

KIT REED

MOMMY NEAREST

Don't hit my hand away!"

"Mo-o-m!" She is tying a fucking ribbon in my hair.

"Tammy, dammit, smile!" In spite of the bonding, Mom's teeth are turning yellow. After all, she's practically ninety which sucks, because I'm only sixteen. But hey, she looks all buff in the string bikini, tan as a Moroccan camel saddle, your aggressive size four, check out the Universal Trainer biceps and gleaming six pack abs. The woman is oiled like a piece of antique furniture, which is what she is, while I bob along the beach in pink like a captive balloon.

Smile? "No way!"

She keeps running at me with the bow ribbon. "Shh, they're watching. Hold still!" Welcome to my mom. Regard the tummy tucks, butt lifts, herbal body wraps, hair weave, botulism shots to chill the wrinkles, laser peels, the woman is a miracle of technology. Older than the Aztec gods and she hits the beach like Baywatch is in its first season and she is the new star. You know those prom corsages you smooch into books and a hundred years later they're still there but they're all shriveled and flat? Well that's my mom. It is obscene.

I hiss back at her. "I don't care." I am yet another miracle of technology, about which more when I am feeling stronger. Right now I'm battling the hair ribbon. She keeps coming at me, moving her mouth like you do when you're trying to get a baby to swallow something it doesn't want. "Leave me alone!"

She wails, "After everything I've done for you!"

"You mean fucking done to me!" These clothes! Pink jellies and this fucking ruffled playsuit, way gross, and she is all, it's slenderizing, whatever that's supposed to mean. What it means is, I'm supposed to look twelve, which in pink candy stripes, I do. You know, one more magic appliance, like the lipo and implants and collagen. She's all, Accessorize. Like, check out your look -- sequined headband, mylar bikini, fat kid.... The woman looks like Barbie on Ultra Slim Fast in the bikini, while I could be Mr. Poppin' Fresh on steroids. Or Mrs. Poppin' Fresh, if there is a Mrs. Poppin' Fresh, one more part of her total look. "I hate these clothes!"

Her Sicilian Sunset mouth begins to tremble. "You look lovely."

"I look fat."

"Pleasingly plump."

"Fat!" I look like an albino watermelon, and she knows it too. I am clawing at the ruffles on my front. The ugly truth is Evelyn locks me in my room a lot, along with my old buddies Mrs. Fields and Ben&Jerry's and SaraLee to keep me fat, like if you don't have a waist you'll never grow up. See, if I do grow up, she has to get old. "I feel like fucking Gretel." I do not have to add that she looks like the witch.

"Shh," she says, because we are going by the Caribe Zanzibar Resort and there is a party going on, you know, audience. She wants them all pointing at us and smiling. Oh look, young mama. doesn't she dress the little girl nice. She is hissing, "They'll hear."

I get louder. "This is a sick playsuit. Only a sick mother would make a daughter wear a sick playsuit like this." I thwap the back of her thong bikini; any fool could see she is wearing Shape Shifters taped to her butt.

"Don't use that tone with me, not after ..."

"Everything you did." I cut her off at the pass. "Don't start."

She starts anyway. "Doctors, clinics, pain. Everything I went through ..." Well, what she went through was ... Look, you know. It was in all the papers. On TV. M.O.W. "A Mother's Pride." These days geriatric moms are no big deal. Some babe my mother's age just popped triplets, but it was a very. big deal at the time. I have the clipping laminated in my bedroom, to keep me straight.

SEVENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD WOMAN BECOMES OLDEST FIRSTTIME MOM

No wonder she's always tired. Don't bother me Tammy, I'm tired. Say you're bored and she goes, Shh Tammy, I'm lying down. Or she sighs. Tammy, why don't you go out and play? By this she does not mean: go out and ride around in cars plus I'm maybe too weird for guys to want to ride me around in cars, I mean, nobody else dresses like this. Nobody else's more is, like, a hundred years old. Kids go "Are you adopted?" When I'm like, "No," they back off fast, like, the light bulb goes on. "Oh, you're that Tammy." Like it's creepy, which is what it is. "Test tube Tammy Ohhhhh." Can you guess what they call me at school? "Turkey Baster Tammy" is another one. Oh right, ironic. The Sexy Sixties name. God, we haven't even had the Sixties in History. Our books don't go back that far.

The newspapers said my more made a million on the rights to our story, which she did. The papers also said this scary thing. That these old bags had other motives, like, birthing a nurse for The Final Days? Like when they've fallen and their beeper doesn't beep us kids are screwed: Help, I've fallen, and tag. You're it!

No way! My more isn't like that. She's the picture of fucking health!

You bet she is. Look, while we're standing here Evelyn has gone down the bill of complaints in full voice and she is winding up, "I did everything for you, and look!"

Something inside me snaps and I go, "No, you look. And then you can fucking go to hell." I start unbuttoning the playsuit. It's time she found out this is only padding and I'm skinny underneath. If I drop the playsuit the whole world will know which of us is young and sexy here, and which is the rack of chicken bones. But her face crumples up and I don't have the heart.

"Oh, Tammy." I expect her usual, but instead she sighs like she'll never take another breath. "I didn't ask for this."

"Well I sure as hell didn't ask for you!" Like a high school junior needs a room with orthotics plus Odor Eaters overflowing her beach shoes and Ensure folded up in the Depends Adult Undergarments in her beach bag and a secret aluminum walker that she keeps stashed by her bed.? I mean, having a baby at her age has gotta be disgusting. Like a thousand-year-old mummy having sex. Right out here in the open I go, "What were you thinking?"

"Shh," she says. "They'll hear." We are stalled in front of the Caribe Zanzibar. There are a zillion people on the deck. I am not smiling. Instead I hit her where she lives. Not to put too fine a point on it, she had me to stay young. The LaMaze classes must have been a hoot. She says, for the audience, "Oh honey, I wanted you?"

I snap, "Yeah, like you want a face lift that sticks."

"Don't!" She pulls down the Raybans so I will see that she is glaring. But it isn't quite the same. Things in her face are fighting with other things so the parts don't match. It is too weird.

I am afraid to ask, Are you okay? so I growl fondly, to buck her up. "You think you're so fucking cool." Which Evelyn isn't, you know? Especially not now. I am beginning to itch all over. It's like having one of those things festering underneath a Band-Aid that you're scared to peel it off and take a look at?

But I do. I step back. I study my too-tired go-out-and-play don't-bother-me-I'm-resting mother. Except for the ankle bracelet, which does not go with the antique jeweled Judith Leiber cockroach handbag or the retro Rave rocket shoes with the toes cut out, she looks all right to me. I snarl, "Go on, say you wish you'd never had me. Go ahead."

This is phase one of the ritual fight, where we get down and duke it out. Then we can make up and go home and she will buy me things. First I have to get her so pissed that she snarls, "I've failed."

Here's how it's supposed to go. She starts with, "On top of everything, you mined my figure. Breast feeding, it made me flat!" Not! Truth is, you can forget the silicone implants and the Breastalizers glued inside the top of the bikini. My room will always look like a transsexual in the middle of the change. Then I yell and she goes, "You murdered your father, you ungrateful bitch." Which is not exactly true. He was a hundred when he died but she blames me)"You were too

heavy for him") I personally think it was the shock. Her pooping out a baby at her age. Besides, who says that was my real dad in the test tube anyway? The egg, she got from a surrogate baby ranch. Darling, I got knocked up. No wonder he died.

Evelyn is supposed to be yelling these things and I'm supposed to be snapping off witty rejoinders so we can finish and get home. Instead we're out here in the sand and it isn't happening. "Mom?"

She is just standing there.

I yell, "Are we fighting, or what?"

Moms, I will never understand them. Evelyn starts blinking like a bird that just ran into a power mower. Her mouth is going mwah. Mwah. Mway.

"I wasn't your baby," I tell her, trying to bring her back to planet earth. "I was just your second career."

It is definitely her turn. Her line is, "And I'm doing a damn good job!" Then she's supposed to finish me: "You're acting like a child!"

What in God's name did she expect? It sure as hell wasn't me. Like, she thought she would miraculously be forty, like the other morns in the tenth grade? We have Civil War statues in front of our high school that are younger than her. But she is distracted. I hiss, "This is when you say, You're acting like a child.... Mom?"

Nothing. No way. Me and Evelyn are in stasis here. In front of the Caribe Zanzibar and I can't get her going, not even with pumped old men watching from the Tiki deck. I give her a little prod. You know, like, when you're in the middle of the last act of a play and the star has lost their place? I go, "And I made your life a living hell, right, Mom? Well, I'll tell you whose life is a living hell."

Then Evelyn whirls with this bizarre little kiss-me mouth that the collagen injections have plumped it up so you can hardly see the witch-wrinkles except where the lipstick bleeds up into the grooves and she spreads her hands like a child. "I know. Oh Mommy, I was bad."

You bet I am scared. "Mom!"

She sounds younger than me. "Mommy says it's against God."

She is definitely getting weird. If we're going to survive here, we need to keep this fight on track. I go into attack mode. "You never had a mother, you were too old."

But instead of hitting me or throwing herself down on the redwood chaise with the black mattress emblazoned with Caribe Zanzibar in silver letters and going

"I've failed" so we can quit and go home, Evelyn just sort of sinks down on her Shape. Shifters)(TM) there in the sand and pulls her knees up under her chin and pats the sand and keeps patting the sand until I give in to something a lot scarier than gravity and sit down next to her. For a long time she doesn't speak. She has gone back inside herself like the witch on the weather house and what comes back out in the next revolution is somebody I don't know. She says, "Mama."

I try not to let her see that I am staring. Her face is sinking into her skull in spite of the lipo and the laser touchups, dermabrasion, chemical peel. Her legs look like naked chicken skin and her knees are jittering. I say, "What's the matter?"

Then my mother scares me shitless. She gives this silly little-girl giggle. "I lost my place."

My belly is bunching up in the horrible playsuit, or I think it is. Truth to tell, I'm a size eight under all this padding, but given the way things are going with my mom in this week before her eighty-ninth birthday, it seems safer to let her dream. I try, "So do you want to have our fight here, or go home or what?"

"Oh," she says. "Mother?"

Should I grab somebody's flip phone and dial 911 or what? "I'm not your mother!"

But she just goes, "Mama, have I been out in the sun too long? I know it's bad for my head. Should we go home now and can I have a lolly after my bath?"

Oh fuck, I think. She is having an attack of Alzheimers. What am I going to do? "Wuow, More, you're sorry you ever had me. Remember?" Look, we can't go on like this. We are miles from the car. "Mother-daughter conflict, RIGHT?"

"I know you're scared I'll fall in love and go All the Way with some terrible boy." Her eyes are silvered over, burnt-out lightbulbs in some other continuum. She grabs my hand. "I promise, he won't touch me. I promise I'll be home by ten."

"Whoa," I say, but I am already wondering how I would look in her bikini, in case we keep regressing like this. Is this going to end up with us changing clothes and my mother going home in the ruffles, with me leading her by the hand? I bark, "Shape up! I am definitely not your mother. Evelyn! Do you know who I am?"

"Mama," she says in that girly voice, "I promise not to Do It until I'm married. And we won't have babies until after graduate school."

My God, I think:. We're going through the Seven Ages of Mom. "Graduate school! You're a fucking full professor." Which she is. Retired.

"No, you're right, we should wait until I get tenure."

"Mom, you got the gold watch twenty years ago!"

"Tick," she says. "Tock. There goes the biological clock. Forget about Men with Paws, I'm having menopause!" She folds up and starts to c~.

"Oh, Mom!" I give her a little buck-up poke in the rib. "Hey look, you really showed them. You never had menopause, you had a kid!"

"My tubes are all twisted and dried."

"Baby? Remember?" I wiggle my fingers in front of her face but she won't focus. "Evelyn, you're a phenom! Name in all the papers, right? Natural childbirth,, play group. You wrote a book!" I am so worried that I start to sing, "Tammy, Tammy, Tammy my lo-ho-hove."

Evelyn mumbles, "Medical breakthrough or medical mess?" I don't know if her head is back there in then or here in now. Are we in some odd transitional phase? Should I give into this and wipe her mouth, or smack her face to bring her back to now? She quavers. "Oh yes mother is embarrassed, my poor Mama is soooo mad at me!" Sand is getting in the Maalox circle inside those collagen lips.

"Would you please just quit regressing please? Mom?"

But she is sliding a different way. All of a sudden she turns into her room. "Pregnant, Evelyn. At your age. It is disgusting."

Then she morphs back into the Little girl. "Oh Mama, I made a big mistake!"

If she keeps on this way I'll never get her back. I've got to think fast. I roar: "You made a mistake. What about me? You think I wanted a hundred-year-old mom?" I rattle her shoulders, gotta try. I have to get her good and mad or she will sink into the sand here and fucking die. People have drifted over from other beach hotels to watch. "Mom. Mom."

She just goes on in her mother's voice. "A baby, and at your age! You should be ashamed." Then she steps back into Evelyn, all girlish and embarrassed. "Oh Mommy, it was an accident."

"I'm not your mom!" Yes I am getting desperate. I shake her harder. I turn her so she'll see that there is an audience, "You're the fucking mother here, so chill."

Then she blinks a little and comes back to herself. Thank God. "Don't you dare use that tone with me," she says. "Shh, they're watching. After everything I've done for you."

Right on. I've got her going now. "Damn straight."

Her eyes flash, but only a little bit. She tries to get up, and can't. "They said I was crazy, wanting a baby."

That's more like it. Fine, More. Stay mad. "And they were right? But she isn't moving so I rasp, "Now you're supposed to say you're sorry you had me, right? Right, More, right?"

"What? Sorry? Oh no!" Oh my gosh she looks at me and her eyes have cleared but I would swear to you that the middles have started spinning around. Then, it is so sweet and so scary, instead of going into the old I've failed routine she says, "I went ahead and had you and I'm glad."

And something inside me goes, squish. This woman's present is my future and it is huge and terrifying. Mother. Daughter. God.

"Oh, honey." She is fixing to collapse into my arms. If I lose her now, this far from the car, I will never get her home. Adrenaline. We are going to do this on adrenaline. So I hiss, "Stand up. Don't faint or they'll think you're old."

That gets her, you bet. "Who, me? Old? I'm not old!"

"Shh. They're watching."

She whips her head around. They are. The clientele of the Caribe Zanzibar plus the Hilton and Fluorescent Gulls. Audience! "Oh," she says like a gift. "Oh. Oh!" She touches her hair.

Bingo. They are watching and she knows. I play her very carefully, like a fish you're scared to land. I bang on my ruffled front as if we have been arguing like normal. "Plus, I hate my fucking clothes!"

"Don't use that tone with me." She is getting mad.

I goad her a little bit more. "Why?"

"Because I said so." Spoken like a true mother. Cool.

"Because you said so?" I give her a push. "Like you're God?"

"No!" she says, and it does my heart good. She gets to her feet and she will stay on her feet as long as I can keep her fighting with me. "Like I'm the mother, and you're only a little girl?"

Way to go, More. "Like hell I am," I yell at her. Relief makes me incoherent. "This outfit sucks and you can go to hell!"

"Okay, missy, I'm warning you." Evelyn grabs my arm. It hurts. I go, "Mom!" She is marching now, thump thump in the rocket shoes. Rage is making her loud. The whole beach has come out to see. She throws back her shoulders and shouts, for the audience. "Okay, Missy. Watch out," Louder. Spotlight, music. I'm ready for

my closeup, Mr, DeMille. Applause. Applause! Her wig bobs in the sunlight and striding along like that in the bikini with the Breastalizer inserts and Shape Shifters(TM) bobbing every whichway, she is magnificent. "Or I'll unplug you from the Internet. And no dessert!"

I squint at her, to be sure the cure takes. Yup, she's up and running. Fine, I think, but I slip in the needle once more, in case. "Your dessert. You know 'what you can do with your dessert!"

"Shut up," she hisses because she knows what is coming. "They're watching."

Cool! I give her the finger and lay on one last infusion like rocket fuel. "You can take your dessert and shove it up your ass!"

So we are cool. On the strength of this one fight, we're good for at least a year. When we get home I'll let Evelyn spank me. After that we'll both cry and she'll make me sit on her lap. My little girl. Then she'll send me to bed. And I can go down the garage roof with my backpack and hitchhike over to the malt. By this time I've boosted enough cool clothes that I can just segue in and, like, mingle, I look so different that even the cute guys don't know it's me and if I slip up with one of these guys when we're rolling around in his car in the parking lot and I end up pregnant, hey, what'll we do? Evelyn won't even be mad. I'll have it but we'll say she did it and it will get her in all the papers, and hey, what retired professor about to be retired as a more wouldn't want to start a third career?