



The One That Scares You Most

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LISA WAS FORTY-ONE WHEN HER MOTHER HAD A STROKE. Her brother Teddy called to tell her about it. It had been twenty-three years since she had spoken to her mother and a few weeks since she'd talked to Teddy, who worked as a life coach. The thought that anyone would pay Teddy for his advice made Lisa laugh. He was morbidly obese, a diabetic who smoked. The life coaching thing was new.

"She woke up a different person," Teddy said about their mother. "She's nice now."

"What do you mean, 'nice,'" Lisa said.

"Nice like sweet," he said. "She's been asking for you. And for Dad. She'd forgotten she and Dad are divorced. When I told her, she cried. It was weird. I don't think I've ever seen her cry before, have you?"

"She doesn't cry, she makes people cry. She made you cry all the time."

"I've forgiven her," Teddy said piously. Of course you have, Lisa thought. Most of Teddy's income was doled out to him by their mother; she'd been floating him for decades. When she died, Teddy would be wealthy. He was counting on it.

"When did this happen?"

"This morning. I wanted to call you earlier."

"Why?" Lisa said.

"Because I thought you should know," he said. He was trying to sound grave, but she could hear a thread of anxiety in his voice.

Is she still a drunk?" she said.

Teddy sighed. "She hasn't asked for a drink if that's what you mean. She hasn't been drinking as heavily as she used to the past few years. I wouldn't call her a drunk."

"You never did," Lisa said.

Opening a kitchen cupboard, she took out a box of graham crackers, then went to the refrigerator for a carton of lemonade. Her five-year-old daughter Rosie had a friend over; they would be wanting a snack any minute. She looked through the French doors that led out to the back patio. Rosie and her friend Bella were sitting on an iron loveseat grooming their American Girl dolls. The day was hot, and Rosie's face was as flushed as a peach. Lisa's husband Peter was on his knees, weeding the lush bed of hosta at the foot of the tall wooden fence between their brownstone and the neighbor's. Peter thought Teddy was an idiot. He'd never met Lisa's mother.

"She's going home tomorrow," Teddy said. "I called a service the hospital recommended; they're sending a nurse. She's weak on her left side. I guess you should wait until Monday to see her."

"See her?" Lisa said. She poured the lemonade into two glasses. "What makes you think I want to see her? This is your problem, Teddy. She's all yours."

"I need you," Teddy said.

"What for? You said you hired a nurse."

"The doctor said it's likely she'll have another stroke. She could be paralyzed next time; she might lose her speech. She could die!"

"Isn't that what you've been waiting for all these years?"

"What? Don't say that!"

"Okay, well, let me know when she does die. Actually, no, don't."

"But she's asked to see you," he said.

"Don't care," she said.

"How can you be so unfeeling?" he said.

"Easily," she said, and hung up. She set out the lemonade and crackers and called Rosie and Bella inside.

"Can we have Oreos?" Rosie said.

"Graham crackers are healthier than Oreos," Lisa said. She wrapped her arms loosely around her daughter's neck and breathed in Rosie's hair. It was warm and smelled of Rosie's strawberry shampoo, blond like Peter's, thick and

curly. It was a piece of luck, having such a delicious child. She would have stayed like that for the rest of the afternoon if Rosie hadn't wriggled in protest.

"Mommy, no," she said, aggrieved. Reluctantly, Lisa let her go and went outside to talk to Peter.

"Hello there," he said cheerily as she came up behind him. "Come to help me, I hope?"

"Suzanne had a stroke," she said. She hadn't referred to her mother as "Mom" or "my mother" since the day Suzanne prevented her from entering from the apartment where she'd grown up by changing the lock on the door. Lisa had been seventeen, a senior in high school. She'd had to go live with her father in New Jersey and switch schools in the middle of the year. "Teddy called. Apparently Suzanne has amnesia and has forgotten what a bitch she is."

Peter sat on his heels and brushed soil from his hands. "Seriously?"

"That's what he says."

She knelt beside him and violently pulled a dandelion out of the ground by its roots. "He says the stroke has made her *nice*. How can a person who's never had a kind moment in her life suddenly become nice? I don't see how a stroke could do that."

"Strokes can affect any part of the brain. A personality change isn't uncommon," Peter said. He was the kind of person who read everything and had all sorts of facts at hand. Lisa never doubted anything he said. She depended on him being right the way other women depended on their husbands being handy around the house.

"There isn't a molecule in Suzanne's brain that contains nice," she said.

"What does it matter what she's like now?"

"She doesn't get to be a nasty drunk for her whole adult life and then just turn on a dime and go out as a sober sweetheart. She doesn't get to forget who she was."

"Why don't you tell her who she was, then? Now's your opportunity."

"Because she asked for me to go see her, and I refuse to give her what she wants. Yes, I am that small."

"You're that angry," Peter said.

She pinched a weed and yanked. "Yep. Small and angry."



When Lisa went to live with her father, he'd been at the end of his second marriage. Her stepmother wasn't a terrible person, but she'd fallen in love with another man and was on her way out the door. "Good," she'd said when Lisa showed up. "You can keep him company. You're peas in a pod, you'll have a grand time together." It was true that they were alike. Lisa had inherited her father's prominent nose and straight black hair, his love of words and facts. If their time hadn't been exactly grand, it hadn't been unpleasant: her father had swayed admirably in the emotional weather of a displaced teenaged girl. Though at the time Lisa felt herself to be deeply unhappy, she looked back on their months together fondly, the creatively concocted meals and invigorating yardwork, their shared enthusiasm for Scrabble. She'd never before had her father to herself for any length of time. They became close by dint of maneuvering around each other, finding points of connection here and there like small gifts laid at their door. She had been seven when her parents divorced. She could not imagine being divorced from Peter. There was nothing about her parents' lives that she could imagine for herself.

A few days after Teddy's news, Lisa met her father at a midtown restaurant for lunch. He rarely came into the city since he retired a few years ago, but he wanted to see her in person, he'd said, to talk about Suzanne. Teddy, the big baby, had called him.

"Honestly, I don't see what it has to do with you," Lisa said as they were being served their meals. "You were married to your second wife almost as long as you were to Suzanne and you don't even know where Hilda is now."

"Hilda and I didn't have children together," he said. "Don't be mad at Teddy, he's in over his head."

"He's always in over his head," she said. "He just stumbles along doing whatever. Have you seen him recently? He's a whale."

Her father repositioned his water goblet on the tablecloth and made a sound in his throat. The restaurant was fancy, Italian. He always took her to expensive places and paid the check, which made her feel cherished and safe. He looked fresh in a pressed blue dress shirt and a blazer made of straw-colored linen. "Teddy isn't you, Lisa," he said.

“No kidding,” she said.

“But he has some very good qualities.”

“Such as?”

“Empathy.”

“I’m plenty empathetic,” Lisa said. She put down her fork. “Wait a minute. You think I should visit Suzanne, don’t you. Wow, I’m surprised.”

“Why? I’ve always wanted you to patch it up with your mother.”

“*She* locked *me* out of the house.”

“Well, you called her a drunk.”

“No, I called her an alcoholic.”

“The clinical term! That’s even worse,” her father said, and they laughed. “You know she would have taken you back if you’d apologized.”

“I wasn’t going to apologize for telling the truth,” she said. “How many times do we have to go over this ground? You know what she was like, Dad. I’m glad I got away.”

“I wish you’d known her when she was young. She was sharp as a tack, and so funny—irresistible, really, everyone loved her.”

“I find that so hard to believe,” Lisa said. Blah, blah, blah, she thought. She’d heard it before. They had gotten to the restaurant early, but now it was crowded, the atmosphere loud with broken conversations and scraping chairs, the clatter of silverware and china. She wished they could talk about something else. Lately, Rosie refused to play soccer for some reason she wouldn’t divulge. The three of them were going on a family vacation to Cape May in a couple of weeks. Lisa was considering doing some freelance editing in addition to her publishing job, with the idea of eventually making it a full-time thing so she could work from home. She toyed with her pasta, spearing a single rotini. She’d lost her appetite.

“I was thinking—” she began.

“Alcoholism is a disease,” her father said, as if unaware that she had spoken.

She stared at him. “So I should give Suzanne a pass, is what you’re saying. I should feel sorry for her. The poor woman was a victim of forces beyond her control.”

“Lisa.”

“Dad. I’m not going to feel sorry for her. You know who I feel sorry for? Me.”

“You turned out all right,” he said without looking at her. When he did look up, his eyes were rheumy and tired. He was getting old, she thought with a pang.

“No thanks to anyone but myself,” she said. “I don’t remember you being any help.”

“What do you mean? I took you in!”

“Excuse me? Took me in?” she said. “I wasn’t some urchin, I was your daughter!”

She left the table and went down a long hallway to a ladies room that was nearly too small to turn around in. Sliding the bolt, she leaned against the door and allowed herself to seethe. Her father had left her and Teddy with Suzanne knowing full well what their lives would be like without him as a buffer and responsible adult. Either Suzanne found reasons to be livid and screaming, or she acted as if her children didn’t exist. When Lisa was about twelve, she went with Suzanne on a train to upstate New York to visit Suzanne’s mother. Teddy hadn’t been with them. For four hours, the train had chugged through lush summer landscapes, lakes and mountains and forests, but the only thing Lisa remembered about the trip was that Suzanne hadn’t spoken to her once. She’d been hungover, so Lisa knew to make herself small. It was in the days when smoking was still allowed, and they’d sat in the smoking car. Suzanne had smoked cigarette after cigarette while gazing at the back of the seat before her, either deeply lost in thought or trying not to jar her head. Lisa had found the dining car by herself and bought a three-dollar tuna sandwich for lunch, and Suzanne got up to use the bathroom once, sliding wordlessly past Lisa’s knees. Lisa had no recollection of her grandmother or the visit, only Suzanne’s relentless silence and the fug of cigarette smoke.

Someone rattled the door. “Occupied!” she yelled. Her voice echoed off the tiles. She reapplied her lipstick and returned to the table composed. Her father had ordered them both tartufo, her favorite dessert.

“I was seventeen years old,” she said as she sat down. “Seventeen, Dad. She kicked me out and somehow I’ve always been blamed. Please tell me: how does that compute?”

“I’m not saying you were to blame,” he said. “But you’re not seventeen anymore.”

She cracked the chocolate shell on her tartufo with her spoon. The ice cream inside was vanilla. The day Suzanne locked her out of the apartment, she’d been

puzzled that the key wouldn't turn. She'd jiggled it and tried again. When no one answered the doorbell, she'd banged on the door until a neighbor came out and told her to stop. "I don't know about that, Dad. A part of me will always be that seventeen-year-old girl."

"Oh, come on now, don't be dramatic," her father said.

"It's true," she said mildly. She didn't expect to be understood.

"You only have one mother, sweetheart."

"Right. And that mother had only one daughter."

She looked beyond him at her reflection in a long mirror across the room. She wore a tailored dress made of lilac silk with a square neckline that framed her collarbones; her long hair was pulled back into a sleek braided twist, revealing a pair of delicate gold hoops in her ears. She had an interesting job, a husband she loved, a daughter she adored. I escaped, she thought. I freed myself. And yet she had also been discarded.



Rosie loved Teddy, and Teddy loved her, so Lisa wasn't entirely surprised to come home from work and find her brother sitting cross legged on the carpet in Rosie's room playing with her collection of horses. Rosie was in possession of the biggest, most realistic-looking horse in the collection; Teddy held a glittery little pony that had once decorated a cake. Peter had let him in an hour earlier and gone back to his computer.

"Let's go on a trail ride," Rosie said.

"Okay, partner," Teddy said. He looked up as Lisa came in. "Mommy's home."

"Mommy, Uncle Teddy's here!" Rosie said.

"I can see that, baby," Lisa said. "Can I borrow him?" She beckoned to Teddy, who arduously stood and followed her downstairs. Though the house was cool, he was perspiring.

"She's smart as a whip, isn't she?" he said. "I bet she gets As in school."

"They don't give grades in kindergarten, but yeah, she reads everything, she's like her dad." She took a baking dish of marinating chicken out of the refrigerator, then opened a box of lettuce and dumped it into a wooden bowl.

“Speaking of dads, I saw ours today.”

“He’s going to visit Mom, you know.”

“No, he’s not. He only told you he would to placate you. What is it with you wanting everybody to visit Suzanne?”

“She could die, Lisa. Don’t you want to make things right again before that happens?”

“Right *again*?” she said. “What ‘things’ were ever right in the first place?”

“Don’t you love her?” he said.

Lisa put the dish of chicken in the oven. “Of course I don’t love her. I can’t believe you have to ask.”

“I can’t believe you just said that! I don’t think it’s true. What kind of person doesn’t love their mother?” He pinched the flesh between his eyebrows as if she’d given him a headache; his face and neck were flushed. His shirt tails were half untucked and his jaw was darkened by a day’s worth of beard. You’re a mess, Lisa thought. Very few of her and Peter’s friends and colleagues had met Teddy, and that was on purpose. He’d done a year and a half at a third-rate college, and lived in a studio apartment in a bleak post-war building at the farthest reach of the Upper West Side. She had a master’s degree in Comparative Literature. Peter was an economist. Their brownstone in Park Slope had three bedrooms, one of which Peter used as an office.

“Sit,” she said. “Calm down.” He sat at a long trestle table that was half-covered with books and mail.

Peter came in and took a bottle of red wine from a rack on top of the fridge. Lisa sat down across from Teddy. “I don’t see how you can love Suzanne after the way she treated you—treated us—growing up. Why? Because she gives you money?”

“No,” he said, offended. “I just do. People love their mothers.”

“Not always. Some people don’t love their mothers. And some mothers don’t love their children.”

Rosie came down from upstairs. She went to Lisa and squeezed against her side. “Is that true, Mommy?”

Lisa stroked her hair. “Is what true, Rosie Bear?”

“That some moms don’t love their children.”

Peter handed Lisa a glass of wine and gave her a narrow look. “Not in this house it’s not,” he said to Rosie.

“Uncle Teddy said his mom is Mommy’s mom, too,” she said.

“Really,” Lisa said. She looked at Teddy. “When did he say that?”

“When we were playing,” Rosie said.

“What else did he say?”

“He said you and me and Daddy are going to go see her.”

“No, we’re not,” Lisa said.

“But I want to go!” Rosie said.

Peter squatted down so he was eye level with Rosie. “Hey, Rosie, do you want to play on my computer?” Playing on the big computer was a rare treat, reserved for emergency distraction. They only had one innocuous game, called “Carnival,” that Rosie would play hours if they let her. Peter took Rosie’s hand and led her away. “Work this out,” he said to Lisa before they left the room.

“You are the most manipulative person on earth,” Lisa said to Teddy.

“She’s been asking about you constantly,” Teddy said. “She wants to know where you are, why she hasn’t seen you.”

“Did you tell her why?”

“Tell her yourself!” he shouted.

Lisa was shocked. “Don’t yell at me and don’t tell me what to do.”

“She always loved you more than me,” he said.

“Oh for God’s sake,” she said. “How could you even tell? She acted like she hated us both. Anyway, obviously she loves you or she wouldn’t have supported you financially all these years.”

Evening was falling, and the sun’s last rays coming through the panes of the French doors created golden rectangles on the floor. The baking chicken smelled delicious. Lisa could hear Rosie’s squealing laughter upstairs. She made a wide circular motion with her finger as if to encompass it all. “This is my life, Teddy. I made it all by myself.”

“You think my life is crap,” he said.

Lisa folded her hands on the table. “Truth? I think Suzanne screwed you up and made you not value yourself. I think that’s why you don’t take care of yourself and can’t sustain a relationship or have a career. I think she crippled you, and she gives you money because she knows it and feels guilty.”

Abruptly, Teddy stood and went out to the patio. Lisa watched him fish a pack of cigarettes out of the back pocket of his jeans and light up. He’d been smoking since he was thirteen, filching Suzanne’s Marlboro Lights; he would doubtless die young, which was sad. She got up and went out to him.

“Drag?” she said. He passed her the cigarette. She had briefly smoked in high school because it was the cool thing to do, but gave it up when she went to live with her father. Now she took an occasional investigative puff if she was with someone who was smoking, which was almost never. She took a drag and resisted coughing. A cricket shrieked from somewhere. The traffic on 9th Street was faintly audible. She thought about the trip to Cape May. “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, but that’s what I think. If you’d gotten away from her, you’d have had a happier life.”

“She tells me she loves me all the time now,” he said.

“Then what’s all this about her loving me more?” She handed back the cigarette.

“She was meaner to me when we were growing up.”

“That was only because you provoked her.”

They stood in silence. She could hear his breathing and smell his odor, a combination of armpit and tobacco.

“How’s the life coaching?” she said after a while.

“I couldn’t get it off the ground,” he said. “I’m thinking about getting a real estate license.”

“Do you really think Suzanne will die soon?”

“I think she might have a fatal stroke, yeah.”

“Then you won’t have to worry about having a job anymore.”

He shifted his weight and blew out a stream of smoke. “That’s not why I love her.”

“I know. Leave this alone, will you Teddy?”

“Is that really what you want?”

She laughed and turned to go back inside. “You must be deaf,” she said.



The oppressively muggy weather turned overnight into the kind of bright, crisp day that Lisa envisioned when she thought about summer, though days like that were relatively few during August in the city. She got out of the subway two stops early so her walk to work would be longer, bouncing along in a pair of sneakers she would exchange for proper shoes at the office. Her phone rang. She fished it out of her bag, looked at the unfamiliar number, and imme-

diately dropped it back in. A few minutes later, it rang again, showing the same number. Thinking it might be someone from Rosie's day care, she answered.

"There you are!" a bright voice said. "Are you coming to see me soon?"

Lisa ducked into the entryway of a building. Suzanne's voice was higher than she remembered. "How did you get this number?" She felt the harshness of her voice in her throat.

"Teddy gave it to me," Suzanne said.

"I'm busy," Lisa said and hung up. She held her phone in a shaking hand as she punched in Teddy's number. "You fucking asshole," she said when he answered.

"What?" he said.

"Suzanne just called me. You gave her my number." Teddy didn't reply. "What the hell, Teddy? You agreed to stop this shit."

"I did, but that was after I gave her your number."

"You had no right," she said.

"Change your number then," he said.

"That's what I'll do," she said.

At work, she handed her phone to her assistant and asked her to take it to Verizon.

"You have to do that, they won't let me," Britney said. She was very young but far more confident than Lisa had been at her age. "But why do you want to change it? You're going to have to alert all your contacts, it'll be a big pain."

"I'm being harassed," Lisa said.

"No kidding," Britney said. "Do you know who it is?"

Lisa paused. She had yet to meet anyone who could comprehend her relationship with Suzanne. Britney talked to her mother every day and called her "my best friend."

"Some guy I knew in college," she said.

Britney nodded sagely. "A stalker. Why don't you just block his number?"

"Of course!" Lisa said. "I don't know why I didn't think of that."

Britney smiled. "It's a less dramatic solution."

Lisa spent the rest of the day in a state of trembling anger, reliving every shitty thing Suzanne had said and done that she could bring to mind. "Why can't you remember the good times?" Teddy once said. She couldn't remember any good times, only the bad: they swarmed her mind like flies. Finally she called Teddy again.

“Tell me a good time with Suzanne,” she said.

“Nantucket?” he said. “That house Mom rented when we you were ten and I was twelve?”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Sure you do. The house on Pine Street. Mom was great, she hardly drank at all. We used to ride our bikes to the beach and have a picnic every day. You were afraid of the waves. Mom would hold your hand and show you how to dive through the breakers. We’d go to the market on Main Street and buy flowers in the morning, and to the Sweet Shoppe for ice cream after dinner. You and Mom both loved strawberry. One day we went out in a sailboat. I remember being surprised Mom knew how to sail, but she did. We had a blast.”

Lisa recalled the crashing waves and Suzanne’s hand in hers; the blue horizon that sliced the ocean she imagined went on forever. “Watch the waves,” Suzanne had said. “When you see the biggest one, the one that scares you most, hold your breath and dive under it.” Beneath the wave, the water was bubbly but calm, and Lisa would bob to the surface like a buoy.

“Okay thanks,” she said to Teddy

“You remember?” he said excitedly. “It’s a good memory.”

“It is,” she said.

When she got home at the end of the day, she dumped her purse on the floor by the door. She could see Rosie outside on the patio. Peter came out of his office.

“Your mother called.”

“She called you?” Lisa said.

“No, she called the landline.” As if bidden, the landline rang. “That would be her,” Peter said. “She’s been calling every thirty minutes all afternoon.”

“Teddy must have given her that number too,” Lisa said. “Let it ring.”

“No, she’ll only keep calling.”

“Then I’ll leave it off the hook.”

Peter picked up the phone and handed it to her. “Just tell her to stop.”

“Hey sweetie!” Suzanne said in the same cheerful voice, as if they spoke on the phone every day. “What are you doing right now?”

Lisa sat down at the kitchen counter in a fading patch of light. It was getting dark earlier these days; summer was winding down. “Right now?” she said.

“Yes,” Suzanne said.

“Right now, I’m talking to you.”