TARYN PEARCEY

YOUR MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

YOUR MOTHER DIED OF A BRAIN TUMOUR when you were eight but waited twenty years to start haunting you. The first time was in the produce department at the supermarket. You had a bell pepper in your hand and were trying to remember if they were better soft or firm or if it even mattered since it was cheaper to buy cup o' noodles and frozen dinners. Your mother appeared from behind an elderly couple comparing cheeses in the deli, as if she marched around the grocery store looking for a manager every Saturday afternoon. She was wearing a floral-patterned cardigan that you recognized from a photograph from the 1970s that your dad once showed you.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, moving toward you hurriedly. She looked rushed and annoyed, one hand on her jutted hip, and you turned to see if any of the other shoppers were disturbed by the appearance of your disgruntled, middle-aged dead mother.

"I'm shopping," you said.

"You know what I mean." One of the slippers on her feet was pink, and the other was so dirty that it had turned grey.

You looked down at the basket on your arm for answers, but it was empty. "I need groceries, Mom."

She threw up both hands and shook her head. "You've always been difficult," she said. Then she turned and shuffled away.

You spent the rest of your trip to the store searching for her, and after two hours your basket was still empty. When a security guard started to follow a couple metres behind, you decided to go home.

That night you dreamed of sitting in your mother's kitchen, writing out all of her Christmas cards or "practising your penmanship," as she called it. Snow was falling outside. You were home sick from school, but she said that wasn't an excuse for not getting work done. She was trying to make a meal that involved chopping a lot of garlic, and the air was thick with the smell of it. The recipe was hand-written on an old index card, and every so often she

asked you to read something but became frustrated and walked away before you had a chance to speak. As she moved around the kitchen, she spoke to you without expecting an answer. She was teaching you one of her life lessons, which were often brought on for no reason.

"Sometimes bad things happen to good people," she said. "That's something you might as well learn now, Steph. Pregnant women die in car wrecks. Children are born with horrible diseases and spend their short lives suffering. There's no reason, no order in the world. You'd just better get used to it."

The next time your mother visited, you were looking for a new apartment. There were only four weeks left on your lease, so you crammed as many appointments into the day as you could, and during one of these appointments you opened the closet in the bedroom of a run-down basement suite to find her wearing the same cardigan and slippers as before. You hadn't realized the first time how much taller than her you'd become.

"Here you are," she said. "Always somewhere you have no business being."

You closed the door, but she passed through it like smoke, so you turned and walked out.

"There you go again," she said as she followed you out to the galley kitchen. "Running away from your problems. I always knew you'd grow up to be like this. It's cowardly."

The landlord asked what you thought, but you just shook your head and continued past him and out the door.

Your mother accompanied you to all of the other apartments—the one that charged fifty dollars a month for laundry, the one with a washer but no dryer, the two-bedroom you would have to share with a mother and new baby, and the rundown complex with police cruisers in the parking lot—but after the second apartment she stopped speaking and just followed a few paces behind, her arms crossed. This was worse than her endless chatter, and you began to provide a running commentary of what you saw in each place to fill the silence.

"It doesn't look like anyone's cleaned this shower in months."

"The kitchen's pretty small, but I could manage."

"I could do nine hundred by myself."

"I could get another job, part-time. I don't do much on the weekends anyway."

"Will you give me a hint if you think I've found the right place?"

"Mom, what did you mean when you said I was a coward?"

In the last apartment you turned around to look at a doorway you just passed through, but she didn't appear.

Later that week you started smoking. It was the first time since the three cigarettes you smoked when you were fourteen—one in front of Chuck Hayes to impress him and two the night before to practise at home in the bathroom, where your brother Charlie found you and told your dad. This time you bought three different brands at the corner store because you weren't sure what you might like, and you lit one cigarette from each pack, took a couple puffs, and set them in cereal bowls like incense—one on the bedside table, one on the coffee table, and one on the back of the toilet. You thought maybe your mother was haunting you because she died young and wanted you to do the same.

It occurred to you that all of the pictures of your mother had been lost in your building's basement storage locker. When your dad purged all of his, you let Charlie have most of them since he didn't remember what she looked like. As a teenager he used to point out women on the street and ask if they reminded you of her, and you used to correct him about the eye or hair colour or the shape of the face. After a while he stopped bringing it up.

Without photographs you resorted to things around the apartment that reminded you of her, such as the old ratty sweater you bought ten years ago because you thought it was kitschy, the front page of last week's paper with the minivan car wreck, and the cloves of garlic that got lost in the cupboard and sprouted little green tendrils. Then you sat down to wait—first with nothing, then with a magazine, then with a cup o' noodles and the TV on. Eventually you fell asleep on the couch, the stench of nicotine circling your nostrils.

Your mother was married once before and had a daughter with her first husband. She never talked about them with your dad or brother, but she told you constantly about her first daughter, Caroline. It was as if you were an empty notebook and she was trying to record everything she knew about her through you. She would sit on the closed-in porch and call for you to bring her lighter—which you did eagerly, as it was the most attention she gave you all day—and as soon as you were there she would already be halfway into some memory.

"Caroline was such a quick learner. She was walking before any of the

other kids in the 'Mommy and Me' class—even those a couple months older than her—and her first words weren't something throwaway, like 'mama' or 'papa.' Caroline said, 'dog,' 'ball,' and 'snow.' And she was so beautiful that people would stop me in the supermarket and ask to take her picture. Even I couldn't believe that I had made something so beautiful. It would do you some good to get to know her—to have an older sister like her to look up to. She could teach you a lot, I bet. If she was so advanced at that age I can only imagine what kinds of things she's doing now."

Sometimes, when you thought about Caroline, you hoped that she would turn out the exact opposite of what your mother wanted—that she would cut off all her hair, smoke too much pot and develop memory problems, work at a dead-end job like waiting tables or flipping burgers, or marry young and not finish school. And sometimes you hoped that she would turn out exactly like your mother wanted—a lawyer, doctor, or politician with a rich husband and a brood of blond, cherubic children—and then drop dead from an undiagnosed brain tumour just when she reached the peak of her perfect life, maybe stumbling into a large display case at the mall and landing sprawled on the floor with her ugly, saggy, "it's laundry day" granny panties on full display.

You mother became a regular part of your life without asking your permission. Some days she appeared at breakfast, usually shaking her head at whatever you put in your mouth. You tried to repeat the breakfasts that made her show up, but she seemed to come and go as she pleased. She watched you shower and dress for work, offering notes on how your clothes didn't work with your figure. She watched you tear the eviction notices off the door and throw them in the trash on your way out. She sat next to you on the bus and chuckled if you stumbled or missed your stop. "Why don't you have a car? Did you even learn to drive? I'd blame your father, but you should have pushed him to teach you."

She was there when your boss approached your desk and gently reminded you that you had some vacation time saved up and that you might consider using it to "wind down a little." As you left the office early with your purse and the little potted violet that no one else would water, your mother pointed out which of your coworkers were watching out of the corner of their eyes.

Over the next week she went with you to the library and the park. She sat on the opposite end of the couch as you absorbed hours of daytime TV—

court shows, cooking shows, crime shows, and competitive tattooing shows. "Even when I was sick, I never sank this low," she said. "I always kept busy doing whatever I could—laundry, cooking, cleaning. What kind of kids did I raise if this is where you turn at the first sign of trouble?"

You snuck away to the bathroom to call Charlie. You weren't sure what time it was in Thailand, but it probably wasn't a time when he wanted to be awake.

After six rings he picked up. "What?"

"It's Steph."

"I know. What is it? Is it Dad?"

"It's Mom."

The line went quiet. You wondered if this was one of the bills you forgot to pay.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Does she ever *bother* you?"

He sighed. "Sometimes, I guess, but honestly I don't remember much."

"I mean does she ever bother you, like does she ever follow you around and talk to you or berate you?"

You could hear shuffling on his end, as if he was sitting up in bed. "Is everything okay? Have you been working? Dad says you haven't called . . ."

Your mother called out to you from the other room, but you couldn't make out what she was saying over the sound of the TV. Scattered around the sink were cigarettes from the packs you brought home. You picked one up and ran it along your bottom lip.

After she passed, the doctors said that the tumour had grown slowly, deliberately, remaining undetected for so long by avoiding all the major structures, only popping up with the occasional headache or spell of irritability. It made everyone believe it was just another part of who she was. It was so patient and smart that it could have been with her for years, they said.

She refused to be admitted to the hospital. The doctors tried to convince your dad, but he could never stand up to her—not even when she weighed ninety pounds and could hardly sit up on her own. They gave her a month but said she likely wouldn't be coherent for that long. Your dad had to work through most of it because he still had to pay for her medication, so you were in charge of the house and your brother.

Sometimes a nurse came around to check that your mother was breath-

ing all right. It was the same nurse each time, and she rarely spoke, which you thought was strange because your mother's doctors had always gone out of their way to talk to you. You didn't like the nurse because she threw out all of your mother's cigarettes, without which she didn't have a reason to call you into her room anymore. When she stopped being able to recognize people, you would make Charlie a grilled cheese, turn on *Sesame Street*, and then go up to her bedroom to watch her breathe. She talked for as long as she was able, the whole time staring up at the ceiling, her eyes moving wildly.

"I wouldn't be marrying if I didn't want . . . things get better."

"Three hours? Three hours is . . . might as well take her to China."

"People try to decide . . . but you won't let that happen."

"Don't let your grandmother pick out your clothes . . . doesn't know what she's doing."

"Visit you real soon . . . promise."

Near the end she could only wheeze. You thought that was strange, since the problem was supposed to be in her brain. You thought that maybe the problem was really in her lungs because of the smoking, and you thought that maybe she might get a transplant. You could even give her one of yours. You didn't know the phone numbers for the doctors or the hospital, so you called your dad at work and explained it to him. He was silent for a long time before he told you not to worry. He said that he was going to come home early and that he would pick up McDonald's. By the time you hung up and went back into the bedroom, she had already passed.

The last Saturday before you were going to be evicted you were scavenging for free samples at the mall when you saw Caroline at the cell phone kiosk. She had the same blond hair your mother told you about, and she had sunglasses perched on her head and a nice purse. You followed her around the corner, but she got lost in a crowd dotted with other blonds who looked just like her. Every time you thought you found her, your mother would say, "She's much more beautiful and successful than that. Do you really think she'd be caught dead in an off-brand cardigan?"

You eventually left the mall and crossed the parking lot to the Superstore. You laughed and asked your mother if she thought Caroline inherited her shopping habits. Then you wandered inside and searched the produce section and the frozen foods. You finally found her staring at a display of packaged lunch meats and slowly walked over. When you were finally stand-

ing next to her, she didn't look at you or even acknowledge your presence.

"Don't ignore me," you said. "You can't pretend you don't know who I am."

"Speak up," your mother whispered over your shoulder. "How is she supposed to know you're there?"

"How dare you show up out of nowhere and act like I don't exist?"

"You see how composed she is?" your mother persisted. "You need to be more like her. Straighten your back. Speak from your diaphragm."

Her hair had seemed bright—almost blinding—but as you got closer it started to fade. She was really more of a dirty blond, if she was blond at all, and her porcelain skin was shiny, oily, and dotted with pock marks.

"I'm as much her daughter as you are, if not more. Where were *you* when she died? I bet she never even haunts you. It's me she wants to check up on—*me*."

You took a deep breath and smiled. It had been weeks since you felt this good. Your mother didn't offer any more advice, and you took her silence as praise.