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**Mother Pearl**

## “Mother Pearl”

Typically she liked to travel a cappella, with no particular agenda but her own. Now the staff at Bethany Elder Care traipsed alongside her, as if Pearl were the Queen Mum, some royal personage who needed great care and chronic attendance. It miffed her beyond belief.

“Time for your clinic appointment.” the Candy Striper enthused gaily.

“Splendid,” Pearl mumbled beneath her breath. “I’m ecstatic.”

The Candy Striper carefully lowered Pearl into the wheelchair, as if Pearl were liquid and might spill. They sped down an elongate linoleum hallway and the sharp smell of antiseptic commingled with cooked peas.

Pearl’s wheelchair angled into the cramped space before Nurse Smith, lurching to a stop when the Candy Striper’s toe tripped the wheelchair brake.

“There’s no escape for me now,” Pearl thought glumly. Nurse Smith slipped on the plastic gloves with a snap, then tapped the syringe twice before poking Pearl’s arm.

The perfect word presented itself, then abruptly disappeared. *Must not misplace my words.* Pearl studied the patchwork pattern of protruding veins on her papery brown skin. Oh yes - *here it comes.* Oh no - *there it goes.* She rubbed her temples vigorously to jumpstart the stalled synapses.

“Schadenfreude,” she announced victoriously to the Nurse.

“Beg pardon?” Nurse Smith tightened the black leather swathe about Pearl’s arm and pumped a pear shaped ball vigorously. The long tentacles of the stethoscope dangled from her ears as she took Pearl’s pulse.

“Schadenfreude,” Pearl repeated. “The malicious joy taken in other’s pain.”

Pearl looked about impatiently, taking in the canisters of pills and syrups, all vile tasting and unpleasant. They would give her one medication to correct the fall-out from another benefiting none save the self-aggrandizing pharmaceutical firms. No one was likely to enlist her opinion, though. Halfwits. Idiots. Nincompoops.

“I’m afraid your blood pressure is up today, Pearl. Looks like you’ve been over indulging in potato chips, you naughty thing. Salty foods are *not* permitted.”

“I suppose you’d commandeer my vodka too, if you could find it.”

“*This* is the medicine used to manage your blood pressure.” Nurse Smith deposited one blue pill into Pearl’s pale palm, and Pearl pretended to pop it into her mouth. Once back in her room, she volleyed the tablet into the toilet where it dissolved with a fizzle.

Pearl sat idly before a picture window. So much time to fill, even with her writing, the hours stretched and billowed. Perhaps her son Harley would be by for a visit. Perhaps not. He frequently made promises to visit which he did not keep. Her internment here, insisted upon by him, was preceded by a tumble down a flight of stairs which landed her first in the hospital, then days later, in this nursing home. About the fall, Pearl remembered little, but she frequently relived those first few hours coming around at Saint Joseph’s. She’d felt like a caged animal with the bars on the bed and the tubes emitting from her veins. Her rounded knees, poking up like doorknobs from beneath the loose hospital gown, were bruised as overripe bananas. She remembered examining her body carefully to inventory the damage. One trembling hand traversed the length of her body. Her forearm was swathed in cotton bandages and the other arm was imprisoned in a sling. Eventually they’d taken her for an MRI.

A white clad attendant had slid her down the corridor of a long cylindrical tube. He'd lowered the lights and raised the air conditioning. A soothing rush of music filled the room, and Pearl felt decidedly pampered and indulged. When the incessant knocking began, it reverberated in her bones. Every ten minutes or so her host's voice, piped into the chamber, inquired, "Every thing OK, Pearl?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied politely. "The ambiance is superb and the views spectacular." *Stiff upper lip old girl. Grist for one of your characters who will have to suffer this fate soon.*

Presently, the knocking turned into banging and the banging into crashing and the walls of the tube seemed to collapse. Pearl's back itched, nose ran, and her legs tingled with pins and needles. Even though instructed to be as immobile as a cadaver, she'd wiggled her toes.

"You're done, Pearl. Time for the butterfly to emerge from the cocoon."

*Lovely, she remembered thinking. I'm a new woman.*

The technician who'd administered the MRI escorted Pearl back to her room. He was a courtly little man who wore a perky red bow tie which blossomed forth from his bulky white medical jacket. His tennis shoes were red, too and they squeaked when he walked alongside her.

"I think you're amazing," he said tucking her back into the hospital bed.

"I'm not amazing, I'm *ninety-three*."

"May I ask you a silly question," he asked flushing. "What were you before..."

"Before I got old?"

“It’s just that you remind me of someone, a woman whose work I once admired. Her name was Pearl too, a Nobel Prize winner, I believe.”

Pearl doubted if the staff here at Bethany Elder Care knew who she was. As far as they were concerned, she was just an old lady who needed her nappies changed.

She opened her journal, a book covered in red tapestry with golden stitching. The clock in her room tick-tocked loudly. The wind whipped outdoors and a limb from the elm screeched across her window pane. *Write it down, old woman. Just write.* She tapped her pencil once, twice, three times on the top line of a new page. In green spidery script she wrote, April 5<sup>th</sup>, Bethany Elder Care - Day 62. Dropping down two lines, Pearl’s hand scrunched like a claw and released the words.

*Just an old lady who needs her nappies changed? Yes, most regrettably, this is true. Frequently cross, argumentative and testy, yes I am, but I’ve been other women too. I was and am the little girl sitting on my father’s lap transfixed by the silver quarter he’s pulled cleanly from my ear. The size of his hands, the spicy scent of his cologne, the way his cool blue eyes warm when he looks at me is more than just a memory. And at sweet sixteen I still stand before my mirror admiring the ebony velvet of my gown, the whiteness of my neck and shoulders, the gardenias nestled in my hair. I understand for the very first time what it means to be a woman. Eventually, I marry Charles, a famous writer, who loves every woman he sees, sleeps with every woman he meets, leaves me longing and bewildered. I am that empty space on a page waiting for the words to complete me, for the love of my lifetime will not. I am that woman floating down the Yellow River on a barge with a man who serves me green tea from a painted cup. He proudly presents me with “his” karsts limestone mountains. Even though I’ve been married for one hundred years, the kiss he presses upon my lips makes me feel shockingly virginal. I am all of these women, not just an old woman who needs her nappies changed.*

Some hours later, when sleep overtook her, the journal slipped from her hands and fell to her lap. Pearl's head bobbed heavily on her thin, reedy neck. She did not hear Mr. Singleton upset his lunch tray over the aide's head, nor the hubbub created by the death of Mrs. Bennington in the room adjacent. The walls were as thin as eardrums, but sleep rushed in and swept her up in its merciful arms.

She awoke suddenly, as was her habit, to both drop off and reawaken, without preamble. Her looking glass reflected a woman whose silver cloud of hair framed an oval face with deep set eyes and an aquiline nose. "You never were a great beauty," she chided. "But I've come to like the look of you, anyway." Presentable enough anyway for her family, who would be along shortly.

At three o'clock on the dot, her apartment door opened with a sigh and in ambled Harley and great grandson Benny who peered up from beneath a thick fringe of bangs.

"Oh, visitors," Pearl said, breathlessly. "Visitors bearing gifts! I have a great fondness for chocolate chip cookies. Let's consume the contraband before we're caught."

She looked knowingly at Benny, as if he were her special partner-in-crime.

Harley sat in the chair closest to the door, no doubt plotting his hasty exit. He valiantly struggled with conversation, or so it seemed to Pearl, moving woodenly from the weather to family gossip, finally settling upon her impressions of Bethany Elder Care.

"Well then, how are you getting along here? Is the staff up to snuff?"

"Yes, they are indeed," Pearl assented. "All but one, who is a *bizsnich*."

"A what?" Harley shook his head in confusion.

“I have acquired this word from Jamal. He was introduced as our *Domestic Engineer*. I think he attends to the laundry. He is preparing to take his GED, and is quite fond of rap music. Did you know that today’s street poetry is derived from it? I must keep my vocabulary current, after all. It’s an obligation one holds to one’s readership.”

“I doubt your readership will ever miss your not knowing street talk, Mother.”

“That’s hardly the point. The point being you asked me my opinion about the staff here, and I have just rendered it. Nurse Smith is a biznich. I know of no better word to describe her other than the one provided by my young protégé.”

Harley was clearly irritated. “Show her your picture, Benny.”

The Crayola drawing was carefully tied with blue ribbons. Benny proffered the scroll to Pearl who hurriedly unfurled the drawing.

“It’s you Grandma. It’s you in Africa and China and Antarctica.”

Harley shifted uneasily in his chair. His glasses had slipped down lower on the bridge of his nose, and he spoke slowly, articulating each and every word with painstaking care. “Benny has been bragging to his classmates about his infamous Great Grandmother Pearl. Unfortunately he’s prone to exaggeration.”

‘How so?’ Pearl studied Benny. “I’m sure this young man will be my finest biographer someday, and certainly the only one whom I will authorize.”

“He said you’d been to Antarctica. You’ve never been to the South Pole, have you Mother?”

“Many times in my dreams. And who knows, before my time is up where my imagination might take me.”

“He’s also said you’ve been to the Moon. Might as well get it all out on the table, eh Benny? She ought to know what kind of biographer is going to chronicle her journeys.”

Benny knelt down besides Pearl and took her hand. “I love you so very much,” he said. His eyes sagged pitifully and his lower lip wobbled. A puddle of tears slipped down his freckled cheeks. “Please don’t die, Grandma. Not now. Not ever. Never.”

Harley looked horrified and Pearl began to laugh. “I’m not planning on it anytime soon,” she said. “As a matter of fact, today Nurse Smith indicated that my health is much improved. Harley, you’re to have me released in a matter of days, from what I understand.”

“Arrangements are being made, Mother. Even as we speak. You are to be released by the end of the week.”

Of course this was his little fiction. Weekly visits always ended with this promise, and as yet, Pearl was still here. She looked hopefully at her son, who seemed to be rapt in the study of his cuticles.

They ate the cookies and shared some tea, and the afternoon passed quite quickly. She watched their figures retreat behind the closed door. Gone, gone her great Grandson who she cherished and adored, and gone the son who would always remain an enigma. Harley, an only child, had always been so thoroughly out of reach. It was her fault, she supposed. She’d not been there for him when he’d been a child. There’d be babysitters and nannies, and later, summer camps and schools abroad. She’d modeled care by proxy, and now it was her turn to be helplessness and dependent, to want his care but to receive it from the hands of a stranger. But as with all aches and pains which had become familiar, she knew her disconnect with Harley would not be terminal. He would always love her and she him, although neither had a clue how to bridge the divide nor how to speak to the other. How the news might startle her following. She, the Grand Dame of Letters, at a total loss for words with her very own son.

The week unfolded predictably, and yet Pearl could not hope but anticipate week's end not with trepidation but cautious elation. Perhaps this time Harley really meant to have her released. On Friday morning, Pearl bathed, perfumed, and dressed in her best traveling tweed sat primly in her wheelchair; her suitcase zipped and latched, in her lap. She slumbered off and on throughout the morning, was taken to lunch, and then returned to her post to await an exit interview. Most likely this would be an interview that would never take place. Best not to get her expectations up, as she had so many times before. The hands of the clock plodded about the disc and the day's light faded into night.

She might as well conduct an exit interview, a mock rehearsal, here and now, just in case she *was* released, or to mentally review the scene for one of her characters. There would be the usual final health check involving the counting of heart beats, white cell counts, and bowel movements. Her accounts would be settled too, of course, all of her many extravagances to the hairdresser and snack shop exposed. Ho-hum. There was just so much accounting one had to do over a lifetime. In their efforts to sum her up and prepare her file for the archives, she wondered if they'd probe further, ask the really important questions that she'd been waiting for someone to ask.

She might be asked, for instance, if she'd been happy with her life. *Yes, she would answer, notwithstanding ten unhappy married years. But I'd dumped the sod, and loved many more deserving.* Had she any regrets or unfinished business with anyone? *Perhaps. But her relationship with her son would always be unfinished and she'd come to accept that.* Was there any place she wished to travel? *Paris might be nice, or maybe Kalamazoo.* Was there anyone she'd wished to meet but never had? *No, definitely not. Fictionalized characters were always preferable to their real flesh and blood counterparts.* Was there anything she'd said that she wished she could take back? Was anything left unsaid that needed saying? *Perhaps just...I love you Harley. I've tried to show it, but have rarely said it.* Had she any regrets to remedy, simple pleasures to repeat, confessions, admissions, declarations, prayers to be said before the last line of her

story was written? *But of course my dear, what a silly question. At ninety-three, I am more than just an accumulation of years, more than just a tired old heart supported by dwindling bones in a loose sack of skin. But those admissions, declarations, and prayers would have to wait for yet another day, for I'm growing tired and sleep is upon me.*

With that final thought, she heard Harley's voice, coming to her from afar, flowing down the hallway, fluid and constant, bubbling high, descending low, like an instrument, ever melodic; then again, perhaps it was only her imagination.