting me up for adoption?

"It's about Sam," she said.

Was he back? — but her eyes were wet and red from crying, so that couldn't be it.

"He left me with something besides a broken heart."

I wandered into the kitchen, hoping he'd left money for some groceries.

"I'm having a baby," she told me.

I turned to see her stumbling off the couch,

scrunching the cigarette in the tray.

“Maybe,” she said, wandering around the living room. “What do you think? Would you like someone to play with? A brother, maybe?”

As long as he doesn’t eat much, I wanted to tell her. I folded the end piece of bread in half and shoved it into my mouth.

“You are no help to me,” she said.

I shrugged.

She dumped her purse out on the floor, fishing through change. She said, “Call it.”

I gagged, tried to breathe.

“Call it,” she’d ordered me. The quarter flew in the air.

The dry bread clogging my throat, I croaked out a word.

Heads.

Heads.

Heads.

And Justin’s here now.

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The Hamburger Helper is boiling on the stove and we’re sitting in the kitchen, playing checkers, when they come in.

“Did you get them?” Justin asks.

This morning, Mom promised him she’d go to the store after work and pick up a box of MoonPies.

Ted plops on the couch and gives Justin an angry glare.

“Yes, I did. Damn, you’d think. . .” Mom says and she comes to the table with a box, sets it down.

Justin stares at it in disbelief.

“What?” Mom asks.

“They’re banana.”

“Oh, Justin, that doesn’t matter.”

“Damn straight it doesn’t!” Ted says, charging to the table. He rips open the box and slaps a MoonPie in front of Justin. “Eat up,” he orders.

We all watch as Justin reaches for it.

He removes the wrapper and takes a bite of the yellow moon. It's too much, and I can see the tears in his eyes as he chews, trying to force it all down.

## **My Little Boy**

A single child, a boy child, of a single parent — a woman, lonely and yes, fearful — but he needed to find his own strength. She didn't want her son to cling to her, and believing it was in his best interests, she didn't want to hold on.

She wanted him to become a man unafraid to take risks; unlike his father who had been unable and unwilling to do anything lest he fall under his own mother's judgment.

But — there on the news. Everyday. Another child. Amber Alerts. Innocent grins haunting you from flyers on the convenience store windows. She always bought milk in the paper cartons so he would know: *Have you seen me?*

He was her joy. He could be silly, though. One morning they were walking to the school and he began draping his hands over his body; the sides of his head, his shoulders, his hips. A swivel of them.

“Stop it,” she'd told him, embarrassed that someone might see.

He had simply grinned and said, “What? I can't do the Macarena on the way to school?”

And he was growing up so fast! He was no longer

content with her company; he wanted to play with the neighborhood boys. Outside. Trees. "Chicken" when a car approached. Jumping self-made, sky-high ramps with their skateboards.

She didn't want to nag.

"There are people in the world," she would say.

He'd mock her and reply, "There's lots of people in the world."

"You know what I mean. The world —"

" — isn't a safe place anymore. Somebody might take me," he'd say, mimicking her frequent warnings.

She'd smile and jokingly say, "And I don't want them to, unless they promise they'll keep you."

Then they'd chuckle and he'd dash out the door to be with his friends. To explore. To risk. To dare.

She would stand at the screen door, knowing there was only so much she could do.

She remembered the day he got lost in Kmart. They were passing the electronics department and she told him that he couldn't stop to play the display Nintendo. She'd continued walking, glancing at the items on the ends of the aisles and then she'd turned, heading to the registers.

She'd thought he was behind her. Immediately, she panicked and strode back to electronics. He wasn't there.

"Danny!" she called, rushing to the toy department. "Daniel! Mijo!"

There were children in the aisles, stabbing the 'try me now' buttons and crashing Tonka trucks across the floor, but there was no sign of her son.

She'd rushed to the customer service counter, asked to have him paged.

"I'm going to see if he went to the car," she'd said, as she shoved aside the glass door and rushed outside.

He wasn't there.

Rushing back into the store, she was met by the concerned faces of the manager and the customer service clerk. No one had answered the page.

Her heart beat wild enough to confuse her. Daniel!

And then, as if a miracle, hadn't he appeared?

Her heart beat tears into her eyes and, though she wanted to choke him, she threw her arms about his shoulders and said, "Where were you?"

He'd laughed about her concern. He'd been in the bathroom. He hadn't heard any page.

Be careful, Daniel, her heart whispered. Be careful.

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He'd lost track of the time, she thought as she walked down the block to Kenny's house. Playing video games. Climbing trees. Seeking a new adventure. Never thinking of a woman waiting back home. It had to be, she thought, something in the male gene.

A group of boys played in the street and she searched for her son, but he wasn't one of them.

But he wasn't at Kenny's. "*He left about an hour ago.*"

Or Robbie's. "*I saw him with Kenny this morning.*"

Yes, try Cesar's. "*He hasn't been here.*"

She walked home, each step an effort. Her cries throughout the neighborhood unanswered. She had to call someone —

The police?

"Daniel!" she yelled into the night. "Daniel!"

How she got from that moment to this one, she did not know. Who chose his clothes? He looked handsome, she thought. But he didn't look like he was sleeping. No, he looked sweet when he slept and lying there against the satin lining, he simply looked unreal.

"My little boy," she whimpered as she stared at him.

"My little boy. My little boy. My little boy," she cried as she collapsed into her grief.

But there was one moment, when a sliver of her anger cut through, and she wanted to scream at him — *Why didn't you listen to me?* — momentarily feeling as though he'd gotten what he deserved.

## **Falling Angel**

It had been almost a year since I'd seen Dana.

"Girl!" she screamed and threw her arms about me.

She looked great and I told her so.

"So how have you been? Finally get that divorce?" I asked.

She shook her head. "We're still fighting."

"Did you go back to school?" She'd had a plan. College. A career. A life of her own making.

She shook her head again. "No money. Getting the child support is a damn hassle and that's barely enough."

"So what're you doing with yourself?"

Dana giggled. "Right now I'm looking for a man."

For as long as I've known her, she was looking for a man, that man, any man.

"How's Angel?"

Angel was the pre-teen daughter caught in the crossfire.

Dana's face went dark. "She . . . she tried to kill herself a few months ago. I had to put her in one of those places. . .

"Damn Aaron tried to keep his insurance from

paying for it. Said it was all my fault.” Her attention drifted elsewhere momentarily and then she shrugged and turned back to me.

“Man,” I mumbled. “I’m sorry.”

“She came home this afternoon,” Dana said.

I didn’t know what else to say. I just stood there and watched the bar lights dance across her face.

## **Cat Movements**

I don't feel her at first. Then her movements intensify and she's coming toward me, pressing her body against mine. I can feel the pointed balls of her knees as she bends her legs into mine. The slivers of ribs through the thin nightgown, her pressing at my back.

Against me, and still she moves, preparing a place of rest.

I hold my breath and wish —

I wish my mother...death.

No. No, I wish I could take her hand and steal away through the window. Take her to the children's playground in the apartment complex next to our efficiency. Get her into a swing and push her.

High. High. Higher.

When I was a child, my mother, bored with her job, would take off. (*I need to take my daughter to the dentist today.*) She'd call the school (*I forget to send a note with Denise; she has a dentist appointment today*) and we'd spend the afternoon at the park, eating blood-red candied apples and throwing pieces of the buns from our hot dogs to the birds un-

til we were left with only the franks.

We'd play "When I'm Older."

"When I'm older," I said. "I'm going to have a house with a million rooms and you're gonna live with me."

"Oh, you won't want that, Denny," she'd replied.

"Yes, I would." I took her hand in my own, frightened by the sadness in her voice, the sudden distant look in her face. I held her hand against my cheek. "Why wouldn't I want you with me?" I asked.

She looked into my face for a long time and then, again, without reason for the sudden change, she smiled. She pulled her hand away, clapped and said, "We're supposed to be having a good time."

I was confused, but I smiled, began clapping as well.

My mother told me I was a wonderful daughter. She said, "I'm glad I'll always have you with me."

## **Something Mama Can't Fix**

Virgil calls early morning. Says Sonny's on his suicide kick again.

"We're heading to Sweetwater in the afternoon," my brother tells me. "Can't stay and babysit and he's too messed up. . . won't come along. I'm not fighting with him. Thought you should know."

I thank Virgil. Ask about his kids and then thank him again. My goodbye is quick 'cause I don't want to hear the stories about what my boy's done this time. What Sonny's been drinking. What's Sonny's been putting up his nose.

I don't want to sit in the silence of my brother's unspoken accusations. I'm not the one who offered Sonny a bottle. I've never offered my son a line. Still, Virgil thinks it's somebody's fault and that that somebody is me.

I learned he felt that way when Carroll O'Connor died. I was visiting and we were eating dinner in his kitchen, the black'n'white TV on the counter behind us, pretending to be the reason we weren't talking.

We turned to the screen, listened to the story about the man's career and all that drug mess with his son.

"I wonder if he ever found his peace," I said, though not necessarily to anyone. "All that time he spent going after that drug dealer who sold his son that stuff."

Virgil grunted. "Maybe he should've looked in the mirror."

"The boy was adopted; so evidently that man did something for that boy that his own parents hadn't. He chose him and he raised him."

My brother grunted again. "Well, give him that. Too bad that ain't the case for everyone."

I stared at Virgil. "That drug business — it couldn't have been his son's fault? — I mean he was a grown man."

Virgil shrugged. "Train a boy up, all I got to say."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. I was fixing to ask Virgil how long it would be before his grand ideas had some effect on his nephew but I just stared at my plate and pushed the black-eyed peas around.

Virgil had taken Sonny in after he got caught stealing from his job. Still a kid, Sonny had some options. Sending him out-of-town, putting him to work on my brother's farm seemed like a good idea. Virgil was sure that Sonny just needed something to do — working sunup, sundown —needed a man in his life to show him how to be one.

But almost a year now and Sonny's in a deeper mess. And he's started to talk about killing himself. Mostly when he's drunk or high. It's good that he's talking about it 'cause I heard that it means he's really asking for help.

But I'm not sure what I can do. Not sure what anyone can do now.

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Mid-morning, Virgil calls again. Sonny's passed out. "I left him a note to call you," my brother says. "Hope he does."

He will call, I think, stepping out into the yard. He

has before. Twice now. And both times, I've been able to talk him out of it.

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First time, I hated myself for whatever it was that had done this to my boy. I apologized, cried, pleaded and my son did the same.

He'd promised he'd quit the drinking, the drugs, the trouble. He didn't.

And every time, I heard about it from Virgil. Heard in every beer, every toke, every misdeed what kind of mother I'd been.

The second time Sonny called to say goodbye, I asked him what he wanted me to do — how could Mama fix this? — but he couldn't give me an answer.

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I work in my garden all afternoon, back door open. With trembling hands, I weed and dig and plant. My mind keeps searching for what it is I can give my son to still the madness in his heart.

< >

I go in and I'm in the bathroom, washing up, when the phone rings. My first thought is to run down the hall and grab it, but I stand at the sink, rubbing my hands together 'til I've got a thick lather going. I hold my hands under the water and watch as the dirt and bubbles make their way down the drain.

The phone stops ringing.

I grab a towel and dry my arms, elbow down and then my hands. I glance at my nails and wonder where my emery board is.

I find my way to the living room and check the caller ID. I sit down.

I wonder if Mr. O'Connor's son made promises he couldn't keep to anyone, including himself.

The phone starts to ring again. I check the phone number.

Maybe Mr. O'Connor never found his peace, but I wonder if he ever considered that maybe his son had.

I take a breath, close my eyes and lean against the couch.

The phone rings and I let it.

## **Time with Mommy**

By ten in the morning, the temperature has reached 87 degrees.

The children are hot. Dizzy with hunger and boredom. Kay had deliberately kept the three of them — Michaela, Henry, Danielle — up the night before watching Leno, CNN and a M\*A\*S\*H rerun, in hopes that they'd sleep until lunchtime. Past it, even better.

But they are up and asking about breakfast, something to which Kay has given no thought.

While the children were sleeping, Kay had gone to the motel vending machine and had bought a package of cookies. Back at their room, she'd sat just outside the door and ate them. She'd had a momentary thought of sharing the vanilla cream sandwiches, but there were only six. Being fair would have meant each child got two and her none or they'd each get one and split the other two, but who would've gotten the sides with the cream filling and where was it written that a really good mommy gave up the cookies every time?

They are in the car now, riding aimlessly, Kay's attempt to turn her children's attention elsewhere.

“Mommy . . .” five-year old Danielle whines from

the back seat of the car. "I want cereal."

Kay ignores her.

"Mo — "

The sound of the heel of Kay's hand against the wheel cuts her off.

"What would you like me to do, Danielle? I've told you it's almost lunchtime and you'll have to wait until then."

The little girl winces.

"Daddy would give her however many bowls of Trix she wanted," the boy says.

Kay glares at her son by way of the rearview mirror.

"But you're not with Daddy, are you?" she asks.

His eyes tell her he wishes he were.

"Daddy has you all the time," Kay says in a singsong tone, her eyes locked with her son's. "Why don't you want to spend time with Mommy?"

Henry turns and looks out the window.

Before turning back to the road, Kay's eyes scan the backseat. The children's newly-darkened hair makes their pale coloring even more stark in the morning sun. They slouch. And frown.

Kay shakes her head and ignores them. Phillip had made them so selfish. I'm hungry too; do you care?

Uncomfortable with the quiet, Kay turns on the radio. She lets her mind meld into the music as she sings along under her breath.

"So, is it hot enough for you yet?" the disc jockey asks.

"Yes, damn it, it's hot enough," Kay tells him as if the radio personality controlled the weather. She wipes the back of her hand across her forehead and then runs her fingers through her own tresses, glancing in the mirror, still unsure if she likes being a redhead.

But hadn't the motel manager commented on how pretty her hair was? She smiles at her reflection, thinking how that might come in handy. She notices Henry looking at her.

She smiles at him. "What's the matter with my baby boy?" she coos.

He turns away again.

Too much like his father. She never could figure out how to break Phillip, but she's determined to succeed with Henry. So much depended on it.

She continues to drive, her ear half-tuned to the radio. Something the disc jockey is saying piques her interest and Kay turns the radio up a bit.

"Mommy . . ."

"Okay, Danielle," Kay huffs. "Okay."

At the next gas station, she pulls in.

"Stay in the car," she says. "If you do anything, you will make Mommy very, very angry."

The girls agree to stay put. Kay ignores Henry's lack of response. She smiles at her daughters. "Mommy likes it when you do what she says."

Inside, she goes to the restroom and empties her pocket. There are a few crumpled dollar bills and a handful of change. She reminds herself that the next two days at the motel are already paid for, so that's not a worry. She just needs to find something to eat.

She takes a breath. The reflection in the mirror criticizes her.

I can handle this, Phillip. Leave me alone! I don't need you or any one else telling me how to care for my children! I can handle this! I can!

Kay yanks the door open and wanders through the few aisles until she knows what she will do.

At the register counter, Kay asks for three of the free cups given for ice and buys a frozen drink. At the beverage counter, she fills each cup halfway with the slivers of frozen water, then pours one-third of the icy drink into each one. The containers overflow with the bright red slush.

Kay smiles as she pictures her children's delight.

She asks for directions to a music store before she heads outside.

At the car, she hands the children the confection through the open car window.

"And don't spill it," she warns. "If you waste . . ."

Kay gets into the car. Turning the key in the ignition, she asks, "Who wants pizza?"

She'd heard that the radio station was conducting a remote broadcast and was giving away food. Maybe they could get enough for dinner tonight too.

"We do," the children yell in unison. "We do!"

Kay grins at them. "Well, first tell me who the best mommy in the whole wide world is."

"You are!" Michaela says, Danielle joining in.  
"You are!"

## **On the Wind, a Lullaby**

She began in the kitchen. Like the other rooms, the condition of it disgusted her, but it did not make her cry.

Hannah stood in the doorway, a bucket stuffed with a bottle of bleach, cans of scouring powder and a bottle of ammonia in one hand; a plastic bag full of rags and rubber gloves in the other.

The sharp smell of ants hung in the room and flies peppered the ceiling. There were dishes in the sink with scraps of leftover food, dried out or molding.

Above the sink, the cabinets had been emptied of most of their contents, cans lay scattered on the counter, on the floor. Broken jars, the contents having oozed out, caked and hardened, blackened. The doors of the cabinets had been axed, the wood splintered and slivers of it had showered down over the counter. One door was suspended crookedly, held in place by one hinge and Hannah tilted her head, trying to make sense of it.

More dishes, but clean ones and possibly every last one her sister owned, lay broken, scattered across the floor.

Hannah sighed as her eyes circled the impossible

task of the room. Where to begin?

She pressed the tears down, turned her head, took a breath of air and then turned back, forcing herself forward. She set the bucket and bag by her feet. She needed a broom.

Opening the kitchen closet, Hannah was surprised to find it orderly — overlooked.

Bracing the bristles against a pile of broken porcelain, Hannah pushed the broom and then again, again, until a clear space emerged. She leaned the broom against the wall, kept her eyes focused as she walked back into the living room and picked up an empty cardboard box. Returning to the kitchen, she set the box down, pulled on the rubber gloves and knelt.

Who had been responsible for what? Hannah thought as she deposited the shards into the box.

She worked in a methodical way, trying not to think: these were the dishes Janine had picked out for her wedding because she loved the rose pattern. These were the jars of jam she and Janine had canned after the peach harvest. These were the glass baby bottles Janine was going to use because she'd decided first off against breast-feeding.

Hannah had not noticed how her movements had stirred the flies, but as they buzzed around her, she waved her hands crazily through the air.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed, batting this way and that.

A few moments more and Hannah knew, like her husband had told her, that she couldn't do this. Standing quickly, her stomach lurched and she headed toward the back door. She ripped the gloves off, fought with the lock and then yanked the back door open.

On the wooden porch, Hannah fell to her knees and leaned over the side, her body heaving until her insides were empty. She took a few deep breaths and looked out across the dirt yard, in her mind, heard Sam say that once the baby was here, he'd see about planting grass for a nice yard.

"They'll be five or six of 'em running around," he'd predicted.

Hannah had glanced at her younger sister when he'd said that, and she'd seen Janine cringe.

She should have done something.

Hadn't Janine asked early on for some kind of root—

"I don't need this," Janine had said. "It'll only tie me longer to Sam."

Hannah had noted the desperation in her voice, but she'd ignored it. Janine was still young; still restless, even married. But babies had a way, Hannah told her sister, of changing things.

"You're just scared. Lots of women are. Some are even ashamed and it's the most natural thing in the world."

Even now Hannah can recall her sister's hands, like steel clamps bracing around her wrists. "Please," Janine had begged, and there was something in her eyes that Hannah chose to deny.

"You've been blessed, more blessed than me," she'd simply told her sister. Hannah would never bear one, though she brought the world many.

And the child had come. Weeks early and he was small, but seemed healthy. Hannah had placed that baby against her sister's breast but Janine acted too tired to even hold him.

"I can't, Hannah. Please."

But Hannah had insisted. Sam wouldn't be back from his trucking job for a week so Hannah stayed, assisting her sister until Janine had regained adequate strength. On the third day, Hannah went home and stayed away. She'd instructed Janine on feeding and basic care.

"Women have an instinct. You need to follow yours," was all she said as she left.

But Janine had not liked to play with dolls. She'd never cared for hers, leaving them in the mud or at a relative's and that baby had not been a toy that she could forget. It cried, it wanted, it needed.

Hannah shook her head wildly, her tears flying as

she thought of her sister placing a pillow over that baby and pressing it down.

And then — was it guilt or more craziness — she'd taken Sam's gun and run out in the field out back, killed herself.

Sam had come home to find it all. And then, him crazy with grief and pain, he'd destroyed what Janine had left behind.

A mess Hannah is sure now that she cannot clean up.

She hadn't noticed it before there in the middle of the backyard. Hannah walked toward the crib, which too had been attacked by the axe. She crouched down, reached in between the splintered slats and tapped the smiling pink pig dangling from the mobile.

Her touch set it momentarily in motion. There was a tinkle of a note and Hannah expected to hear a lullaby, but instead her mind heard the cries of a child passed between two women.

Here: one giving life.

Here: the other, taking it.

## **Mother Love**

Adrienne Yvonne stands in the bedroom doorway. From down the hall, she can hear Vanessa, Cesar and Eddie scrambling about in the kitchen, setting the table for breakfast.

"Lemme pour the juice," Cesar pleads in his I'm-big-enough-to-do-it voice, and Adrienne supposes her siblings have let him because the youngest child squeals with delight.

Adrienne surveys the room, thinks about picking up the piles of clothes crumpled on the floor or placing the uncoupled shoes into the plastic boxes lining the closet's back wall. Last night had been quite a decision for her mother—what to wear when she went out.

Adrienne considers straightening the bottles of "Vanilla Fields" and "White Diamonds" on the mirrored dresser. Or wrapping the cords neatly around the blow dryer and the curling iron, putting them away. Or repacking the make-up bag, which lies overturned, its contents spilling: the eye liner in rainbow hues, the mascara in blue, brown and black, the rouge and lip pencils and sticks.

Adrienne moves toward the dresser to create or-

der, then she changes her mind and instead flops down on the edge of the bed.

She stares at the rubber cord slashing across the nightstand wood until she can no longer evade the temptation and she picks it up, twirls it in the air.

The *whisk, whisk* cuts through the silence.

Letting the cord drop to the floor, Adrienne picks up the tarnished bent spoon and taps the saucer, which holds the candle her mother used for prayer to the Virgin Mother and for getting high. She annoys herself with the clatter and then Adrienne flips the spoon in the air and lets it land with a clank on the floor.

Her brothers and sister have turned the television on and the house buzzes with the theme song of an animated program based on the latest Japanese imported toy.

Adrienne lies down, decides to let the expected sirens piercing through the morning upset the joyous expectation in the kitchen. Dutifully, she has called 911, though having found their mother dead, Adrienne's first thought had been that she, Adrienne, was now free of having to complete that particular task.

Adrienne rises slightly, looks into her mother's face. The older woman continues to stare upward, her eyes no more vacant than when she was breathing.

Adrienne leans over, presses her lips to her mother's ear. "You promised you'd make us pancakes this morning," she hisses.

## **Letter Home**

You were a woman already in mourning and I was going away, but oh, I still see you!

— Before sleep, inviting me to choreograph steps on the back porch to the music from your tongue, our shadows in time beneath the leafless trees.

— Against a solitary bulb, the gentle whirr of the machine as you finished with lace and buttons, one Easter morning.

— In the yard, the garden, leading my child hand to the ground, rich earth awaiting the implantation of a young seed.

So much time and I wonder:

Do you ever dance for me against the shadows of the moon? Count my days in rites that pass with a season, or in the inches of a sapling's growth?

Oh, woman. Mother —

Mother, do you miss me?

## About Malcolm

We return from the hospital to find that the cats have helped themselves to the birthday dinner. Several plates lay broken on the floor. Utensils are scattered. Paw prints decorate the single-layer cake. *HA Y RTHDA*, it now reads. A trail of white-frosting prints leads to the tray of roast beef. Slivers lay congealed in gravy.

"Malcolm said you had a way with mashed potatoes," Beth says. "Too bad I didn't get a taste." She tilts the near-empty bowl toward me.

"There will be many more family dinners after this one," I tell Malcolm's fiancée. "Happier ones." I sigh and then make motions toward cleaning up.

Andrew, my other son, who left the hospital with only bumps and a bruise, does not offer to help. Having always accused me of favoritism, he's busy sulking, believing I blame him solely for the accident — he was the one at the wheel and he had been drinking. I want to reach out and slap him, tell him to act like the twenty-seven-year old that he is, but that would suggest that he's right.

"I think this was Malcolm's way of getting out of eating this," Beth says, as she stacks dishes atop an-

other. "He wanted Italian."

I let myself laugh as I move with her toward the sink. We make room for each other, scrap food remnants into the disposal. I reach across to set a plate in the second sink when Beth touches my hand, fingers my wedding band.

"I was going to tell him I'd finally picked a date," she tells me. "That was going to be his present."

I wrap her in my arms. "And you will," I assure her.

The phone begins to ring. Beth against me, I feel her heart pick up pace with my own.

Andrew answers it. He leans against the wall, his shoulders folding. From his tone, I know he's speaking to his father.

"Okay, okay," he says quietly and then he turns to me. He holds his hand out, says, "It's about Malcolm."

Beth and I are slow to release the other. One deep breath, together, and then she nudges me toward the phone.

Andrew won't meet my eyes as I walk toward him.

A quickened beat resounds in my ears.

You love Andrew too, I remind my heart as I take the receiver. No matter what, you love him too.

## **There**

The phone rings, waking me. My hand is quick to the receiver so that my wife does not stir. I glance at the digital numbers on the clock and wonder who and why the hell at 2:36 in the morning.

“Patrick?” It’s my sister, Margaret. Her voice is low but it trembles with a panicked expectancy.

“Yes, what is it?” I ask, sitting up in bed.

“It’s . . . it’s Mother. . . Patrick, she’s dead. She’s killed herself.”

I want to tell Margaret that she’s wrong. That I spoke with our mother just last night; she’d assured me that the galleys had been proofed and would arrive by FedEx today.

“Greta came to wake her and she found her.”

I move my mouth to speak. What I say is, “Now her book will have to be published posthumously.”

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Somewhere in my treasures collected from my childhood is a packet of postcards and letters sent to me throughout my early years by my mother in ab-

sentia. My friends envied me my activist/writer/adventurer mom who had not allowed herself to be bound to any man or even her children. Playground equipment fundraisers were nothing compared to the curious stamps on letters from places I could only point to on the globe.

“How are you?” I ask my sister.

Margaret simply says, “This only proves that she truly was a selfish bitch.”

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When our mother came home, finally and to stay, I was both overjoyed and saddened. There had always been something mysterious about her that made me yearn for her presence and yet, there, with us, she was quite simply a stranger.

She and Margaret argued continuously it seemed. My sister was angry, felt deprived.

She'd learned of menstruation from the school nurse. Her first bra was purchased by our grandmother. The boy to whom she forever pledged her love to in her diary and in her heart would remain an unimaginable in our mother's mind — simply parts: his brown eyes with bushy brows hanging over like awnings, his jet-black hair running past his neck, the cleft in his chin.

One day, Margaret accused her of being negligent.

My mother looked astonished.

“When you wanted something special for your social studies project, did I not send a congressman from Washington to help you with your presentation? And when you wanted a dress that would outdo all the girls at your prom, did I not send you a hand-beaded one from Paris? And all the things you have in your room, Peg, your clothes, your records, your books, didn't I work wherever I could in order for you to have them?

“I will give you your contention that I have been mostly absent,” I recall my mother telling my sister.

“But, though I have not always been here, Peg, I have always tried to be there.”

I move to end the phone call, tell my sister I'll fly out as soon as I can find a flight available.

When I was six, I dreamt my mother had died. I woke crying, my body shaking with a wild panic. She was visiting us then and I made my way down the hall to her bedroom, stumbling in the darkness, slamming my toes into the baseboard and not caring — I had to get to my mother.

Even now I can feel the worn softness of the flannel gown she wore as she embraced me, welcomed me against her beating heart. She laughed gently in response to my concern.

“I have no plans to go until I have nothing else to live for,” she'd told me.

Now, as I reach to put the receiver back, I think of Margaret's upcoming dissertation defense; I think of the pending birth of my first child, a son; I think of my editorial triumph, the forthcoming publication of my mother's life's recordings —

I think of these things and I cannot stop my hand from trembling.

## **What It Spells**

Victor rushed home after school to show his mother the brand-new fountain pen he'd won at the spelling bee held for the entire fourth grade.

"I'm the best speller!" he proclaimed.

His mother took the pen and examined it. Montblanc. She recognized that name from a department store in the mall. She'd recalled thinking 'A hundred-twenty dollars?' as she'd stared into the display case. 'For a fucking pen?'

She rolled her eyes. Stupid teachers. They couldn't have given him free lunches for the rest of the year?

Well, maybe she could return it for cash. Store credit.

"I wanna practice writing my name," Victor said, pulling a spiral notebook from his backpack.

His mother laughed. "Okay, you're so smart, what does R-E-T-A-R-D-E-D spell? 'Cause that's what you are if you think I'm letting you keep this."

## **The Woman Who Gave Birth to Stones**

The village fell to sleep beneath a moonless sky. The woman lay in the open field near her house, her skirts bunched around her waist. In the distance she could hear the toll of the bells from the church. She did not know the exact hour, but each *dong, dong* reminded her that time was passing though she no longer knew how many hours . . . three, four . . .

She breathed deep and anxious, groaned as another pain jolted through her. She yearned to press her naked legs together but knew that doing so would not serve her. Turning, she moved onto her side, her head resting on her outstretched arm. As the pains continued, increased, she clawed at the ground, the dirt sifting through her clenched fist.

She breathed and then again, until all echoed pain. Turning again onto her back, she howled with the wind rising and then finally, *now finally*.

Summoning strength, she rose until she sat. She reached between her legs.

There was no sound, only blood, which she wiped away with her apron. There was no breath, only her tears, which watered the wildflowers, sure to bloom tomorrow in memory. And the wind —

A steady breeze rocked her as she sat with it there in her lap. Then the wind became cruel, teased from her mouth the name *Gabriel* and carried it away.

The bells again; her husband's voice called to her in its sound.

She swiped at her cheeks. She looked down and gently folded the arms and legs under, tucked the head beneath. She took the ends of her apron so it was cradled as she rose.

Tomorrow, again, they would go to the priest and when it was time, she would lie with her husband, one hand clutching the dark hair at his nape, the other across the pillow, clutching the necklace, fingers entwined in beads.

In the distance, the flame of her husband's face flickered in the window.

At the edge of the path, she knelt, reached into her lap, setting the stone in place behind the last and the others before. She pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips, smoothed her hand along the skin still soft, though it would stiffen like them all now under her feet as she made her way to the door. Not one beneath her steps ever uttering a sound.

## Tears

He insisted on oatmeal and fried onions for breakfast. Following, he wants to go outside and water the roses.

Nan is at the sink, scrubbing the skillet. Stilled by his request, she takes a breath, reminding herself it is not an outrageous request, just *another* request — she does not know how many this morning alone. Pulling her hands from the lukewarm water, she lets the cast iron thud to the bottom. She cuts across his path to the door.

Outside, she dries her hands on her pants as she rounds the house to check the lock on the gate leading out front — to the vast and unfamiliar neighborhood —and then she returns to the backyard, surveys for things he might trip over.

The yard had never seemed “too large” until recently. In fact, when she and Russ first viewed the house they had had doubts about the size of the backyard — would it comfortably hold the four or five children they were planning?

Nan stands at the edge of the yard, her mind alive with the wild boyish ramblings that had never occurred. The dark braids, wisps of hair escaping,

which had never swung upside down from the lowest branch of the oak she and her husband had planted in anticipation.

She shakes herself from the thoughts, reminding herself not to compare what she'd wanted and what she'd received. She turns to find her father-in-law outside.

He stands over the rose bushes, a steady stream of yellow showering.

Nan laughs, afraid of what she might do otherwise.

Her father-in-law appears shaken at her reaction. "I'm sorry. Did I need to put the nozzle on first?" he asks.

She breathes deep. "It's okay, Poppa. Let's just put the hose away and go back inside."

Nan guides his hands as they push his penis back through the slit in his boxer shorts. She watches him tug on the zipper, pulling his pants closed and she's momentarily pleased that he remembers still how to operate the fastener.

"They'll bloom full with a good watering," he tells her as they walk across the patio to the back door, and Nan nods, glancing back to the rose bush, the wetness clinging to petals, like a shimmer of tears in the mid-morning sun.

## **The Men in My Life**

I am yanked from sleep and lie in that alert paralysis and fearful anticipation which follows sudden awakening.

The forecast, on the last television news broadcast, called for clear skies so I know it's not an unruly storm rocking my old trailer on its foundation. The pounding at the door echoes my heart thumping against my chest, and I reach over to the nightstand and ease open the top drawer, take out my ex-husband's pistol. I glance at the digital clock before I slip out of bed, creep up the hall to the living room and peek out the curtain. There is someone on the deck outside, but I can't see who it is.

The pounding continues.

I cock the gun, press myself against the door and in a harsh tone, ask, "Who's out there?"

There's silence — the pounding ending as quickly as it began — and then a voice comes from the other side. "It's just me, Mom. It's Justin."

I relax, although I'm wondering what's he's doing here in the middle of the night. I open the door, and my nineteen-year-old son is standing there, grinning

at me.

“It’s late,” I tell him.

“I just wanted to talk,” he says. “Bond a little with my mom.” He looks dejected. “Can’t I come in?”

I open the screen and glance about the yard. There’s no vehicle except my truck. “You walk?”

“Some friends dropped me off,” he responds, stepping in and flopping on the couch.

I glance up the road leading to my house and see no taillights. He’s been out there a while, I realize, and that bothers me. I close the door and lock it.

“Please, do,” Justin tells me, pointing toward the gun in my hand. “Put me out of my misery.”

He’s high on something, drunk, besides. Again, I mention the hour.

He pouts. “Don’t you even want to talk to your own son?”

At eleven-thirty at night when I’m trying to sleep, no, I don’t, but I don’t tell him this. I sigh. “Justin, why don’t you come over in the daytime?”

“Is it my fault,” he asks, “that Christina chooses to be such a bitch at this hour?”

I sigh again. I haven’t the patience to hear him bemoan that on-again, off-again obsession he calls a relationship. Like my daddy would say “Try’n fix it, but if it’s broke most of the time, you might as well throw the damn thing away.” I’ve told Justin as much, but he hasn’t heeded my advice.

I take the gun back to my bedroom and then return to the living room. I sit in the chair across from him. “So what are we going to talk about?”

He shrugs, though he continues to grin. He is, I note, a handsome boy, and I realize that though he is an alcoholic, he is not like his father: angry and destructive. Not like my father: moody, self-deprecating. He is charming, animated and talkative. He may be splitting inside, but he always tries to appear happy.

“I gotta pee,” he says suddenly.

“You know where the bathroom is,” I say.

He rises and makes his way down the hall, a ball

in an arcade game, bounding off one wall and then the other.

I take the opportunity to go to the kitchen, to my purse sitting on the table. I find my wallet and remove all but three dollars. Folding the rest of the bills in half, I quickly survey the many possibilities before I open a cabinet and slip my money into a box of stuffing bought last Thanksgiving but never used. I put the box back on the shelf, behind some other boxes, and press the door closed before returning to my seat, where my son finds me when he returns.

Like I know he will, my son runs through a number of topics before he gets to what he really wants.

“Do you have about ten bucks I can borrow?”

“I’m broke. Just enough to get me a pack of cigarettes tomorrow,” I say.

I go to my purse and hold my near empty wallet out for his inspection. “This is all I’ve got,” I tell him.

A previous “visit” from Justin once cost me \$200 in an unauthorized ATM withdrawal. Pressing charges against my son would have saved my checking account, but would have jeopardized his probation. I opted to close the account and lose check-writing privileges until I pay off the bounced checks and the associated fees.

When I was married, his father, Wayne Roy, had no qualms about picking up my paycheck without permission, forging my signature and drinking away the last two weeks of my working life before the bills were paid and the children fed.

I know I will never see the \$313 given to me by relatives over the years as Christmas and birthday presents that my father borrowed with the promise to pay his “angel back, with interest.”

I’ve learned to lie with no suspect and no remorse from the men in my life.

“I just need ten bucks,” he whines. “I’ll pay you back when I get paid next week.”

His probation officer called me last week, looking for Justin because he’d cancelled an appointment

and never rescheduled another. When I suggest the PO call Dave's Burgers, he told me he had.

"Justin's no longer employed there," he'd said, although he didn't mention why.

I didn't know what to say to his PO because Justin had promised me he'd see this job through to the end of his probation.

Right now, I don't want to embarrass my son or catch him in his lie, so I just say again, "I'm broke, Justin. This is all I've got."

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Justin decides he doesn't want to talk. He wants to read. As he scours through the few books I own, I announce I'm going to sleep.

"Hey, can I borrow your truck? I can go get you your cigarettes."

My back is to him and I smile, delighted I can tell the truth. "Something's the matter with the alternator or the battery. It's not running right now. Pete said he'd bring his charger tomorrow."

Pete's my neighbor, five or so lots away.

"Oh," he sounds disappointed.

I reach the doorway to my bedroom. "Goodnight, Justin," I holler before I enter, crawl back into bed and sleep.

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I am pulled awake again within hours, my son's voice outside resounding across the remote desert.

The living room door is open, the porch light on. I look out and there are Justin and Pete, leaning into the truck with a flashlight. They've pushed the truck closer to the trailer, and the battery charger sits on the railing of the porch deck, a thick orange extension cord running from it into the living room through the partially open screen to an outlet in the wall.

Seeing me, Justin yells, “We’re working on it!” Irritated, I walk out and join them. Catching Pete’s eye, I whisper, “I’m sorry.”

“I was up,” Pete says, although I’m sure he’s lying. “Anyway, it’ll save me a trip in the morning.” He smiles like he understands whatever is going on. “We’re just charging it; it won’t be ready ‘til morning.”

I glare at Justin.

His grin wilts. “I thought you wanted the truck running.”

I’m about to let him have it — how many people does he plan to wake up and pull into his latest drama? — but I calm myself. “I’m going back to bed,” I say and head back inside.

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I’m still awake when Pete leaves and Justin comes in. I try to ignore his noise, but I will not sleep if this continues.

I must, at every opportunity, place limits on how I’m treated by others. That’s the advice of my support group at Al-Anon. I don’t have to yell or plead or even provide explanation. I just need to clearly state what I need and learn to accept what others can or cannot, will or will not give in response to those needs.

I take deep breaths, recall the prayer we use, asking God’s assistance in my search for serenity as I get out of bed and walk up the hall.

In the meeting room, it all sounds doable, but standing before my son, I feel my resolve quiver. Still, I hear myself say, “It’s time to go to bed.” I just want him to sleep this off.

“I’m not sleepy,” he says. Justin is sitting on the couch, flipping through a book.

“Well, I am,” I force myself to respond. “So, either lie down on the couch and go to sleep or leave.”

Justin looks at me. Are his eyes glassy from drink or do they glisten with tears? I can’t help but think

that he might have been different had I spent his childhood raising him rather than trying to raise his father. I open my mouth, but before I say anything, my son closes the book, sets it on the coffee table, makes his decision.

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I have watched the digits on the clock radio change for almost an hour.

He didn't want to sleep here, I tell myself. That was his choice. He's responsible for whatever happens. That's what my Al-anon sponsor would say and I would agree. Still, that doesn't stop me from pulling myself out of bed, dressing, retrieving the gun and heading up the hall.

There are coyotes. Rattlers. Bobcats, not likely, but possible.

I turn on the outside light and check the battery charger. The LED gauge has a window with a color bar, a diagonal line separating the green from the red. The battery has been charged just above 50%. I should wait, I should, but the needle sits in the green — even if it's just an nth of the way — and I take this as a sign to go. I grab the flashlight lying by the charger and head down the steps. I prop the hood of the truck up all the way and lean into it, aim the flashlight beam at the battery, checking that drunk or sleepy eyes have placed the clamps on the correct posts.

Straightening up, I look across the vast land. *He could be anywhere.*

Still I get into the cab, toss the flashlight on the seat and place the gun on the dash. I put the key into the ignition, but check to make sure the light switch is pushed in, the radio turned off, before I twist it. I don't even have to utter a prayer as the alternator turns over on the first try, like it knows, somehow, that it must.



## **Earthworms**

The rain stops and your mother sends you and your brothers outside.

You should be in school, but you have no jackets and the car still isn't working. Your mother went next door, but Mrs. Daniels, your neighbor, didn't answer this time so your mother yelled that you were staying home.

Peter and Ross rush to the sidewalk, the puddles inviting them to further your mother's pissy mood. You watch as they discover the earthworms, which have surfaced and now wiggle across the concrete.

Your brothers use twigs to prod them. Ross shares something he learned in class and then the two are using the twigs to saw and saw until bodies split in two.

Suddenly your mother rushes out and slaps your brothers and you.

Through his tears, Ross offers, and you pray that it's true, that not only will they survive, but they'll become whole again as well.



Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz is a fiction writer and poet. Visit her blog, "gwen notes," at <http://gwennotes.blogspot.com>.

Cover Artist Daphne Buter lives in the Netherlands. She is an author as well as an artist and hovers on the Internet at <http://butter.blogspot.com>.



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