

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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THE HANDMAID'S TALE



MY EVIL MOTHER

a short story

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You're so evil," I said to my mother. I was fifteen, the talk-back age.

"I take that as a compliment," she said. "Yes, I'm evil, as others might define that term. But I use my evil powers only for good."

"Yeah, tell me another," I replied. We were having an argument about my new boyfriend, Brian. "Anyway, who gets to say what's good?"

My mother was in the kitchen, grinding something in her mortar. She often ground things in her mortar, though sometimes she used the Mixmaster. If I said, "What's that?" she might say, "Garlic and parsley," and I'd know she was in *Joy of Cooking* mode. But if she said, "Look the other way" or "What you don't know won't hurt you" or "I'll tell you when you're old enough," I'd realize there was trouble in store for someone.

She was ahead of her time with the garlic, I feel compelled to mention: most people in our kind of neighborhood hadn't found out about it yet.

Our neighborhood was on the northern margin of Toronto, one of many cities that were rapidly expanding over farm fields and drained swamps, wreaking havoc with the vole populations and flattening burdocks as they went. Out of the bulldozed mud had sprouted postwar split-levels in tidy rows, each with a picture window—ranch style, with flat roofs that hadn't yet begun to leak in the winters. Those who lived in these houses were young moderns, with children. The fathers had jobs, the mothers not. My mother was an anomaly: no visible husband, no job exactly, though she did seem to have a means of support.

Our kitchen was large and sunlit, with a canary-yellow linoleum floor, a breakfast nook, and a white dresser with rows of blue plates

and bowls. My mother had a thing for blue in tableware; she said it warded off any evil eyes intent on ruining the food.

Her eyebrows were plucked into two incredulous arches, as was almost still the fashion. She was neither tall nor short, neither plump nor thin. In everything, she took care to imitate the third choice of Goldilocks: just right. That day she was wearing a flowered apron—tulips and daffodils—over a shirtwaist dress with small white and pastel-green stripes and a Peter Pan collar. Cuban heels. Single strand of pearls, wild, not cultured. (*Worth it, she said: only the wild ones had souls.*)

Protective coloration, she called her outfits. She looked like a dependable mother from a respectable neighborhood such as ours. As she worked at the kitchen counter, she might have been demonstrating a jiffy recipe in *Good Housekeeping* magazine—something with tomato aspic, this being the mid-1950s, when tomato aspic was a food group.

She had no close friends in the vicinity—“I keep myself to myself,” she’d say—but she performed the expected neighborly duties: presenting tuna-noodle casseroles to the sick, taking in the mail and newspapers of those on vacations so their houses wouldn’t be targeted by burglars, babysitting the occasional dog or cat. Though not the occasional baby: even when my mother offered, parents of babies hesitated. Could they have picked up on her invisible but slightly alarming aura? (Invisible to others; she claimed that she herself could see it. Purple, according to her.) Maybe they were afraid they’d return to find their infant in a roasting pan with an apple in its mouth. My mother would never have done such a thing, however. She was evil, but not that evil.

Sometimes women in distress—they were always women—would come over to our house, and she would make them a cup of something that might have been tea, sit them at the kitchen table, and listen, scanning their faces, nodding silently. Did money change hands? Is that how she made her living, at least in part? I couldn’t swear to it, but I have my suspicions.

I’d see these consultations going on as I trudged upstairs to do my homework. Or homework was my cover story; I was just as likely

to be painting red nail polish on my toes, or examining my mirrored face for flaws—too sallow, too zitty, too chipmunk-toothed—or applying a thick layer of deep-red lipstick and admiring my pouty reflection, or whispering to Brian over the hall telephone. I was tempted to eavesdrop on what my mother was saying, but she could always tell when I was doing it. “Big ears,” she would say. “Off to bed! Beauty sleep!” As if mere sleep would make me more beautiful.

Then the kitchen door would close, and the murmuring would resume. I’m sure my mother gave these troubled women a chunk of advice, at the very least, though it might also have been a mysterious liquid in a jar. She kept a supply of such jars in the refrigerator. The goop in them was of different colors, and they were none of my business. Neither was the herb garden at the back of our house, in which nothing was labeled and everything was off-limits, though I was occasionally allowed to pick flowers from the benevolent decoy ornamentals placed strategically here and there and to stick them into a vase. My mother had no interest in such frilly, girly decorations herself, but she was content to indulge me.

“That’s lovely, my pet,” she would say absentmindedly.

“You didn’t even look at it!” I would whine.

“Yes, I did, my treasure. It’s very aesthetic.”

“I was watching! Your back was turned!”

“Who says you need eyes for seeing?”

To which I had no answer.

The percentage of husbands in our neighborhood who developed coughs or broke their ankles, or who, on the other hand, were promoted at their offices, was probably no higher than elsewhere, but my mother had a way of hinting at her own influence on these events, and I believed her despite the nagging doubts of common sense. I also resented her: she thought she was so clever! Nor would she tell me how she’d done it. “That’s for me to know and you to find out,” she’d say.

“Nobody actually likes you,” I’d thrown at her during one of our standoffs. “The neighbors think you’re a loony.” I’d made this up, while suspecting it was probably true.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Don’t you care what they say about you?”

“Why would I care about the tittle-tattle of the uninformed? Ignorant gossip.”

“But doesn’t it hurt your feelings?” My own feelings were frequently hurt, especially when overhearing jokes about my mother in the high school girls’ washroom. Girls of that age can be quite sadistic.

“Hurt, fiddlesticks! I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction,” she’d said with a lift of her chin. “They may not like me, but they respect me. Respect is better than like.”

I disagreed. I didn’t care about being respected—that was a schoolteacher thing, like black lace-up shoes—but I very much wanted to be liked. My mother frequently said I’d have to give up that frivolous desire if I was going to amount to anything. She said that wanting to be liked was a weakness of character.

Now—now being the day of our fight over Brian—she finished grinding and scraped the contents of her mortar into a bowl. She stuck her finger into the mixture, licked it—so, not deadly poison after all—then wiped her hands on her flowered apron. She had a stash of such aprons, each with a seasonal theme—pumpkins, snowflakes—and at least five crisp, striped shirtwaist dresses.

Where had she acquired those flowered aprons and shirtwaist dresses and the string of real pearls? She wasn’t known to go shopping, not like other mothers. I never knew how she got anything. I’d learned to be careful what I myself wished for, because whatever it was might materialize, and not in a form that fulfilled my hopes. I already regretted the pink angora sweater with the rabbit-fur collar and pom-poms I’d received on my last birthday, despite having mooned over its image in a magazine for months. It made me look like a stuffed toy.

She covered the bowl of mashed-up garlic and parsley mixture with a little red plastic hat and set it aside. “Now,” she said, “you have my full attention. Who gets to say what’s good? I do. At the

present moment, good is good for *you*, my treasure. Have you tidied your room?"

"No," I said sulkily. "Why don't you like Brian?"

"I have no objection to him as such. But the Universe doesn't like him," she said serenely. "She must have her reasons. Would you like a cookie, my pet?"

"The Universe isn't a person!" I fumed. "It's an it!" This had come up before.

"You'll know better when you grow up," she said. "And a glass of milk, for solid bones."

I still believed that my mother had some influence over the Universe. I'd been brought up to believe it, and it's hard to shake such ingrained mental patterns. "You're so mean!" I said. I was, however, eating the cookie: oatmeal raisin, baked yesterday, one of her staples.

"The opposite of 'mean' is 'doormat,'" she said. "When you're tidying your room, don't forget to collect the hair from your hairbrush and burn it. We wouldn't want anyone malignant getting their claws on that."

"Like who would bother?" I asked, in what I hoped was a contemptuous tone.

"Your gym teacher," she said. "Miss Scace. She's a mushroom collector, among other things—or she was in the old days. Some disguise! Gym teacher! As if I'd be fooled by that!" My mother wrinkled her nose. "It takes so much energy to keep her at bay. She flies around at night and looks in your window, though she can't get in, I've seen to that. But she's been poaching my mushrooms."

I wasn't in love with my gym teacher, a stringy woman with a chicken neck who was given to hectoring, but I couldn't picture her gathering toxic mushrooms by the light of the full moon, as I knew they ought to be gathered. She definitely had an evil eye—the left one, which wasn't entirely in sync with the right—but she lacked the heft of my mother. As for flying, that was bonkers. "Miss Scace! That old biddy! She's not even . . . She couldn't even . . . You're so crazy!" I said. It was something I'd overheard at school: *Her mother's so crazy.*

“Crazy is as crazy does,” she replied, unperturbed. “Let’s not duck the subject. Brian must go. If not off the planet, out of your life.”

“But I like him,” I said plaintively. The truth: I was besotted with him. I had his picture in my wallet, taken in a train-station photo booth, with a lipstick kiss covering his tiny, surly black-and-white face.

“I dare say,” said my mother. “But the Universe doesn’t care who we like. He was dealt the Tower. You know what that means: catastrophe!” My mother had read Brian’s tarot cards, though not with him present, of course. She’d made one of her pressure-cooker pot roasts and invited him to dinner—a suspect act in itself, which he must have known since he frowned the whole time and answered her perky inquiries in monosyllables—and saved an uneaten corner of his apple pie crust as the link between him and the Invisible World. The pie-crust corner was placed beneath an overturned tray; she’d laid out the cards on the tray bottom. “He’s going to be in a car accident, and I don’t want you in the death seat at the time. You need to cut him off.”

“Can’t you stop it? The car accident?” I asked hopefully. She’d stopped a couple of other looming disasters that had been threatening me, including an algebra test. The teacher had thrown his back out just in time. He was absent for three whole weeks, during which I’d actually studied.

“Not this time,” said my mother. “It’s too strong. The Tower plus the Moon and the Ten of Swords. It’s very clear.”

“Maybe you could mess up his car,” I said. Brian’s car was a mess anyway: thirdhand and no muffler, plus it made strange clanks and bangs for no reason. Couldn’t she just cause the car to fall apart? “Then he’d have to borrow another car.”

“Did I say it has to be his own car?” She handed me the glass of milk she’d poured, sat down at the kitchen table, placed both her hands on it, palms down—drawing energy from the Earth, as I knew—and gave me the benefit of her direct green-eyed stare. “I don’t know which car it will be. Maybe a rental. Now do as I tell you. The long and short of it is, if you dump Brian he won’t die, but if you don’t

then he will, and most likely so will you. Or else you'll end up in a wheelchair."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Queen of Hearts. That's you. You wouldn't want his blood on your hands. The lifelong guilt."

"This is nuts!"

"Go ahead, ignore my advice," she said placidly. She stood up, snapped her fingers to release the excess Earth energy, then took some hamburger out of the fridge along with a plate of mushrooms she'd already chopped. "Your choice." She spooned the garlic mixture into the meat, broke an egg into it, added dried bread crumbs and the mushrooms: meatloaf, it would become. I wish now that I'd got the recipe. Then she began mixing in everything with her hands—the only proper way to do it, according to her. She made biscuit dough like that, too.

"There is absolutely no way of proving any of this!" I said. I'd been on the high school debating team that year, until Brian had said it was a brainy thing to do. For a girl, he meant. Now I pretended to disdain it, though I'd secretly taken up the study of logic and was keen on the scientific method. Did I hope for an antidote to my mother? Probably.

"You wanted that pink angora sweater, did you not?" she said.

"So?"

"And then it appeared."

"You probably just bought it," I said.

"Don't be silly. I never just buy things."

"Bet you did! You're not the Easter Bunny," I said rudely.

"This conversation is over," she said with chilling calm. "Change the sheets on your bed, they're practically crawling, and pick those dirty clothes up off the floor before they fester. Panties are not carpets."

"Later," I said, pushing the limit. "I've got homework."

"Don't make me point!" She lifted one hand out of the bowl: it was covered with niblets of raw flesh, and pink with blood.

I felt a chill. I certainly didn't want any pointing going on; pointing was how you directed a spell. People used to get hanged for