My Other Mother is a Ferrari

by Sally Houtman

The first time I lied about my mother it was easy. "She's dead," I said through the bare wooden posts of the fence that divided our yard from the Bryant's. I said it three times, like a message punched out in Morse code. *Dead -- dead -- deaaaad!* I remember the look on Julia's face: her pasty cheeks all blotchy from the heat, her mouth hanging loose and open. Of course my mother wasn't dead; she was just at work. But after years of feeling second-rate, it seemed I'd finally one-upped Julia Bryant.

In truth I was jealous of Julia -- not of her fleshy knees or her flyaway hair or the uneven circles of her eyes, but more of the logic of these things -- that when I looked at her it was her mothers' knees I saw, her father's hair, her mother's eyes. I looked nothing like my mother. I did not share her thin, provincial face or her sleek, no-nonsense hair. I was a scrawny, awkward child with turned-in feet and a thicket of dark and disobedient curls. I envied Julia, the way her mother called to her across the lawn, *Joooleeah, Joooleeah*, in her rich and reedy tone. I would hear them talking through the kitchen window while I'd sit, my hands pressed against the cool glass, the sill as my frame, tracing invisible landscapes across the blue sheet of sky.

In those days it was just my mother and me; but mostly it was me. My mother ran a medical research lab, living, it seemed, in a world of negative pressure and artificial light, beyond the scope of the naked eye. She drew her world with clean thin lines, then shrink-wrapped and vacuum-packed it for our convenience. But it wasn't my world at all. Not really. I couldn't be content like her, to sit reading Asimov in the slanting light. I craved a world I could taste

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and touch; a world of light and shadow, of windowsills and empty skies.

Though we tried to connect, the gulf that divided us grew wider with the years. She came home from work one day and crouched beside me on the floor where I sat cross-legged, painting a canvas on the floor in front of me. "I'm painting a house," I said, and streaked the sky with faraway blue.

"Is it our house?"

"No," I said. "It's one of those mystery houses, the kind you pass by all the time and you can't see inside, so when you go past, you make up stories about it."

"I see." She rested her cheek on one knee, looking away without expression. "Like it could be a doctor living there who's searching for a cure to treat an illness. Or maybe it could be a famous architect who's designing a monument or museum, eh?"

I held up the brush and paused a beat. "No," I said, "in this house it's a lonely old man, you know, the kind you read about who collects piles and piles of newspapers and hasn't seen a tree for weeks." I looked up at her and felt a snag of guilt; everything I was not was there in her eyes. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll paint one for you, too."

At 14 I dyed my hair a fiery red and at 15 I got my first tattoo. By 16 I'd fully embraced the dark forces of eyeliner and existentialism. While the world marched along in practiced synchrony I was the one who chose to lag behind, knock-kneed and slightly out of step. I had become an anomaly in the exacting science of my mother's life. "I don't know what you're rebelling against," she used to say, a curl of indignation at her lips. "You've got everything a child could want." But I wasn't rebelling against anything, I was simply being me. It was my nature to be messy and contentious, but in her ranks that made me a dissenter, a mallet in her world of breakable things. When she told me I was adopted it explained a lot.

Unmarried at 42, she later said, she'd seen a T-shirt in a store window: a cartoon woman with briefcase and heels and a hand clapped to her forehead above a caption that read: OOPS! I FORGOT TO HAVE KIDS. In that moment, she said, she'd seen her future,

reaching out to her with empty hands. A child, it appeared, was an accessory she'd overlooked, one of life's little optional extras, like air conditioning or leather seats.

At 17 I left school and began to date musicians. Bruno was the first. He came by one night to celebrate having landed a gig with a local band. When my mother cracked open the door at 9:00 p.m. she found him there, all tattoos and gleaming teeth. In his hand he held a DVD, in the crook of his elbow a full bottle of Scotch. "Whaddaya say, Dr. K?" he said, arching a pierced eyebrow in the direction of my mother, "You can send me back out in the cold or you ladies can join me in my humble revelry."

Biting back her disapproval, my mother ushered him in. "Okay," she said, finger wagging, "but only if I mix the drinks and keep an eye on you both." She took the bottle from his hand and laid it on the bar, then slipped on her glasses, holding a shot glass up to the light. She tilted the bottle and began to pour slowly, tracking the liquid as it rose towards the red measuring line. "Here's a little tip," I said. "Never let a woman who slows for yellow lights and uses a ruler to cross off the days on a calendar mix you a drink."

That night we stayed up far too late while Bruno consumed far too much Scotch, watching the DVD while my mother read. He'd chosen a low-budget sci-fi film about aliens taking over the bodies of American factory workers. When it reached the part where the first alien burst free from the stomach of its host, Bruno gave me a shove with his foot. "Hey, Hannah! That's how you told me you got here!" I was lying with my chin in my hands on the soft pile carpet and I shot my mother a sideways glance. She peered over her glasses at him but she didn't say a word.

The next day I visited her at the lab. I hardly ever went there; I couldn't bear the sterile arrogance of the place. I came up behind her where she sat on her high chrome stool and stood with a takeaway container of curry, the name of her favorite Indian restaurant displayed across the front. She turned with a look of surprise and raised her hand. "Oh, Hannah," she said, extending her finger and pointing towards the floor. "You have dirt on your shoes."

If my visits to my mother's lab were uncommon, then her visits to the world outside were more uncommon still. In social situations she became unhinged, as if the behavior of anything large enough to be seen by the naked eye completely confounded her. On the occasions when she would venture into social realms, it was an event not to be missed, a rare occurrence like a comet or an eclipse. When she asked me to accompany her to the Immunology Awards banquet I dutifully complied. When I went with her that night I wasn't looking for love, I was just looking for the corned beef. But that's where I met Joel.

We were at the buffet table when my mother turned to the man next to her. "Joel Wilmer," she said. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Hannah. Joel is a technician in our research lab." She paused and pulled at her hair, the corners of her mouth beginning to twitch. I gave Joel a cool, assessing look. He was tall with even features and long slender hands. There was an air of crisp integrity about him, Everest-like, alluring and unattainable. I fiddled with the bone pendant that hung from a leather strap around my neck, feeling trashy and bohemian. As we spoke I watched my mother's face, the thin slit of her lips. I knew what she was thinking: that she'd stumbled upon the cure, the eureka moment that would relieve me of my fascination with unemployed musicians. "You two should get together," she said. "You're available, aren't you, Joel?" She turned with a coy tilt of her head. "Joel is a good catch, Hannah, too good to pass up. That is, however, if you can forgive his tendency to wear sensible shoes, oh, and that tatty car he drives."

"Oh, that?" Joel whispered, an index finger to his lower lip. "Don't tell anyone but that's not my real car. My other car is a Ferrari."

At that moment a suited gentleman approached and placed a hand on my mother's shoulder, motioning her away. "If you two will excuse me," she said. "I'll leave you to it." She made a wide arc with her hand and deepened her voice. "A stranger calls."

"Excuse me," Joel laughed, grimacing as she walked away, "but did she just do a flourish?"

"No, excuse *me*," I said, grimacing back. "But yeah."

He exhaled through his teeth and shook his head. "So Dr. Kennedy is your mother. Wow. I didn't see that coming. I mean, I never pictured her as the motherly type."

"Oh -- her?" I whispered, an index finger to my lower lip. "Don't tell anyone but she's not my real mother. My other mother is a Ferrari."

"Touché," he said and laughed. "But seriously, it must've been really, uh, how shall I say, interesting having such a brain box for a mum."

"Yeah. But seriously," I said. "It's nothing a few decades of therapy won't fix." I took a sip from my glass, steadying my nerves with wine and sarcasm. "I still have nightmares about it -- you try to imagine being tucked in at night with, 'Once upon a time there was a lonely solid pseudopapillary tumor.' And don't even get me started on the birthday parties. I tell you, she was a real scream." I do a stiff pantomime, hand on my hip. "Hey kids -- did ya hear the one about the Cytohistologic correlation rates? They were undifferentiated." I slap my thigh and give a cheeky snort. "Get it, *undifferentiated*!"

Joel's cheeks reddened. "Wow," he said. "My mum just thinks Serology is the study of British Knighthood."

With Joel I can say I really tried. He was decent and patient, loyal and fair. Love came to him with intuitive ease, wide-eyed and brightly lit. Love for me, however, was a dark and treacherous space with slippery walls and a light switch I could never seem to find. When he told me he loved me I said it wasn't real, that you can't love a thing that's in pieces, a thing that isn't whole. He said it was my fractured pattern that he loved; that he could see my brush strokes. I wondered why he wouldn't want someone more refined, someone who didn't insist on aisle seats or chew her lip or smell of turpentine. He told me that if you relieve a camel of the burden of its hump, it ceases to be a camel.

From the start I insisted we keep things light. I told him I had no expectations, wasn't interested in commitment. That was a lie. I said I needed space, that I was looking for answers, sorting things out. I told him I was searching for my bio mum.

Another lie.

In the early days I could stretch out beside him for hours, lying motionless in the deep pocket of his calm. But over time the calm consumed me, left me wanting something more -- something gritty and primitive. I wanted to break him open, love him roughly, to split the seams of civility that bound him shut. I needed love to come to me, like life itself, in short gasping breaths, transparent and hard to hold.

Our break-up, in the end, was no more than a cliché. We agreed it was for the best, that we would only hate each other in the end. But I knew this wasn't true. I knew that it was ourselves we would grow to hate, our inability to see ourselves for what we really were, how we could be fooled time and again by our own distorted reflections.

The day I moved out I found a note. It was written on clean linen paper, tucked against the beveled edge of the bedroom mirror. *I hope this helps you find what you're looking for*, it read. Below, a phone number and a name. *Bernadine Carpenter*. I felt cold inside my bones. In my hands Joel had placed the answer to a question I'd never meant to ask. I ran my fingers across the letters, feeling naked and alone. In this one brief sentence lay everything I'd hated about him.

And everything I'd loved.

That autumn I moved back with my mother. It was the autumn she began to slip away. It started slowly, an occasional lapse in memory, nouns at first -- a capital city, a neighbor's name. Over time its force grew stronger, taking with it entire experiences, blotting out daily routines. For a time I found it irksome and, regrettably, it wore my patience thin.

"Could you hand me one of those things?" she might say.

"What does that mean, 'one of those things'?"

She'd give her head a puzzled shake. "You know. One of those things."

Feigning epiphany: "Oh, one of *those* things. That narrows it down."

Her strained expression deepening. "You know, one of those long things with a point at the end."

"Hmmm . . . Long thing . . . point at the end -- a parable?"

An unblinking stare.

Impatient now. "A tornado? A Samurai sword? A Spielberg film?"

Holds up an envelope and mimics slicing it open.

"Oh! A letter opener. You could have just said."

I tried not to be concerned, chalked it up to fatigue; long hours at the lab, under too much stress. I simply could not, or would not, accept that there might be something happening that was beyond my mother's control. If there was, I decided, I did not want to know it or the future it had in store. Little by little, pieces of her began to fall away, like photos lifted from an album where only the corners remain. An ad came on TV one day for a film and she turned to me with delight. "Oh, Hannah! That looks good. Would you go see it with me?" I couldn't bear to tell her we'd seen it the week before. When she began wearing her bedroom slippers to work and her missing handbag was discovered in the lab refrigerator, a meeting with her department was arranged.

Although Joel and I had long since finished, the bond he'd developed with my mother as a colleague and a friend had remained unchanged. So it was no surprise when he asked to attend the departmental meeting, no surprise either that he expected me to be there. When he arrived, despite my protests, to pick us up that morning, I was on the sofa, curled up in my sweats with my back to the wall. I told him he would have to take her, that I had other plans.

"Oh?" he said. His face cinched into hard lines.

"Yes," I said. "I've scheduled a breakdown. It's a private one. You're not invited."

"Nice try, Hannah," he said, "but you can't run from this. It's not going away."

"You go," I told him. "Tell them whatever you want. Tell them I've suffered a massive decompression, a catastrophic loss of plot." I pulled a blanket to my chin and chewed the corner a bit. "I can't handle it," I said. It was closer to the truth than I wanted to admit.

"Forgive me for this, Hannah," he said, arms folded tight across his chest, "but for once you've got to come out from behind that firewall that separates you from the real world."

I didn't have the heart to tell him how the real world felt to me, that it was, like a city approached at sunset, a place whose basic outline I could distinguish, but whose signs, even squinting, I simply could not read. "You're right," I said. "It's called compartmentalizing. I'm compartmentalizing. It's just that everyone's going open plan these days."

He stood very still in front of the door, feet apart, shoulders square above his hips; a monument of disapproval. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry this is happening, but it's time to grow up. Your mother needs you now. This is her life we're talking about. It's your life, too."

"Okay, okay. This is me growing up." I stood, slipped on my shoes and coat, and yanked the belt into an angry knot. "But for the record," I said. "This is not my life. This is my life's ugly cousin."

When the comfortable life I'd come to know gathered its things and moved out, something new moved in to take its place. A bullying presence settled in the corners of the house, brooding, sinister. I could see it, like something rippling at the edge of my vision, but when I turned to look, there was nothing there. I felt it creep through the floorboards and rise up, pushing like gravity against me. I decided it might be time for me to face those missing pieces, time to ring the number Joel had left for me. I found the paper pressed between the pages of a book where I had left it, then sat down to dial the number, willing my hands not to shake.

"Hello?" The voice that answered was coarse and hollow, an empty shell.

"Bernadine Carpenter, please" I said. I kept my breathing steady, used my let's-get-down-to-business tone. "My name is Hannah Kennedy. I was given this number, oh, a while ago by . . . a friend. I'm trying to reach Bernadine Carpenter."

Silence. There was steady breathing and a television on too loud. Eastenders. Perhaps I'd dialed the number wrong. "Hello?" I said, and again, "Hello?" a whip of irritation in my voice.

"Hannah?" the voice replied. It was weaker now, breakable. "This is Bernie," it said. "Bernadine. Oh. That man told me you might call. Hannah, this is your mum."

We arranged to meet at a restaurant in her area. After all those years apart she'd been only a few hours away. That morning I used my mother's make-up and made an attempt to mask the world-weary look that frequented my face. I stood at her mirror and began to prepare, it occurred to me, as if for an audition: trying out for the role of the daughter in some surreal stage production. But the thing was, I'd already got the part; with no try-outs or rehearsals we'd gone straight to opening night.

I picked up the photo my mother kept on her dresser: two faces in a hinged frame. Hannah then. Hannah now. It occurred to me as I stood there that day that I would never see myself in quite the same way again.

Before I left I went into the lounge where my mother sat beside the window in her overstuffed chair. I crouched down in front of her and took her hands; they felt cold and thin like the claws of a bird. "Mum," I said. She looked up with a meager smile and began to sing. "Hannah. Hannah-Hanna-bo-banna. You're all dressed up. Off to somewhere special?" She giggled. "Banana-fana-fo-fanna."

"The nurse will be here soon. I . . . I have something to tell you." Whether or not she understood, I felt she had a right to know. I brushed the hair away from her face and tucked it behind one ear like she used to do. On a branch outside a sparrow flexed its wings and shimmied side to side in a palsied dance. "I'm going to meet someone today. It's my birth mother."

Her face darkened. "Oh!" she said. "Oh!" She stared at the wall, beyond the wall. Her voice became a whisper. "Me-my-mo-manna. Han-nah." Then she lowered her head and began, almost imperceptibly, to rock.

I drove along the foreshore on my way up the coast. A single cloud hung just above the horizon, an island in the sky. The wind gusted along the waterfront, buffeting the wind sculptures and turning the colored cubes around and around and back on themselves like some dazed and desperate creatures. Like something trying to find itself.

I sat in the restaurant foyer and looked at my watch. Twenty-seven past 12:00. I'd sat there on the bench, its narrow wooden slats biting against my spine, for 27 minutes. It was long enough for me to note the perfect fan-tail of red plastic stirrers in the Styrofoam cup at the edge of the coffee machine. Long enough to admire the striation of the petals on the lush pink rose on page 92 of the fashion magazine I was holding. It was even long enough for me to calculate that, if we met that day, I would be 49 years old before I could say I'd known my mother longer than not. Yet it was not long enough to know whether or not I'd ever have that chance.

"You've been here a while," the hostess said. She was radiant and freckled with a dimple on one cheek. In her presence I felt skinny and insignificant. I sat up straighter, suddenly aware of the slope of my shoulders, and nodded. "Well," she said, "if you tell me who you're waiting for, you can go inside and I'll keep an eye out for you."

"It's, uh, it's my . . . mother." The word dropped like something from a great height.

She smiled. "No worries. I'll just watch for someone who looks like you, then, eh?" She grabbed two menus and whisked me off inside.

When my mother did arrive I knew immediately it was her: the small, slouching woman with a quick step and a loose tangle of curls. On her face she wore an expression of tightly capped anxiety. It was an expression I'd seen a thousand times before -- in the mirror.

"Forgive me," she said, her words seemed pressured, laden. Her breath came in short, ragged bursts. "I'm -- so -- sorry. I'm forever

running late. The girls -- they tell me I'll be late for my own funeral." She stopped, gave me a stricken look. "My other girls, I mean."

"It's okay," I said as she settled into her seat. "This will take some getting used to." We ordered coffee and pastries, then sat looking at one another as if awaiting a director's cue. I chewed my lip and did nervous origami with the serviette, folding it into the shape of Brazil.

"I can't stop looking at you," she said in an apologetic tone. "It's just that you look so much like my daughter Myra . . . my other daughter . . . I mean your sister."

Sister. The word connected with a jolt.

"You have three sisters," she explained. "Maggie, Myra, and Millie. All from different dads." She tilted her head, on her face the suggestion of a smile. "When people ask my marital status," she said, "the girls say I should answer, 'frequent.' They all have kids now, too, the girls. We all started young. Already I'm a grandma four times over." She searched through her bag and laid a tired manila envelope on the table. "I brought some photos for you, if you'd like to see."

I wiped my hands on the serviette, being careful to avoid São Paulo, then shuffled through the pile. There were photos of birthdays and Christmases, of picnics, and school plays. And babies. So many babies. I tapped the photos into a neat stack and laid them next to her plate. "Was it hard for you? I mean, the decision you made with me." I studied her face, searching for regret.

She answered in a weak, distracted tone. "Wasn't my decision," she said. "But I admit at that age I was in no fit state to raise a child. The woman you went to, I heard she was a doctor or something. What does she think of all this, us meeting up?"

"She's dead," I said. It wasn't entirely untrue.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She covered her mouth with her hand. "I never thought." She took a sip from her cup, then rested her chin in her hand. "'Least you were well taken care of, that's the important thing." She motioned towards my rings, my turquoise pendant. I imagine she gave you a nice home, good education, and such."

I explained about my painting, my penchant for art, how, like oil and water, education and I would never mix. "I did the math," I told her, "and figured that if we spend a third of our lives sleeping and a third of our lives working, that leaves only a third for play. So I combined the work with the play and came out ahead of the game."

"None of us were much when it came to school," she said. She gave me a sideways smile. "Must be in the genes." She wiped her hands on her skirt and removed another photo from her bag. "Here," she said. "This here's the one I brought for you to keep, if you want. It's the whole family -- grandparents and uncles and such -- minus one, of course."

I looked down at a row of faces, small and eager, like birds on a fence. Their eyes seemed to stare right through me. I imagined these faces circling round, closing in, dissecting me with slow, deliberate pecks. Something inside me made a three-point turn, searching for an exit. I felt sleepy, my head began to hurt. "Would you mind if we sat outside?" I asked.

I followed her as we made our way to the door. From behind I could see the hem of her skirt was frayed, her shoes, scuffed and worn, slapped the floor with each turned-in step.

She grabbed my elbow and we sat on a bench. "My girl," she said with a sigh. She lit a cigarette, then exhaled in a long, rattling cough. "I bet your other mother didn't smoke. The girls, they're always at me 'bout quitting, but I tell 'em everyone's gotta have a vice."

"Yeah," I said, "vice is nice." She nuzzled my arm and pulled in close. I felt something knot inside me, clenching, tight-fisted. My *girl*. The *girls*. When had I become one of her girls? Had there been some ritual initiation without my consent? And who said I wanted to join her club? Was I now obligated to membership because we chance to share the same profile; because we leave the same pigeon-toed footprints in the sand?

"Here," she said, "Next time you can come to the house. I'll write down my address." She leaned across me and tore a strip in the shape of Chile from a discarded newspaper. She pulled a fistful of

pens from her bag and began scribbling with them one by one. "Blast! One of these must work. The girls, they tell me I'm a pack rat. 'Mum,' they say, 'you gotta get rid of all this stuff.' But I can't, I tell 'em. I wouldn't know where to begin."

Where to begin, it occurred to me as I sat on the bench, was easy. The things you want you keep, those you don't, you throw away.

When I arrived home that evening my mother was sitting on the floor, her head inclined forward, her chin on her chest. She was clutching the edges of a thin grey cardigan. Noticing the streaks that lined her cheeks it occurred to me that I'd never seen her cry. I filled my lungs, then slid down the wall and sat beside her on the floor. I could see that her cardigan had twisted, the buttons fastened in the wrong holes. She dug at one with the tip of her nail, on her face I saw the strain of constant perfection. "It's all wrong," she said. "It's a muddle. Everything's a muddle."

I sat on the floor in the failing light, and looked up at the wall above us. There hung the picture I'd painted for her so long ago: her house of possibility in a wedge of graying light. Whether I intended it to rest in the shadow of a rising or a setting sun I could not recall. I suddenly felt how relentlessly life's colors drain, how quickly white slips into grey. I might never have claimed to share my mother's focus or intensity, nor did I possess her keen ability to look inside a thing, to see the unseen, but I knew where to look to find its beauty.

"Here," I said. "Let me show you how it's done." I moved across and undid the buttons, then guided her fingers through the motions until the seam lay neat and flat. "There," I said patting her hands. "Perfect."

Perhaps we'd not been so different after all, my mother and me. In our search to find an answer we'd both missed a purer truth, a universe in the smallest of things.