

Knock



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I let out a big sigh and under my breath, because I don't want to interrupt Dorothy, I say "Dorothy, my dead mother literally lives with me in this house." She keeps talking, I try again.

"Dorothy would you be so kind and please pass the salt?"

She passes the salt shaker from her side of the small, but intimate, dinner table. I glance at her sideways searching for recognition of the depth of my awkward declaration. Just as I am about to repeat my statement, she continues her story about her job as an annuities broker at a local financial establishment without skipping a beat. I know for certain she hasn't heard me and I do so much want this to work out for us.

When she reaches, across the table and touches my hand gently, throwing me a suggestive grin, I forget all about my morbid proclamation. All I want to do is kiss her beautiful wine stained lips and tell her words that will make her want to stay. Perhaps everything will turn out okay. We finish the grand Greek meal of roast lamb and lemon potatoes I cooked for us, accompanied by copious glasses of Retsina, Dorothy jumps from her seat and helps me clear the table. As we put the last of our dishes in the sink, our hands brush against each other again.

"I had a wonderful evening, Theo." She leans in and I stare deep into her aqua-marine eyes. Behind her aquarium glasses, her eye lids close. Her lips pucker. She is breathing heavily. Her hand tightly clasps around mine. It has been a long time since I have felt like this. Too long. The electric current is euphoric as our lips touch. Just then the sound from the television in the living room comes to life, it's blaring a vacuum cleaner commercial.

Dorothy opens her eyes and turns toward the noise. She looks at me in surprise, and then leans toward the doorway.

On the couch is an old woman, grey hair, in a once bright orange bathrobe, flipping through the channels. It's Mother. She halts on the Weather Channel. Dorothy curiously looks at me, then again at Mother, then back at me.

"Who is that?" She demands. "Is that your..." "Yes." I reply shamefully, "but I warned you over dinner. She is dead."
"You are too funny, Theo."

I thought I could make this work—what was I thinking? Wanting to make her best impression, Dorothy makes a B-line for her, leaving me in the kitchen alone. I hear an exaggerated, "Mrs. Thanotopolous, it's terrific to meet you," from the other room. I am frozen in place.

I work at Waste Water. I check sewers for leaks and crawl through intricate and dangerous tunnels through the City's stream of continuous flowing excrement. Every day since my dead mother knocked on my front door a year ago, I wearily leave her alone at home. Even while I am isolated, deep in the bowels of the city, I am gripped with fear that Mother will leave her room and make her presence known to someone other than me. She hadn't yet, until tonight, since I dared to invite Dorothy in, hoping it would all work out, hoping that Dorothy would create a catalytic change in the long, cursed, unmoving equilibrium of my life.

I quickly join them.

Mother looks up at Dorothy, her own brown earthen eyes stare into Dorothy's as she nods "Yes". A smile slowly stretches across her face, a tarnished crucifix around her neck hanging outside of her robe. Dorothy's hand is stuck out like a garden spade. Mother doesn't shake it. Mother just keeps smiling.

Dorothy nervously adds, "I'm afraid your son hasn't told me much about you, but it's terrific to meet you. I've been asking about his family for weeks, but he just kept changing the subject."

Mother continues nodding as Dorothy quickly bombards her with questions like a conversational Spitfire. I watch helplessly, unsure of my next move. Mother isn't budging, not even someone else I could love can move that immovable object.

"Dorothy, this is Mother and Mother this is Dorothy," I say.

Mother does her continuous nodding trick, then her head swivels

back to the Weather Channel. It is minus one in Georgia.

"Please forgive Mother. She gets easily distracted. Loves the weather, as you can tell." I anxiously snicker, trying to make light of this macabre situation.

Grabbing Dorothy's arm, I steer her to the Lazy-Boy Chair next to the couch.

"Sit and let me grab our drinks."

Running to the kitchen, I stumble, gather myself, and begin pouring wine to the brim of three glasses. Suddenly realizing that Mother won't need a drink because she is dead, I down one of the glasses like a shot of Ouzo and gingerly stagger back into the living.

"Here we go!"

Perhaps if we all get drunk, this situation might seem laughable. I plop down on the couch beside Mother, spilling a bit of my wine on our faded red, pink, floral couch which we inherited from a long gone family member.

Dorothy takes a sip and then addresses Mother. "Mrs. Thanotopolous you have a lovely home, I love all the crosses and icons on the walls."

"Byzantine," I rapidly reply. "She brought them from Greece herself. My parents' marriage was arranged by their cousins. Dad was Greek-American; she was from Athens, straight off the boat."

"How nice is that," Dorothy adds. Mother turns back to the TV. So we sit for several minutes as Dorothy tries to make conversation with Mother. Soon Dorothy notices that she is not having an actual conversation with a person, but she's really talking to a wall of ice. She quiets and looks at me.

Mother continues to stare at the weather as the announcer softly mentions another polar vortex will be hitting the Midwest, and here's how you avoid hypothermia, and wear your Thinsulate long underwear. Okay, this is why I invited Dorothy here, although I knew it might not go well, but again, I was hoping for a breakthrough.

"Dorothy," I say, as I move closer to Mother, patting her on her frigid bathrobe covered knee, "Like I mentioned at dinner--Mother is really dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead. Really, really dead."

Dorothy begins to laugh. "I get it. I am dead tired myself after a day at the job."

"She's dead, like corpse dead, but not like zombie dead—" She stares at me in disbelief as if she still hasn't quite gotten the joke. I grab one of Mother's crochet needles from her basket on the coffee table and jam it into Mother's neck. No blood. No yelp. Mother just keeps watching the Weather Channel as if waiting for the barometric pressure to drop.

Dorothy's face goes pale. She seems to hold back a cry.

"Of course I can't blame you for being frightened." I didn't tell her I pretty much had the same reaction when Mother first re-appeared at the door that fateful day so long ago.

"You see, we didn't have the greatest relationship, but as a dutiful son, I took care of her. She died a year ago. We lived together up until the end, until she went in her sleep—a simple heart attack." I pull out the needle from Mother's neck and stick it back into the basket.

With my confession, I now feel as if a weight has finally been lifted, but I wonder how much more Dorothy can take before she either accepts the truth or goes screaming out the door.

Wouldn't it have been simpler if there was a place on the dating profile of LoveConjureNow.com, where Dorothy and I first made contact, to confess all of life's excess baggage? Mine would have read: my parents divorced when I was three. Because my mother was prone to 'Greek Rages,' she sent my father and me numerous times to the hospital for stitches and stab wounds, which eventually lead my father to abandon us. But aging has a way of whittling away at the fire needed to wage war, so Mother and I settled into a comfortable armistice. Up until she died, and came back.

I was hoping that Dorothy could release me from that peace pact with Mother, but that hope was fading fast.

Looking at Dorothy, I could tell she was waging a battle with the thoughts in her head. Was this all too much for her to understand? I could almost hear her asking herself, "Should I stay or should I go?" It was a familiar conversation I've had myself. Silently, I prayed that she would stay.

I should have confessed right then of how I was instantly smitten by her inauspicious beauty, her practicality, her taste in clothes, wearing

blouses with Van Gogh sunflower patterns and stone wash worn jeans. How my dates with her made me feel so alive that I thought she freed me from the millstone of Mother.

Why did I let Mother in? Guilt. How can you turn your own mother away, even given the past, especially if she's dead? What good son would do that? I knew, at least I wouldn't be alone with Mother. But in the end I was still alone, that is until I found Dorothy.

And just before I can tell Dorothy everything, she pounces out of the chair, snatching her purse saying, "I'd love to stay Theo, but I need to get home to clean out the refrigerator." She quickly pecks me on the cheek and says, "Will call."

Out the door she goes, taking her charming lips I enjoyed kissing. I am alone again with Mother.

A heat builds just below my surface.

Wind Chill: 5°	Ceiling: 2300
Heat Index: 17°	Visibility: 9mi
Dew Point: 8°	Wind: 10mph
Humidity: 68%	Direction: 280° (W)
Pressure: 30.15"	Gusts: NA

I glance over at Mother, sitting on the couch, illuminated by the glow of the television. She's been watching the Weather Channel for so long, and the plasma screen is so old, that weather maps have burned into it, barely visible, but still there, with ghost like clouds, and ghost like lakes hanging in midair, with faint arrows of jet streams crisscrossing in layers, upon layers, over a wisp of a map of the United States.

I feel a flame rising, welling up from my gut exploding from my lungs—I cannot say anything.

I fall to my knees at her side, and grab her frigid right hand. Tears are welling up in the corners of my eyes.

"I beg you talk to me. Just whisper one word." She glances at me for a moment, and then back she goes to the wind chill, the pressure, and precipitation of the moment.

Everything suddenly becomes clear. This has to end. I can't live with the dead anymore—even if it's my own mother.

I put on my black navy jacket, pull down my grey woolen cap, go to the front door. I look back one more time and remember the old Greek myth of how Orpheus descends down into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice. He plays his grief to Hades on his lyre so mournfully that Hades allows her to join Orpheus again, in the world of light and life. And as they are about to finally escape, Orpheus mistakenly looks back, only to feel Eurydice's fingers slip away from Orpheus's hand. She falls back to the world of the dead.

In my case, Mother doesn't turn into a shade and drift away; she continues to sit on the couch, planted there, oblivious to the world except for the weather.

She will always be on the couch staring, not speaking, and not breathing.

I try to mouth one word, but can't. Pausing, I gain my composure and I say aloud, "I really love you. Always will."

Only now do I realize how much the pain of my past did not die with her, I am the one responsible for answering the door when I heard the knocking. I invited her back in. But I am going to change that. Pulling the front door close, there's an audible click as it locks.

I step down the porch steps and get into my car. I must decide to either find Dorothy, or at least, continue to drive off into the long night. I turn the ignition key, the engine sparks to life, and I am suddenly delighted at the idea of leaving everything behind.