

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

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Misconception

I LOITERED NEAR THE GROCERY STORE check-out lines and squinted at the tabloids, feeling extra weary with each kilogram of my body weight and my advancing age. I'm 59, pushing 60, and every part of me screams that I'm a senior. I feigned nonchalance as I studied the National Gazette and then I opened the New Star Daily. Another glossy publication drew my attention. I think it was a new one called: Today's Modern Parent. "Hogwash," I said out loud as I read a call-out sentence emblazoned on the cover.

Motherhood is every woman's God-given responsibility and a graceful providence.

"Double Hogwash!" I did not believe in destiny. And there was nothing graceful about the ongoing chores of motherhood. I almost fumbled through the pages to study the article because I was mystified, but I didn't possess the patience or the time.

I knew more than most folks would care to acknowledge about becoming a mother and about the sustained commitment of still being one. They should speak with me. I'd shake up that misconception. Motherhood was a load of tedious work and nothing preordained.

At the age of 26, I became pregnant with the first of my three children. I thought I had wisely made my rational choices. The whole process – I mean – was all quite random. Birth was messy. And parenthood didn't get any neater with the subsequent births of each of mine.

I endured the infant-to-toddler stages with a fine vigilance, accepted the tantrums – theirs and mine. I lowered or altered my expectations and begrudged the ongoing financial expense. After that, came adolescence, a crap-shoot through the years of pre-teenaged angst followed by rebellion and shouting tempers. Most of this included the challenge of uncertainty. No partner had endured beside me or shouldered half the blame.

I had believed that my husband, Terrance, would stand with me. But before my youngest child, Carolina, had abandoned the need of diapering, he abandoned us. I began raising my two young boys and my rambunctious girl.

My three progeny are all grown-ups now, and future hopes are directed towards a need for grand kids. I want legacy. I want to be remembered.

My boys are fine. Two out of three aint so bad. I suppose I've beaten the odds? Maybe not. My Carolina? She's taken everything that's in me. She is fully christened: Carolina Alice Stokes. The boys are William Conrad Stokes and Hayden Arthur Stokes, or Denny as he prefers. My boys are still colloquially referred to by friends and acquaintances as the "Stokes Blokes," and the Blokes are doing okay in terms of adulthood. William is up north near Baffin Island, an engineer. Denny publishes how-to books for the home improvement sector. He's here in town.

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My ex is Terrance. I refer to him as: "The Deserter." He continues trekking the globe and occasionally sending tattered postcards from the most exotic climes. He doesn't say very damn much of anything on these.

I studied another tabloid called the Gossip Gazette, I got to laughing over a headline: "*Ravenous Dog Sneaks Inside Buckingham Palace and Bites Prince Charles in the Privates....*" The final words were partially obscured by an overlapping cover. My short-sighted vision mistakenly inserted a perceived plural by adding an "s" onto the word 'Private', and then a non-existent full-stop period which created a strange misconception.

I chuckled, picturing a distraught and hapless Charles bouncing around in physical distress and clutching his privates. Laughter morphed into a hacking cough due to my acidic stomach which manifests as a duodenal ulcer. I picked up the pages and saw the completed text which ended: '*Private Residences!*' Anyhow, Charles was supposedly bitten on the shin. At least that's what the details verified as truth below the spurious headline.

I paid for my groceries with as much dignity as I could, and I got out fast, knowing the check-out cashier wouldn't understand my snuffling sense of humour even if I ventured to explain.

I should be a grandmother by now. That's my reasoning. I love the weest babes. I'm getting on. My birthday is later this October. I'm not denying this advancing age. I think I'm enjoying it. I look much younger. Well, yes, I truly believe that this is fact. But it's a Hippy Hippy, Happy Birthday in the fall. By now, I'm supposed to be a grandmother just like my contemporaries, and yet I'm not. I'm still waiting, wanting, fingers crossed. I'm hopeful.

I do love the tiniest of infants and unpredictable toddlers and even the kiddies – playing with them, laughing. I like going to T-ball tournaments, eating hotdogs, tossing frisbees, and all the joyful and sweet memories gleaned from the earliest of childhood times. I miss all that.

My grown-up children are not married. They are not waltzing into solid or long-term relationships. No reproduction is eminent. Yeah, they've made it into adulthood. My daughter, my youngest child, Carolina, is off her nut again. My hair grows out with solid streaks of ice. My nails are bitten.

Carolina has been arrested three times in the last two months because she's drunk and drugging. The police have documents and they're charging her with petty theft and other minor offences. She's moved back here to stay with me.

After my visit to the grocery store, I returned to the modest sanctuary that is my downtown condo which is an extravagance paid off over the last three years. I attempted a nap because my daughter had gone out for the day and the place was silent. I hoped that she was job-searching. Couldn't sleep.

I prayed that she was distributing the carefully-worded resumés, the ones I had encouraged her to edit, glossing over references regarding her past employments. I hoped she wasn't boozing. When would she return?

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My stomach worsened. I downed half a bottle of Pepto, but still developed gargantuan hiccups, the kind that hurt.

Carolina is my battle ground. She just turned 25. She'll be staying here with me until she sorts herself out once again. That's an "if and when" supposition.

Her father? Madagascar? Nicaragua? I've kept my husband's last name. I'm not quite sure exactly why I've retained it. I am Isabelle Natasha Stokes – a grandmother in waiting.

A few nights ago, after Carolina and I had shared our casserole dinner, a noodle dish with ground beef and green peppers, I poked my head around the corner of the guest room and peered into her temporary accommodation. "No smoking in the bathroom, Honey. Reeks like a dead animal in there."

She was sitting on the bed, hunched over like a ghost and staring at the floor. "Must be something from outside," she said. "Second-hand fumes incidentally brought indoors. I told you I'm not smoking."

"Funny stuff – like a pile of putrid compost."

"Mom, where's the locket?"

"Please, I've asked you before, to pick up the laundry." I kicked a pile of underwear and socks and a crumpled, damp towel across the hardwood towards her. "Clean up."

"Auntie Sylvia gave that locket straight to me. Not to you. And where's the garnet ring, the ivory pins and the silver chains?" She yanked the front of her bathrobe over her bony clavicles and flounced a tendril of dry hair from the thick collar of the robe. "Where's the golden cherry-shaped pendant?"

"I told you. I've tucked those items of jewelry away in a safe and secure place."

"I might pawn the loot?"

"Wouldn't put it past you."

"But, I'm not. I'm definitely not doing that sort of thing anymore."

"You'll have to earn my trust. One step at a time, and an honest living wage. You have to contribute. I expect you to make a dent in the funds you owe me for the bail-outs." I ran a hand across my cheek, pulled at my chin, inhaled a deep and painful respiration. "Any nibbles for a job?"

"I'm trying."

"So what's on the agenda?"

"Mom. It wasn't that flamin' serious. You had to bail me out. Oh my god! The police are goons. Gotta make a quota or something."

"Three times. I paid. I Paid your bail and also the additional court costs. Three! That's three times way too many."

"The cops in this town are crazy imbeciles." Carolina sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "They rounded up everyone off

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the street on that last Saturday night and I just happened to be standing there. Got caught up with that crowd. Wasn't fair. Even the innocent. Like me. The cops pushed and then they shoved a lot of people into the take-away vans. Bystanders. Everyone."

"At 3 a.m.? Part of a mob in front of a sketchy night club?"

"Innocent."

"No one is into innocence or good deeds at that hour, that place. It was a Sunday morning by then." I corrected her. "And you were standing around boozing. Smashed out of your gourds. Open liquor violations. That club? What the hell's the name of it anyhow? Is it Crap of Monties?"

"It's 'Camp of Montrose,' Mom! And It's a decent night spot, a good venue. I was...."

"How's that?" I reached over and picked up the laundry. "I know it to be a sleazy booze hall down on Fifth."

Carolina shrugged and fingered her white teddy bear with the soiled pink ribbon around its neck. "Good music. There's an awesome dance floor. I trust the bouncers." She tossed the old teddy onto the unmade rumple of the bed. "Anyhow, Mom, I need about twenty dollars to cover my cab fare. Then I can go downtown tomorrow. I'm looking for work. Full-time."

"Take the bus. Number six. Every twenty minutes."

"You're kidding?"

"What interviews have you actually lined up?"

"I need a new blouse."

"There's a nice pink one in the basket. Iron it."

"That's too stodgy. It's yours."

"Borrow it. Keep it. I don't think a plain conservative blouse with a feminine collar like that one is a misfit for any sort of interview. Besides, you're showing off too much skin and curves in those stretchy numbers. Not suitable to impress an employer."

Carolina barrel-rolled herself up and off the bed, laughing softly. "Oh Mom! Don't even start," she said, grabbing my plastic hairbrush and yanking it through the ragged tendrils of her hair, humming tunelessly.

Her hair, once a lush auburn, was a source of pride to me and for her when she grew it long, is now a brassy home-dyed blonde and it's brittle. "It's not fair and you know it," Carolina said, "making me check-in with you, and always insisting I come back in here by ten-thirty, like a curfew every single evening. And not letting me have your spare key as if I'm twelve. I don't do anything wrong. I'm better, see. I'm straight as a friggin' ruler."

"Uh huh."

"Mom, I'm clean. Really I am! I'm Squeaky.... just like you used to call me when I was a kid and I'd finished my nighttime bath routine, remember? I'm a Clean Eugene. I swear I'm doin' well. And I'm totally serious

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and sober even when I do go out with my friends and we go into a club. I'm working all the steps. Living the God-damn program."

"How many days of sobriety?"

"Lots. Enough."

But it wasn't.

Carolina didn't stay ship-shape for long. I kept myself dry-eyed about it, watching her. Gradually, as before, Carolina broke all her promises, carrying away my trust and more of my patience.

A few days after our evening conversation, her eyelids started sagging. She began sleeping until noon and then later. Her skin went sallow. Her forehead dampened with sweat. She wouldn't eat the breakfast that I concocted. Then the movements of her limbs became deliberate and trembly. I saw her ambling around the apartment like a zombie. It was obvious and painful to find her consumed this way once again.

I hoped it was only marijuana edged with alcohol, or even the stolen headache pills, and not crack or those funny little oval tablets, oxy something. Previously, I'd found a baggie half-full of these stashed beneath the bathroom hamper.

I can't monitor her activities when she's outside and beyond. My Carolina gets herself together when I'm here to prop her up. Even this afternoon, she eventually straightens up. She gets dressed without too much fuss and shoves out by two o'clock.

My stomach lurches all the time. I'm not sure what to think as I stand there watching. My Carolina swaggers off and I am peering through the dusty window, watching as she strolls half way down the street. She's swinging that ridiculous sequined shoulder bag, shuffling her summer sandals. It's February.

What really freaks me out are the johns that hang-out around Garbally Street. I hope to God that Carolina isn't loitering down there. I'm almost paralyzed with fear. Hard case prostitutes and pimps that way. It's called the "Stroll" – a few seedy blocks back and forth in front of the Ridge.

Last year, I opted for everything that I could find; enrolled her in the counselling courses at Westvale. She went twice a week and then refused. "I don't respect that crazy, controlling bitch," Carolina said, referring to Dr Anna. Silverstein who oversaw her sessions.

I hassled Carolina through the social service applications. But she (or rather I) did not qualify for public assistance or psychiatric interventions. They said my pension was too generous.

During her last episode which was more than a few months back, I saw her embrace sobriety for three full weeks. But once again I smelled the whisky breath, guessed about the drugs. I hauled Carolina home and made her stay, imprisoning my own daughter. I'd kick her out again if I thought she had any place to sleep, but she doesn't.

And now she keeps vomiting, like she's a champion puker. I smell it on her; that sour evidence. Hung over and strung out.

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"Mom?" she calls to me from down the hallway. Her voice is weak and scratchy.

I'm in my room, I'm lying flat, trying for at least ten minutes. It's seven o'clock on a Friday night. Together, we have only just cleared away the supper after enduring our mutual interlude of silence. I've crept away and sought the solace of my bedroom and I've firmly shut the door.

But she knocks politely and peeks around the doorframe. And for a moment, I rub my eyes disbelieving, because I see my baby. I see the child, and she is all in innocence, peering in at me like she used to, my sweet and only cherubim. At this moment she is strikingly fresh and lovely with her long frazzled hair, her thin face and big green eyes. Her cheeks are glowing as if she's blushed or come in from the wind.

"Mom...."

"What is it Carolina?"

"I think I'm pregnant. Two months late."

I did not possess a new supply of tears and so dry-eyed I rose again.

"Mom, what should I do?"

"Let me think."

I want a grand baby and so desperately and I've dreamt repeatedly of this. She doesn't even know who the father might possibly be. We can't begin to speculate. Yes, I want to know. I pound questions out at her but nothing comes back as a distinct reply. And I must not dismiss this new reality. I must choose.

I know one certainty. I dare not let my drug-dependent, scramble-headed daughter – and she's an addict – sure, and she's single and jobless and falling further into the dereliction of the street. Presently, she's in the truest sense of poverty. I decide. Me, again – yeah me again.

I will not watch while she carries another problem, a drug-addicted infant consigned to struggle against fetal alcohol retardation, poverty, uncertainty and any number of other deficits.

Morality aside, my longings rise inside my chest and I consider the unborn: the "what if," and the "if only". Then I crash again, my hopes defrayed. I must immediately arrange a therapeutic abortion. She is already more than eight weeks gone.

I will cry for destiny and for grace, new tears for my Carolina. She will cry also. And we will cling together as a mother and a daughter are meant to be together, until it's finished.

I will soothe my child by dismissing my unborn legacy, destroying him or destroying her. I can't help but wonder about all this, the baby, my grandchild, even though I know I shouldn't let my mind wander into dark specifics.

I'll take my Carolina home, my broken doll. And I prop her up beside me and offer comfort. I'll make everything come out right – no matter

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what it takes from me or robs from her and no matter what it truly costs. And again and again and again, my heart is breaking for my daughter, exploding into a thousand tiny shards of pain.

And then I tell her everything is meant to be, like this is destiny and we shall endure. But first we grieve.