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MAY CAUSE HARM TO SELF OR OTHERS BY NAOMI KIMBELL COPYRIGHT 2006

I was about fourteen when I found out my mom was afraid of me. She confessed this to my dad shortly after I requested a sword for Christmas.

Afraid of me?

Well, yeah. You are kind of scary, he said and shrugged. *Sometimes.*

I laughed. I tried to laugh in an evil way. Then I slunk back into my room to think about things. I had always been afraid of my mom. This turning of tables was interesting and worth some careful speculation. What kind of leverage could this give me?

Shit! This word was used nearly to the exclusion of all others when my mom was cooking, cleaning, doing yard work, or getting ready for work. *Shit!* was often followed by a loud crack or crash of something being flung into the wall with titanic force yet careful forethought as she never broke anything really important to anyone. In fact, very little was ever broken but we never invested in nice cookware or cutlery. It just wouldn't have lasted.

Jesus fucking Christ, was also used with some regularity, though its usage was much different than the former. It was nearly always uttered under breath, through gritted teeth, rage and brimstone glistening in the eyes. *Jesus fucking Christ, why isn't anything ever easy,* my mom would say as she tried to open the plastic around a package of batteries. *The people who invented packaging should die of small pox.* She also thought that vandalism should be a capital crime and that euthanasia had been unfairly stigmatized; ruled out as a treatment option for certain conditions and diseases.

During a rage, I used to stare at her in awe. Horror, if I was riding with her in the car. We drove a 71 Datsun 210, mustard yellow, black vinyl interior. The seats seared right through your clothes on a hot day, the dash off-gassed hot, rubberized fumes and my mom hated to drive. She white-knuckled every turn, leaned on the horn, and if that wasn't loud enough, she'd yell. I'd sit in the back seat and hold on tight.

So, of course it surprised me to hear that my mom was afraid of me. It had never occurred to me to kill my parents with the sword I'd requested. I wanted to hang it on my wall, for decoration. But since my dad had kind of insinuated that they were afraid I'd kill them, I thought about it in gory detail, then decided to use another method if I ever really wanted them dead.

That Christmas, instead of a sword, I got towels, light blue and light green. I also got a set of light blue flannel sheets. I tried to be polite, but it was really hard.

Towels? I asked.

Well, we needed them, said my mom. *So I thought it would be fun to wrap them up. To make it look like there was more under the tree.*

I wanted to cry. I had saved those packages for last because they were big and soft and I thought they might be clothes. I was actually excited to open them.

Towels, I said again. My mom sighed in staccato and grabbed at some stray gift wrap.

I guess I can't do anything right, she said and began jamming paper into a garbage bag.

I guess you can't, I thought, but knew better than to say it.

My mom's mom, Margaret, was also scary, I guess that's a family trait, but she was scary in a different way. Margaret wore pressed, polyester suits, high heels and hats. She whistled a lot, but never a tune. She expelled flatus at random, inappropriate times because, she said, of her hemorrhoid surgery; she didn't hold herself to the same standards of etiquette she expected of everyone else.

Margaret hated my mom. It was a palpable hatred, but never admitted in words. Margaret was above reproach in all ways, Methodist and precisely devout. Charitable, self sacrificing, and long-suffering, Margaret was a self-made saint; St. Margaret of Anaconda, our Lady of the Smelter. With a glance, Margaret could unravel you. She hid criticism in every compliment and demanded respect, adulation and above all, service.

When I was born, my grandparents and my aunt with Down's Syndrome came to visit. My mother might have thought it reasonable to expect that her mom would help out, give her the advice all new mothers crave. But rather, she expected to be waited on and shown the sites of San Diego; was angry when no trip to the zoo was planned.

After a week of my parents ruining Margaret's vacation, my dad, fed up and furious, stood at the door of the bedroom he shared with my mom and said audibly, *when the fuck are they leaving?* The next day, Margaret, my grandpa and aunt were gone and after that, each Christmas and birthday, sent my parents expired coupons as gifts; me, broken toys and clothes that didn't fit. Her judgment had been passed, our family existed at the margins of her charity, she, just barely conscious of our existence, dropped a line once in a while to tell us of her latest cruise, a charity event she had organized, or to gossip about other family members that had earned her displeasure. My mom seethed at this treatment, but could never have confronted her mother. Margaret simply wouldn't have acknowledged any wrongdoing. She was simply above reproach. And she knew it.

Some months before my dad told me about my mom being afraid of me, I decided I needed to be more of a prankster, a characteristic I didn't come by naturally. Egged on by my devious friend, Leslie, I put canned mushrooms in my parents' slippers, short-sheeted their bed, mixed up their vitamins, heinously switching the B complex with the multivitamin, and rubbed ketchup all over a homemade mannequin I'd hung on the door to look like blood, all in the same night. When my parents got home I waited for the explosive laughter, guffaws and knee-slapping. It didn't come, and my amusement shifted quickly to regret as they began discovering what I'd done. I could hear their voices, hurt, angry, *Jesus fucking Christ,* even my dad

said it.

Later, my mother talked with me in hushed, harsh tones in the kitchen.

Was this Leslie's idea? she asked, spit coming through the minute gaps in her clenched teeth.

Yes, I said, nodding vigorously. Obviously it was Leslie. *All her idea. She made me do it.*

She can't come over anymore, said my mom.

Okay, I said, I didn't like Leslie much, anyway.

A week or so later, I tied all the living room furniture together with string and waited at the top of the stairs, giggling, thinking I'd really come up with something funny this time.

Oh, for Christ's sake, my mom sighed as she saw the web. But she didn't try to untie it, or stomp up the stairs and holler at me. I'd broken her. She simply stepped over the strings, got another cup of tea and went back to watch Mary Tyler Moore. My parents never mentioned it to me, I never tried another practical joke. Instead, I focused on another area of interest. Space-time travel.

Space-time travel was definitely accomplishable, if one could muster the amount of concentration it took to achieve it. I walked around, looking for portals, attempting to meditate a hole in the fabric of space large enough for me to slip through and never be seen again. I was woefully unsuccessful, so I began reading books on the occult and astral projection, looking for techniques, specific recipes that had proven results. Astral projection seemed a common enough phenomenon, replicable in laboratory tests. It should have been easy. I spent hours lying on my back, listening to space music, trying to pull my consciousness out of my forehead by sheer force of will. The most I accomplished was a rocking sensation, the feeling one has on a ferris wheel, and, convinced I was close to finding the portal out of my head, redoubled my efforts, but never achieved success.

As an adult, I would describe this practice to my doctor, who then added the phrase psychotic features to her original diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Not an easy condition to be pegged with, actually, but fun to bring up at key moments in casual conversation.

You know, it wasn't until I was thirty that I realized not everyone hallucinated. Isn't that funny?

My social skills sometimes mirror my mother's, who doesn't really have any. I sit and watch the crowd at parties, rarely fully engaging in it, unless drunk. I don't like chit chat, grandiose gesticulation, wide, openmouthed smiles and vigorously nodding heads. Everyone at parties seems to have an affect disorder of which the main feature is best described as *specious enthusiasm*. Simple, perfectly fine words like wow and hi and cool become multisyllabic and imbued with an intensity of meaning not found in a Webster's dictionary. They are usually uttered in an earsplitting pitch and are likely to cause the eyes of the utterer to pop out of their skulls. Even aside from parties, I don't really like people at all. That's another diagnosis. Not sociopathy but social phobia, which means I'm afraid of people and social situations. My mother has the same affliction. I asked her how she dealt with it: *I stay home,* she said.

I have been prescribed meds for anxiety and now, instead of being afraid of people, I criticize them audibly. At thirty-five and in marriage number three, I've finally decided on several things: I don't feel the need to be polite and stay in

situations in which I am uncomfortable. I never eat food I don't like and I'm not afraid to ask for substantial raises at work. I also feel fine about letting someone know when I think they're stupid. In this, I take after Margaret, a point which my mother mentions frequently. I have no problem with this comparison. I don't like bullshit. Neither did she.

In fact, I'm told I'm rather mean, which I think is true. I am mean. And sometimes murderous. That's probably another diagnosis, but one I have yet to confess to my therapist.

About two-thirds through my first marriage, I thought I might kill my husband. We had been together for four years and had endured fights to the point where we had stopped yelling and simply endured. The reasons for our staying together were far outweighed by good reasons to end it.

That night, when I stood in the kitchen with the knife in my hand, there had been no fight, no harsh words, just the sudden realization that I had wasted all this time, years of my life, in a relationship that was doomed, with a husband who didn't respect me. Water filled my lungs, all at once, as if I hadn't realized I was at the bottom on an ocean, and tried to inhale. I wanted to claw through my chest and open the space around my heart, let the water out, and at first, I thought that's what I might do with the knife; the knife I was still holding, fingering, toying.

My husband's back was turned toward me, he was talking to our little daughter, crouched on the floor looking at her stack of blocks. I was leaning on the counter with the long blade in my hand. It was a knife my husband had made. *Poetic*, I thought. *Perfect*.

I fingered the handle, cradled it firmly in my palm. The weight was good. Good balance. It had a full tang so there was some heft to it. It was razor sharp. All our knives were. It was a source of pride for my husband to keep them that way.

Convenient.

The blood drained from my face and left it cold.

I was shaking, trembling.

The moon shone through the window. The dogs drowsed on their beds. The fire crackled in the woodstove. Dinner bubbled in the oven. We were having stew.

I gripped the knife tighter.

There, between the ribs.

I stood there, silent, a lump in my throat.

Desperate. I am desperate.

I put the knife down and left the room, though part of me stands there still.

Murderous. Waiting.

I often think about it.

Naomi Kimbell works and writes in Missoula, Montana. She is currently employed at a homeless shelter, and has spent her career working with battered women, people in poverty and the homeless. Naomi has considered herself a writer all her life and is now a graduate student in the MFA program at the University of Montana. This is her first publication.

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