

Arlene

by Stephen Stark

Robert always knocked on his mother's door when he came to visit, ever since his father had gone to the nursing home to die. Even though she still lived in the house he grew up in, he always went to the front door and knocked. He wasn't entirely sure why he did this, or when it started, but he had undefined notion that she deserved her privacy. There hadn't been some ugly Freudian moment when he'd come to visit and found some strange, unshaven boyfriend wandering around in his underwear. But it was nevertheless a possibility. His mother, at 68, was vibrant and slim and attractive and as intellectually acute and curious as she'd ever been. But he didn't think that was why he knocked.

His mother, Arlene, hadn't changed very much at all from his earliest memories of her. She was an elegant woman, sometimes aloof, with a long list of interests and pursuits and volunteer activities. His father's death had not set her back very much, at least not socially. But she was also not the sort to show any outward signs of setback. And Robert wasn't sure if he resented this or not. Life goes on, was something she said pretty often. And so she went on to this next phase of her life.

There was no answer to his knock. It was early evening, the delicious part of June where the sun seems to stay up forever and the evening takes forever to wane. There were no lights on in the house. Her car was in the driveway. He knocked again. Still there was no answer and so he stepped back a little and for a moment the idea—fully realized in his head—that today would be the worst kind of perfect storm of a day. That he would take his key and open the door and find her body in a chair, lifeless. His heart dropped and he pushed the thought away.

He found her in the back yard. She was weeding a bed of azaleas.

These were azaleas he himself had helped her plant when they were no bigger than a stalk of broccoli. Now they were chest-high, and sprawling, their blossoms gone. There was a wall of white bags of mulch against the fence. She had her gardening kit next to her—a green bag that, actually, Ann had given her. The bag had pouches for trowels and other assorted gardening tools. She was wearing her mud clogs and kneeling on a pad. The weeds didn't have a chance around Arlene. You could see where she had already been, because those parts of the bed were spotless, save for the azaleas.

She was an azalea purist, Arlene, which is to say that she bristled at the thought of using azaleas as hedging. There was one street she hated to drive down in the spring because some complete yahoo had ruined several perfectly gorgeous red and white azaleas by cutting them as though they were boxwoods.

She looked up when he came around the corner, and wiped a strand of straight, steel colored hair off her forehead with her forearm. Ann had also given her the (formerly) white calfskin gardening gloves.

Nice to see you're still among the living, she said.

Ann's filing for divorce, he said. His hands were in his pockets and his eyes were downcast and he felt as though he were bringing home an especially gruesome report card.

This was not how he had imagined telling his mother. He wasn't sure what it was he had envisioned, but this wasn't it.

She widened her eyes slightly, but her expression didn't change much. Her glasses were around her neck, on a very tasteful tether. She sighed, and as she did, she cocked her head to one side. She took off one glove and, with one elegant hand, put her glasses on and gazed at him appraisingly. Even though she had been gazing at him appraisingly for as long as he could remember, it still gave him

the heebie-jeebies. As her only child, he had always felt the weight of expectation from her. It was a palpable thing, that weight, and he had fought against it in the most cantankerous and contrarian way he could.∞ But even in his rebellion against her expectations—which were almost entirely unspoken (which is to say that she wasn't the kind of mother who, for example, wanted him to be a doctor and dragged him by the ear through premed)—which in a lot of ways made them more difficult.

∞ Charlie Burns here: There is an interesting and likely unexplored theme in the narrative. Robert is here defining himself—as he often seems to do—more by what he is not than what he is. Cantankerous and contrarian make for a fairly pathetic personal narrative identity. Again, it's external agency—my mother was like this, he seems to be saying, so I had to be like that.

In her silence, he stammered out, I got served with papers today. She wants me to move out. I'm actually ordered to move out.

I'm sorry, Robert, she said. She sighed again and shook her head. The look on her face said that she pretty much felt that this was inevitable. Not inevitable in the sense that she'd figured their relationship was doomed, but inevitable in a more sort of Calvinist sense—that God will slap you down and will keep slapping you down because you're flawed and that's pretty much what God does and who are you to say that you don't deserve the pain?

To Robert, though, the look on her face said that she knew her son's inadequacies had caught up with him.

With a little effort, she stood. She took off the other glove, then stooped to lay them both neatly over the edge of her gardening kit.

His mother was not an aw-come-here-honey-and-give-me-a-hug type

mom. She was the kind of mother who, if you had some kind of problem, would suggest that perhaps it might be a good idea to volunteer (she was really big on volunteering) at some sort of organization dedicated to helping people with a problem similar to but exponentially greater than yours. Depressed? Volunteer at a homeless shelter to gain some perspective. When *The _____* sat on the shelves of bookstores like a spoiled child and refused to move, and the teaching career he had envisioned for himself died on the vine, she had suggested that he volunteer at the Fairfax Jail to teach English as a second language, or reading to the illiterate.

These were not, per se, bad ideas, but they did not provide any sort of direct succor.

There's also a restraining order, he went on, glancing around the yard. The old, gnarly maple where Duke and he had built a tree house. Flower beds that he had weeded himself, dreaming insane with boredom. The grave of Duke's last dog.

It's two weeks—I can't see Robbie.

That seems a little excessive, she said. She reached behind her and untied her hair and then retied it. He imagined himself a whirling body in space, ready to fly apart.

If he had thought he might mention Bob to her, he made that thought disappear. He had sort of wanted to ask about cousins, about possible lookalikes, or even did she maybe give up his twin for adoption. But none of that was going to come up.

#

Inside, she made iced coffee and sat with Robert in the kitchen.

Have you talked with her, with Robbie?

No. I talked to the lawyer. Her lawyer. I have to get my own lawyer. I've been calling around and I've got an appointment tomorrow.

He sipped his coffee. Some moms baked cookies. Some moms fried chicken. Some sewed. His mother made really spectacular coffee—his mother was a coffee artist.

I can't say I know very much about divorce, although it very nearly killed Charlotte.

Charlotte was a neighbor from years back whose husband had left her for a younger woman the very day their youngest child—a girl Robert had played doctor with as a child, and slept with once in high school—had gone off to college. It was a brutal betrayal. Charlotte had saved her sanity by volunteering at a shelter for abused women. Arlene had suggested it.

She scrutinized him. Robert, she said, then hesitated. Are there..., she started again, and lifted up a spoon to inspect it.

Robert, for a moment, could see his own bulbous, pathetic reflection in it.

She said: Are there grounds?

The first thing he thought of was coffee grounds, but he knew what she meant. He said: If you mean like adultery or something, no. I mean, not me.

Is there someone else? For her, then, I mean.

From the moment he had looked at the papers until right now, this possibility had never occurred to him. He was stunned, but instantly his mental rolodex spun through all of the possibilities. Anything was possible, but he didn't think it was likely. What was Leo's dictum? Anything that can happen will happen?

I don't—I don't think so. No. I mean. She talked about it. Divorce.

Right now he was picturing his wife, her face distorted in anger, her fists at her side and clenched in anger, saying—not screaming, but saying, in a bizarrely calm voice—I want a divorce. He blinked and shook his head to make the thought go away.

I just didn't think she was ever serious. I mean—

Why on earth would she talk about it?

Because.

That's a fine reason.

Because of my—um—screw ups. My emotional unavailability, as she puts it. And because she said I pay more attention to my 'imaginary friends' as she calls them than to her.

Arlene sighed. She and Ann had always got along. They shared a lot of interests, but they also shared some essential quality that Robert found completely indefinable. When he'd first met Ann, he never once would have even entertained the thought that she was like his mother, except for the most rudimentary fact of being a woman. It wasn't until Robbie was born that he began to see the similarities. It wasn't anything he could put his finger on, exactly, just that sometimes when he looked at her, it was like there was a ghostly silhouette of his mother hovering around within her.

The thing is, Mom, I don't want this to happen. I love Ann more than anything. I would give anything—

I would suggest, she said, dipping the spoon into her glass and giving it an entirely pointless stir, That it isn't about giving anything. Not, at least, in the conventional connotation of gift. She put the spoon into her mouth and cleaned it.

What does that mean?

Robert looked at his mother hard, at the way the veins stood out blue on her hands, at the thinness of her lips and the soft, concentric skein of wrinkles around her mouth.

You're a very charming fellow, Robert. You got that from your father. Lord knows he was endlessly charming. [He could see that she was entertaining some private thought of his father, and the idea warmed him.] You can also be very focused on what you want. I've always been terribly impressed with the way you went after your writing career.

Coming from Arlene, this was the most profound compliment Robert could imagine. But the way she said it was fraught: 'terribly impressed.'

She stopped, and he leaned closer, as if she were actually whispering instead of saying nothing at all.

When she went on, she said: No one can really know what goes on inside anyone else's marriage. But if you asked me, she said, looking at him, this time without the appraising, but just with clear, sad eyes. If you asked me, she started again, Does this surprise me?, I would have to say no.

He felt his body go weak, ready to drool right out of the chair and onto the kitchen floor.

Mom, he started. Why? He didn't much like the way his voice sounded. A whine, a plea.

Oh, Robert. You're like a child.

What does that mean?

She shook her head. Oh, Robert-e-bob. [This was a longstanding term of endearment, and most often delivered like fiddle-te-dee.] It means, Robert, you have a lot of growing up to do. It means that you're very self-centered and, as sensitive as you are, sometimes you can be quite oblivious to what's going on around you.

She might as well have slapped him. It wasn't that he didn't know it. It's exactly what Ann would say, if not exactly the way Ann would've said it.

When he left his mother's house, Robert's head reeled. Why he had expected it to be any different, he had no idea. Talking with his mother about personal issues was a lot like talking to some Delphic oracle: she was nearly always exactly right, but you had to do the interpretation yourself, and at your own peril.

