

Mildred Verba Morris

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF

Dear Dora—Yes, the garage door was smashed. Yes, your mother went to the hospital. No, I am not a monster nor am I trying to make your mother into one. Whatever fresh flourishes she added, there was no need for slander. We are a team, I have always said. Your mother is a wonderful woman, but on her bad days, lacks team spirit. To ease your mind, I will set down the sequence of events, or more precisely, the trajectory of molecules in motion, for that is what the world is made of.

We were on our afternoon walk, the same walk we have taken for the last twenty years. A misty rain fell, but neither of us would put up umbrellas. To the left, screened by bare branches, the interstate roared. To the right, houses, familiar as our own climbed heavenward like elements in the periodic table. Halfway up the hill, we saw lights in a house empty for years. With its overgrown garden and blackened shingles the house stood out, as did the couple emerging from it. The man, wearing a black oversized coat, a wide-brimmed black hat, and a wisp of beard, stopped to tinker with the lock, while the woman, also in black, walked toward us. They looked like children in costumes, or, as your mother later gushed, like the high school students she directed in *Fiddler on the Roof*—what was it?—thirty years ago? Excuse me, the young woman said. Anticipating her request, I motioned to your mother to move on. She, of course, stayed.

Contrary to her version, I do not lack pity for motorists lost in this suburban maze, but with my ears and her eyes, things have gone wrong. How wrong we only realize later as the receding car turns right, instead of left. Shaking our heads, we recall the honeymoon couple we sent to the Ramapos instead of the Poconos and that Japanese family we directed to Liberty State Park in *Philadelphia*. But that redhead in the convertible we sent to the wrong airport, that was the worst. At least we will never see those people again, we say, and in a few months, years, or perhaps centuries—amazing how time fast forwards nowadays—their reality fades, and they end up in legendary limbo with the rest of our misdirected characters.

Waiting now under an ancient elm, I shifted from foot to foot, keeping up a steady aerobic beat. Like your mother, you probably consider me a health-

o-holic. So much effort to stay alive, she yawns. Your mother is a wonderful woman, but dons attitudes like costumes for the plays she no longer directs. It was she who introduced me to our boring immortality diet. You don't live any longer, she said, it only seems that way, ha, ha. After my operation—a brush with death catalyzes your thinking—I converted to her nutritional religion, taking each of its dismal tenets one step farther. And, yes, it is boring, but there are hidden excitements within the boredom, which I would not have believed either when I was your age. We take our broccoli without sauce, our whole grain bread without butter, our lentil soup without salt, not forgetting our vitamins, minerals, and assorted medications, nor our stretching exercises and, of course, our daily walk, while trying not to worry about the Big Worry, and at the same time endeavoring to maintain a happy face and some shred of social life because isolation causes depression, the biggest killer of all.

That, at least, had been your mother's excuse for inviting the few dear friends who were not dead over the previous night for my birthday party. Most were former colleagues from the Glen Rock Science Department whom I had gladly left to their Erlenmeyer flasks and Bunsen burners when I retired ten years ago. All those academic anecdotes, those triple negative proclamations, those brayed witticisms I never laughed at. The Great Stone Face they used to call me. Oh, your mother meant well—she had planned the party for weeks—but the surprise almost did me in. Our friends read the same health articles we did and came bearing red wine and wheat germ cookies, pouring praises over your mother's fat-free eggplant lasagna, lamenting that there was no one left like her. They still remembered her *Doll's House* and *Ah Wilderness*, but her musicals, especially *Fiddler on the Roof*, had been their favorites. And she didn't look a day older than when she had taken over after the kid who played the fiddler—Tevye, was it?—got sick. Amazing. How did she manage to stay so young when every one else was falling apart? Had mortality issued her a special exemption? Your mother glowed. There were seventy-five tiny flames in her eyes after she had lit all the candles. But seventy-five! Like the Last Judgment, I said, referring to the candles, not your mother or her sugarless angel food cake.

Mitchell, the ex-music teacher, perhaps noting her stricken expression, said not to worry. We're all in the same boat.

A boat that seems to go faster and faster as it approaches the Great Waterfall, said another dear friend on his second pacemaker and fourth chablis.

But what is time? Is it the current that carries us along, or is it the river bank we pass by? intoned Mitchell. You remember good old Mitchell? Sandy hair, phony British accent, worked with your mother on *Fiddler*, Mommy's boyfriend you used to call him? And now the old windbag was back, cruising around in his motorized wheelchair, acting sexy.

You're so right, said your mother, as always, carried away by Mitchell's tiresome charm. All we can do is hang on, because it's a journey that nobody gets out of alive, ha, ha.

It took me five tries to blow out all those damn candles, and how did that look, I ask you?

Later, when they had gone, and the wine had worn off, I said to your mother, jesting, of course, in my opinion, this party had been the medical equivalent of ten unnecessary x-rays. Oh, I don't know about that, she had said, letting the dishwasher door slam—she has gone through three Maytags already—maybe only five.

All this was gyrating through my mind at top speed while waiting for your mother under the leafless elm. She could not be getting anything out of the stupid conversation, could she? Everyone knows I consider the orthodox pious bigots. You and your mother would gladly tarnish me with the same oxidizing agent, but, having survived an orthodox childhood, I believe I have earned my bigotry.

At any rate, when your mother caught up with me, she was wearing her secret smile, as if she knew things I would never know. Incidentally, her long-ago flirtation with Mitchell—the last time his name shall be mentioned in this letter—was also a scene designed to agitate me into some dish-breaking, sword-crossing fury. Needless to say, it did not work and I am still, it seems, paying the cost. So now, to allow your mother her dramatic moment, I feigned curiosity and asked her where the hell the religious couple had wanted to go. Fort Lee, she said, still smiling. Wrong direction, I said. I *know* that, she said. She couldn't describe all the twists and turns at the top of the hill, so had sent them *down* the hill to Route 4. Two miles longer, but at least the poor children will get there. Not if they're walking, I said. Why walk? she said, her smile withering. I saw a car in the driveway. I informed her that these people are fanatics. This is Friday night, the Sabbath. They walk if it kills them. Perhaps I trumpeted this too gleefully, perhaps I overdid. She looked torn between rustling up a firing squad for me and running after the poor children who had vanished into the haze at the bottom of the hill.

We had now reached the high point of our climb. Your mother was looking out at this vast blur as she called the Meadowlands, wearing her longing-for-Moscow look like the Russian sister whose name I can never remember. She had always wanted to climb the Alps, and why hadn't we? she asked, as if this were a serious question, as if she did not get winded just walking uphill. We had much to be thankful for, I reminded her: two lovely daughters, seven grandchildren, and enough money to visit them once a year, if we respected our appliances and refrained from slamming doors.

And we have our cat and our health, your mother said. Don't forget that.

It was raining heavily now, and I unfurled my umbrella. Your mother was now free to unfurl hers. Winning the umbrella game usually put her in a good mood, but not today. Our walk was now firmly downhill. We passed the house with the red tile roof and the house with the boy who runs out in his underwear. In front of the Florida house, pink, with a wrought iron flamingo guarding the door, I stopped to pick up a dime. Laugh, if you like, but I have saved the fruits of our walks in a frozen orange juice can. In twenty years, \$152.75, not counting pennies and a reasonably good Exercycle.

We were now approaching the house with the barking dog. We walked briskly, anticipating his welcoming woof as we crossed the driveway. The Doberman had always greeted us vigorously, but today he watched warily from his post in the yard. Maybe he's sick, your mother said, and as she said it, he lunged at her, growling and straining at his stake, practically wrenching it from the ground. A festoon of drool sparkled under a gibbous moon. I can't understand it, I said when we had reached the comparative safety of the house with the blue striped awning. He always looked so happy to see us. I guess I looked him straight in the eye, your mother said. You should never do that, never, I said. What came over you? I don't know, she said.

Neither of us said a word the rest of our walk. What was there to say?

When we got home, we began dinner preparations. Your mother washed the vegetables thoroughly because of E. coli, and I fed Creampuff his Science Diet and set the table, putting out wine glasses. The single glass of red wine and the hill are the two enjoyments—or what the world thinks of as enjoyments—left to us. An eventful walk, on the whole, I said, one misdirection and one mad dog. And, oh yes, your mother said, and one dime. I was pleased to see that she was easing out of her bad day syndrome and into her usual sardonic self. But then the news on the radio plunged her back into darkness. It mentioned fog, hazardous driving, and several chain reaction accidents. I

remember, she said, staring into the mid-distance, when I could still drive and I ran out of gas on Route 4. I had to walk to the station along the thin grassy strip at the side of the highway, barely wide enough for a bicycle, and those trucks came so close, I nearly died. Your mother was wearing that look of intense concentration she gets when blocking out a scene, and I refrained from saying it was her fault for running out of gas. I once saw a pedestrian hit, she said. You don't realize how people fly when hit. Then she looked at me. But no one would walk on Route 4 because someone else told them to, would they? she asked, raising her voice above the radio. I turned it up a notch. Who knows what they would do, I said. The couple, she said, were walking slowly. The woman might have been pregnant. We still have time. We could get in the car and offer them a lift. Why would they accept a lift from us, I said, if they had no intention of riding in the first place? These people are religious nuts, I reminded her. Well everybody's a little nuts nowadays, she said, shutting off the water with such force that the pipes rattled. Some benighted souls who don't know us well might think we're nuts. Don't shout, I said, turning up the radio another notch. It was you who told me emotionalism is bad for the heart. She placed her hand on her chest. So far so good, she said. I snapped off the radio. Don't you understand, I said. We're vulnerable. They've got God on their side.

Are you coming or not? Your mother's voice had that sustained shrillness that breaks glass or eardrums, but did nothing for my damaged auditory nerve. Despite what she told you, I *was* coming, but at my age I cannot turn on a dime or even a quarter. You know your mother. Not waiting for an answer, she grabbed the car keys and ran. Wrapped in her fine white rage, she was Nora escaping from her New Jersey doll's house. A minute later, I heard a crash. I ran out and found her in the car, head resting on the wheel, sobbing. In planning her grand exit, she had remembered to slam the house door, but not to open the garage door. After clearing away the splintered boards and glass, I said I would drive.

Route 4 in a fog was the perfect set-up for a collision, a molecular incident that could initiate a whole chain of events. I followed the red taillights of the car ahead, while your mother peered into the dimness at the side of the road as if she could reconstitute the religious couple out of fog and mist. If this continues, I said, I'll miss the Jim Lehrer news report on PBS. You always complain, your mother said, that they drag out the same dull pundits who say the same stupid things. That's why I listen, I said, to keep up with the stupidities of the world.

It wasn't until we rounded the curve twenty minutes later that we noticed the flashing lights. Inching closer, we saw that an ambulance had just left, sirens screaming, and another was preparing to leave. Clearly something had happened, but what? Should I ask? your mother said. My unequivocal no was her cue to roll down the window. Was this a young couple? she said. The policeman, of course, ignored her—what did she expect?—just waved us on with his flashlight.

At home we turned on the radio, but there was nothing about an accident. And on the TV screen, there was only Monica Lewinsky ducking into a black limousine. To lighten the gloom, I said, it's like the joke: *Two old Jews meet. What's new? Rabinowitz asks. Nothing, Cohen answers. Thank God, Rabinowitz says.* She did not laugh. Talk about The Great Stone Face. No, it's not like the joke, not like the joke at all, she said. *They* were young. Of course they were young, I said. Everybody is young nowadays. She shook her head. No, too young to die, she said, or something equally weepy.

Next morning, over oat bran cereal, she was no better. She said she could not sleep, and when she had finally, finally dozed off, she dreamed she was looking down from a great height and saw a procession of black limousines lined up in front of the house with bad shingles. Was this an omen? she wondered. How should I know? It's your dream, I said, then ran out to get the paper. When I got back and handed her the first section, she said she could not bear to read it. Then she sighed melodramatically. Your mother is a wonderful woman, but sometimes has trouble keeping her head above the soapsuds. Get a grip on yourself, I said. The sun is shining, and there is not a black limousine in sight.

Your mother did not appear to be listening to me. She clutched the edge of the table, her eyes fixed, her face as pasty as her cereal. She said she felt a sharp pain in her chest when she inhaled. To me, it sounded like heartburn, and for heartburn, there is a cure. I stirred a half teaspoon of baking soda in water, a classic acid-neutralizing remedy that never fails. She pushed the proffered glass away. She said she wanted to go to the emergency room at once. Just drink it, I said. If it doesn't work, we can eliminate heartburn. No, she didn't want to waste time. But by arguing, I said, we were wasting even more time, and that is what we have least of. Your mother looked at me in a way I can only describe as with malice. She gulped the liquid down, then announced loudly—even though I have told her time and again to speak clearer not louder—it's not working.

Angina was the hospital's verdict. She was to quit smoking, eat properly, avoid salt, and exercise. But you're doing all that already, I said when we got home. Was there anything else? Yes, she said, looking at me through slitted eyes, avoid stress.

Well, at least it wasn't a heart attack, I said. Without responding—I had been wrong about heartburn and was, no doubt, wrong about other things as well—your mother took down the *Home Medical Guide* and ruffled through it. It's worse than a heart attack, she said. *In three years, half of all angina patients are dead.* The triumph in her voice faded when it perhaps dawned that they were not talking about me, but her.

Be that as it may, that very afternoon your mother decided on a new route, one that does not go by the house with bad shingles. It is longer, and sometimes she has to stop to take a nitroglycerin pill, but since each additional mile cuts the death rate by 19%, she considers that a plus. You will be happy to learn that your mother has found peace, relative peace, directing her demise. Our days slip away quietly, without fanfare, like electrons in the slow decay of uranium 238. No more does your mother yell, slam doors, or talk of climbing the Alps. The hill has become her Mt. Blanc, and now when asked how to get to Palisades Parkway, she pretends she is a stranger, and when she passes a dog, she ignores it, and when it rains, she is first to put up her umbrella.

Naturally, she hopes to beat her odds, but if not, she says, play something heartwarming at my funeral, Beethoven or Mozart, and have plenty of flowers. Nothing lugubrious. Afterwards champagne and lots of food. Use the money in the orange juice can to purchase a tasteful urn, and then scatter my ashes on the hill. I nod, yes, dear, yes, dear, playing along with her little charade. Where would we be if I took all her posturing seriously?

Thank God your mother's anxiety about the religious couple seems to have precipitated out. She now says it might have been Fort Lee Road she told them to take. And even if it were Route 4, no sane pedestrian would venture on it. Fanaticism has its limits, and they did not strike her as martyrs or terrorists. Except for their clothing, they seemed perfectly normal. Besides, she was pretty sure she saw the woman, or someone like the woman, in Acme last week buying fruit and once she might have seen them both at a distance on Broad Avenue and she crossed to the other side to avoid embarrassment.

Her chief enemy now is stress, which continues to strew booby traps for your mother. But she is getting better at ferreting them out. And that is why

I would like you to keep the enclosed newspaper article from her. I came upon it while she was in the hospital, and I think we can assume that the Chaim and Rachel Perlman referred to are, or rather were, the religious couple.

Fortunately, she rarely mentions the “poor children” anymore, and when she does, it is as if time had fast forwarded them to mythical status. And who knows? she says, conjuring up the future with a theatrical wave of her hand, sooner or later we are all destined to be players in someone else’s production. She sees the hereafter as a stage set, the religious couple and our other misdirected characters dancing a wild hora through the streets, our dear friends on the sidewalk clapping and stamping, and she on a nearby roof top, fiddling madly.

So you see, your mother still has her flights of fancy—and on her bad days damage occurs—but she has no intention of turning into me. Who in their right mind would want her to? After all, she would not be the wonderful woman who can turn the dull hum of molecular decomposition into a rollicking musical if she were someone else.