Mother

by tommy klehr

He stood in the doorway of his mother's house. The doorway that separated the living room from the kitchen. Out of habit, he picked at the wallpaper. He had done this for years as a kid. Anytime a corner pulled up, he started tugging. Just a little each time; when enough gave way, enough for him to grip tightly between his finger and thumb, he would pull hard, tearing the paper from the wall. Shhht.

“Quit tearing at the wallpaper,” his mother would shout. She had trained her ears so that she could hear it even while she stood over the kitchen sink, water running.

“I'm not,” he would lie, then quickly stick his thumb on his tongue, then press the paper down. He eventually learned that saliva is not a very good glue, as the corner would slowly bend and pull away as the spit dried. He would attack them again at a future time, when she wasn't around.

He noticed his habit. It had started twenty years ago. As he noted the actions, he stopped and stepped back. She had never replaced the wallpaper. Never made him pay for it as she had often threatened. Perhaps if she had followed through, she would still be here.

He felt a tightening in his stomach, as if he had swallowed the pit of a peach, which was swelling deep inside him. He bent over in pain from the ache. How could he have done it?

It was the usual guilt-induced Sunday visit. Like all those other Sundays before over the last twenty years since he had moved out. Although his mailing address was different, he still spent much of

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his free time here. Unable to break free. The ebbs and flows of independence. In the end, she won. She always won. He was all she had. She couldn't let him leave her too. Not after all she had done for him.

“Don't you mean 'to me?'” he would reply when brave. She would let that comment slide by her, pretending as if it hadn't been said; if I pretend that I don't hear it, then you didn't say it. The bravery would be short-lived. She would control him again. She knew just the right way to get him back into compliance.

How could she not? She had made him in her own image. Programmed him. She taught him to need her, but in truth, she needed him. She couldn't live without him. She was an actress, pretending all along.

It was liberating when he struck her the first time. He didn't even remember now why he had done it. She was at the sink — she was always at that sink — and made some demand of him. She turned around to look at him — that look — the look she had perfected so many years ago — the one that made him cave.

Instead of caving this time, all that anger, all the resentment, all the sacrificing he had made, deferring his own life for hers, all came swelling up inside him. It emerged in the form of his fist racing across the kitchen and landing on the side of her head.

That look had disappeared when she saw the rage approach her. It was replaced with fear, before the look, her face, and her body crumpled in a heap on the floor.

He didn't touch her again. He simply stood over her for a minute to see if she was alive. Her left leg extended slightly and she began moaning. As she did, he moved back to the safety of the doorway. To the safety of his old habit.

Having stopped tugging on the wallpaper, his idle hand began to throb from the pain of striking her skull. He flexed his fingers in an attempt to alleviate the pain. He wondered if he would ever be free of the pain. He looked at this fingers as they stretched before him.

The gong of the clock reminded him of the passing of time. It had been thirty minutes since “the accident” as he would later call it. Twenty since she had last moved or made a noise. “She must be dead by now,” he thought but was afraid to go near her. “Mother,” he said. “Mother,” he said again, this time a little louder. Nothing. He walked to her body and tapped his shoe on her leg. Seeing no visible response, he went outside to her shed in search of tools.

Safely ensconced in the shed, he awaited the sunset. When darkness finally arrived, he began digging a shallow grave among the trees that adorned her property. And when he was done, he returned to the kitchen, where he found that she had remained still, silent. He lifted her body over his shoulder, took her to her final resting spot, and planted her. Finally liberated.