In My Mother's House

A Daughter's Story

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—Tillie Olsen

Kim Chernin

Author of *The Obsession*

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For my mother, Rose Chernin.
For her mother, Perle Chernin.
And for my daughter, Larissa Chernin.

Contents

PART ONE

Wasn't I Once Also a Daughter?

The Proposal

July 1974

She calls me on the telephone three times the day before I am due to arrive in Los Angeles. The first time she says, "Tell me, you still like cottage cheese?" "Sure," I say, "I love it. Cottage cheese, yogurt, ricotta . . ." "Good," she says, "we'll have plenty."

The second conversation is much like the first. "What about chicken? You remember how I used to bake it?"

The third time she calls the issue is schav — Russian sorrel soup, served cold, with sour cream, chopped egg, and onion, large chunks of dry black bread. "Mama," I say. "Don't worry. It's you I'm coming to visit. It doesn't matter what we eat."

She worries. She is afraid she has not been a good mother. An activist when I was growing up, Communist Party organizer, she would put up our dinner in a huge iron pot before she left for work each morning, in this way making sure she neglected no essential duty of a mother and wife. For this, however, she had to get up early. I would watch her, chopping onions and tomatoes, cutting a chicken up small, dicing meat, while I ate breakfast, sitting on a small stepladder at our chopping board.

Now, thirty years later, she's afraid she won't be able to give whatever it is I come looking for when I come for a visit. I'm

laughing, and telling my daughter about her three calls, and I am weeping.

"What's schav?" my daughter asks me as we get off the plane in Los Angeles. "There's Grandma," I say, "ask her," as I wave to my mother, trying to suggest some topic of conversation for this eleven-year-old American girl and the woman in her seventies who was born in a small Jewish village in Russia.

My mother catches sight of us and immediately begins talking in an excited voice over the heads of people in line before us as we come through the disembarcation lane. I love this about her, this extravagance of feeling, the moodiness that goes along with it.

"Mama," I call out, waving excitedly, while my daughter looks at her feet and falls back with embarrassment as I push forward into my mother's arms.

She takes me by the elbow as we make our way toward the baggage, giving me sideways her most cunning look. What does she see? I look at myself with her eyes. Suddenly, I'm a giant. Five feet, four and a half inches tall the last time I measured myself, now I'm strolling along here as if I'm on stilts. She has to tip back her head to look into my eyes. This woman, whose hands were once large enough to hold my entire body, does not now reach as high as my daughter's shoulder.

We are all trying to think of something to say. We hurry past murals on the terminal walls. Finally, it is my mother who speaks. "Who are you running from?" she says, tugging me by the arm. "Let me get a look at you."

She stops and looks into my eyes. Then she looks at Larissa. Deeply perceptive, this look of hers. Assessing. Eyes narrowing. "A beauty," she whispers to me as Larissa goes off to stand near the baggage chute. But then she straightens her back and tilts her head up. "It's good you came now," she whispers. "It's important."

She comes up close to me, her shoulder resting against mine. "There's something I didn't tell you."

"You don't have to tell me," I say as quietly as possible. "I already know."

"You know?" She looks doubtful, but only for a moment. "Hoie," she sighs, "you were always like this. Who can keep anything from you?"

"Is she in pain?"

"Pain, sorrow, who can distinguish? There is, let me tell you, a story here. If you would write it down in a book, nobody would believe you."

I know better than to ask about the story. In my family they hint and retreat and tell you later in their own good time.

"But this is not for now," she says, turning her head sharply. "She won't last long, that much I know."

"What do the doctors say?"

"I should wait for doctors to tell me about my own sister?" Her voice has an edge to it, an impatience. But I know her by now. With this tone she attempts to master her own pain.

I want to put my arms around her, to comfort her for the loss of Aunt Gertrude. But I'm afraid she'll push me away, needing her own strength more than she needs my comfort.

"You know doctors," she continues, softening. "For every one thing they tell you, there are two things hidden under the tongue."

"And you?" I ask, because it seems to me she'll let the question come now. "How are you?"

She gestures dismissively with her hand and I know what will follow. *"Gezunt vi gezunt,"* she snorts, with her grim, shtetl humor: "Never mind my health, just tell me where to get potatoes."

Larissa waves. She has been making faces at me, as if the luggage is much too heavy for her to carry; she drags it along, wiping her forehead with an imaginary rag.

"What's this?" my mother calls out. "We leave the child to carry the luggage?"

But I am wringing my hands. I have put my fists against my temples, rocking myself with exaggerated woe. My mother looks at me, frowning, puzzled. There is a playfulness between Larissa and me, a comradeship she does not understand. When I was pregnant with Larissa I used to dream about running with her through the park, a small child at play with a larger one called the mother.

But now my mother cries out, "Wait, wait, we'll help you, don't strain like this."

She is confused by our sudden bursts of wildness; she frowns and seems to be struggling to understand the meaning of playfulness.

"It's a joke, Mama," I have to tell her, "a game we play."

Then, with hesitation, she smiles. But it is here I see most clearly the difference in our generations. Hers, with its eye fixed steadily on survival. Mine freer, more frivolous, less scarred and, in my own eyes, far less noble.

Now she has understood what Larissa is doing.

"Another one, look at her," she calls out, shaking her hands next to her head, leaning forward. "Both crazy."

We take up the suitcases and walk out toward the car. Larissa is carrying the two small duffel bags that make it clear we have come for only a few days.

But my mother has not overlooked this symbolism. And now, refusing my hand when I reach out for her, she says, "Three and a half years you haven't been to visit. You think you're living in the North Pole?"

"Berkeley, the North Pole, what's the difference?" I say, irresistibly drawn into her idiom. "It would take a team of huskies to drag me away from my work."

"Your work," she says, with all the mixed pride and ambivalence she feels about the fact that I live alone with my daughter, supporting both of us as a private teacher, involved in a work of solitary scholarship and poetry she does not understand.

"Still the same thing?" she asks, a tone of uncertainty creeping into her voice. "Mat-ri-archy?"

Reluctantly, I nod my head. But it is not like us to avoid a confrontation. "Tell me," she says, in a hushed, conspiratorial tone, as if she were making an alliance with my better nature. "Tell me, this is serious work you are doing?"

Once, years ago, coming down to visit I grew so angry that when we reached home I called a taxi and returned to the airport again.

"Mama," I say, my voice already too vehement, "listen to me." Larissa falls back and walks beside me. "In doing this work I am breaking taboos as great as those you broke when you became a Communist."

I know that my daughter wants me to lower my voice. Her face is puckered and worried. I put my hand on her shoulder, changing my tone.

"Believe me, where women are concerned, there are still ideas it

is as difficult to think as it was once difficult for Marx to understand the fact that bourgeoise society was built upon the exploitation of the workers."

Since I was a small girl I have been fighting with my mother. When the family was eating dinner some petty disagreement would arise and I'd jump up from the table, pick up a plate and smash it against the wall. I'd go running from the room, slamming doors behind me.

By the age of thirteen I insisted that Hegel was right and not Marx. "The Idea came first," I cried out from the bathroom, which had the only door in the house that locked. "The Spirit came before material existence."

In the afternoons I read books. I started on the left side of the bookcase, at the top shelf, and thumbed my way through every book in the library. *The Classics of Marxism, Scottsboro Boy, State and Revolution* by Lenin, a story about the Huck Bella Hop in the Philippines stories about the Spanish civil war.

I understood little of what I read, but I built a vocabulary, a mighty arsenal of weapons to use against my mother.

Then, when she came into the house, I was ready for her. Any opinion she uttered, I took the opposite point of view. If she liked realism, I preferred abstract art. If she believed in internationalism, I spoke about the necessity to concentrate on local conditions.

Twenty years later nothing has changed. We still refuse to understand one another, both of us still protesting the fact we are so little alike.

Her voice rises; she has clenched her jaw. "You're going to tell me about the exploitation of the workers?"

I answer belligerently, shaking with passion. "There is the same defiance of authority in the scholarship I do, the same passion for truth in the poetry I write as there has been in your life."

"Truth? We're going to discuss truth now?"

"And it changes, doesn't it? From generation to generation?"

The silence that follows this outburst is filled up through every cubic inch of itself by my shame. We are not even out of the airport and already I've lost my temper. And this time especially I had wanted so much to draw close to her. Surely, it must be possible after all these years.

"Mama," I say, throwing my arm around her shoulders with the same conspiratorial appeal she has used in approaching me. "You know what I found out? Marx and Engels, both of them, believed there was once a matriarchal stage of social organization. Yes, I'm serious. I'll tell you where you can read it."

"Marx and Engels?" she says. "You don't say. Marx and Engels?"

But now she sighs, shaking her head. "So all right, I am what I am, we can't be the same person. But I don't like to see you spending your life like this, that much I know."

She pauses, looking over at me, and I can see in her eyes the same resolution I have made.

"Let it go, I don't want to quarrel with you. But when I think . . . a woman like you. So brilliant, so well-educated. You could contribute to the world. With your gifts, what couldn't you accomplish?" Then, in her most endearing voice she says, "You're a poet. I accept this. But now I've got something to say to you. And I don't want you to say no before you give it some thought."

I look down at her face, so deeply marked with determination. "Tell me," I say, in spite of myself, for I know she won't tell me now, no matter what I do.

She looks around her. She has always liked a little suspense. She looks over at Larissa, she looks down at our bags. She reaches in her purse and feels around for her keys.

And then finally, taking my arm, she says, confidingly, almost with humor, "So, what's the hurry? We've got time."

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At dinner Larissa toys with her food. Who can blame her? From the moment we entered the house my mother has been feeding her. In the first ten minutes she brought out a plate of cookies baked for us by Aunt Sara, my father's brother's wife. Since then, I've seen my mother standing at the kitchen door, her hands at her waist, watching my daughter. "A good eater," she says to no one in particular as Larissa accepts a slice of Jell-O mold. "This is what you used to be like," she adds, turning to me, "before you took it in your head to get so thin."

In the kitchen, lined up on the counter, there are several large

platters wrapped in tin foil. They are the gifts brought by my various aunts when they heard I was coming down for a visit. Raisin strudel from Aunt Anne, rolled cinnamon twists from Sara Sol's, a bowl of chopped liver, kugel in an oval pan.

I have always been held in high esteem by my family. "A *chochma,* a wise one," they'd say about me even as a child. "Born with a clear star over her head," his oldest sister would say to my father. "A golden tongue," they'd murmur when I burst out in some extravagant childhood story.

Even to this day, in spite of the fact that I have brought home to them so few tangible signs of worldly fame, they admire me.

They manage to forgive me for my two divorces. They struggle to understand the way I live.

"We never had a poet in the family before," my father's oldest brother said to me before he died. "We're proud of you. If you were born a son, you maybe would have become even a rabbi."

Their family traces itself back to the Vilna Goan, a famous rabbinical scholar of the eighteenth century. But my mother, whenever she heard this, would always snort. "Hach, little people, trying to make themselves feel important."

Her own family was more radical, more violent in its passion, more extreme in its life choices. Each side has always expected me to carry on its tradition. As it is, I have inherited my mother's fierce, revolutionary fervor, my father's quiet inclination for scholarship, and someone else's wild, untutored mystical leanings. They all worry about me because I have become too thin. But the food they have brought me, in love and in tribute, today has been eaten by my daughter.

Larissa moves her food over to the side of her plate, shovels it back toward the center, and makes fork marks in the baked squash.

My mother casts a disapproving glance at her. "Chopped liver she doesn't like. Schav she doesn't like. So eat a mouthful of chicken. Chicken they are eating also among the fifth generation born Americans."

At this, my mother's sister, Aunt Gertrude, who is sitting next to me, throws back her head and emits a dry, conciliatory laugh. It is impossible to recognize in this frail, withdrawn woman, the aunt of

my childhood, the woman who joined the Peace Corps at the age of fifty-three, and went off to serve as a nurse in Ethiopia. I have heard that one day she rode a donkey over the mountains, taking supplies to villages of the interior. The image of her has lived on with me, an aging woman with gaunt face and brilliant eyes, her white hair beginning to yellow, the habitual smoker's cough, the clop of the animal's hooves and she rides, talking, smoking, gesturing, over the bad roads of the mountains of Ethiopia.

When I lean close to her I can smell the acrid sweetness I have known since childhood, when my sister was dying. It makes me want to run toward her, to grab her so tight death cannot get hold of her, and it makes me want to run away. I glance toward her from the corner of my eye, knowing she would not like to be stared at. And she, growing conscious of my tact, presses my foot beneath the table.

Her touch is so light I can scarcely feel it, but it has the power to jog my memory. Profoundly moved, I recall the games we used to play together when I was a child visiting at her house, little pokings and pattings, accompanied by puffs from her cigarettes, perfect rings of smoke, the smell of caffeine and the good odor of soap.

She had some secret sorrow, never spoken of, never completely hidden from me. But I knew, even as a small girl, that if you loved this woman you should pretend to believe that she was happy.

"There you be, cookie," she'd say in her husky voice when she came looking for me. I would jump up and throw my arms around her neck, charmed by her gruff tenderness.

She worked hard; she grew old early. "Something's eating her," my mother would say to my father. And I watched the wrinkles gnawing at her face, deepening perceptibly every time I saw her.

Silence comes to our table. Gertrude sipping her black tea, my mother tapping her fork against her plate, my own chair shifting restlessly as it attempts in all futility to establish itself in some permanent niche in the world.

And suddenly I know precisely what my mother has been hinting at since I arrived in Los Angeles. It comes to me from the silence as if it had been clearly and distinctly uttered. Now, in front of my aunt and my daughter, she is going to ask me something impossible to refuse.

She takes a deep breath, looks around the room as if she has misplaced something, and then delivers herself of one of those weighty utterances which have been troubling the atmosphere all day. "Do you know why I'm alive today?" she says, as if it were a question of her own will that she has lived to be an old woman. "Do you want to know why I'm still living?" And then, when Larissa looks toward her expectantly: "Because," she says, "there's still injustice in the world. And I am a fighter."

My mother's conversation frequently assumes this rhetorical tone. It comes, I suppose, from the many years she has been a public speaker. Even her English changes at such moments. It loses its Yiddish inflection and her voice rings out as if she were speaking through a megaphone. But today I know that all these statements are intended for me.

"Never mind how old I am," she says. "Never mind when I was born. Or where, or to what mother. There's only one important fact about a life. And that one is always a beginning. A woman who lives for a cause, a woman with dedication and unbreakable devotion — that's a woman who deserves the name of woman."

Has she been rehearsing this little speech? I ask myself. Has she been going over it again and again in her mind, as she waited for me at the airport?

As we leave the table she looks out the window, bends her knees slightly, and tips back her head, trying to catch sight of the moon. "Not yet," she mutters and walks toward the room where Larissa has been building a fire.

Here, everything has a story. The charcoal sketch of Harriet Tubman, given to her by Langston Hughes. The book of Tina Modotti's photographs, a gift from a young radical woman. And now I realize there is something new in this room, which she has been wanting me to notice. It is visible in the light from the small lamp attached to an oil painting of my sister in her red Komsomol scarf. It says:

TO ROSE CHERNIN FOR 25 YEARS OF MILITANT LEADERSHIP TO THE COMMITTEE FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS. IN APPRECIATION OF YOUR LIFELONG DEVOTION AND STRUGGLE ON BEHALF OF THE FOREIGN-BORN AND ALL VICTIMS OF POLITICAL AND