

Kevin Anderson

The Minotaur

I stood in the doorway, awkward, me, too large for the fragile house, obtrusive, out of order—order, family, genus. My mother sat on a gray recliner, in faux fur slippers, an open bathrobe over a housedress of mauve, gray robe on mauve on gray recliner. She sat, her hair dyed black, sink-dyed, home-dyed, inky, but not recently; her gray roots showed in an inch-wide strip, a corona that framed her forehead. She occasionally rocked and spoke to a television that was out of my view, but the volume was loud: a game show, clapping, contestants, laughing. She was watching *The Family Feud*, *The Price is Right*? I couldn't tell. Did it matter? She was heavier than I remembered her, and older. At sixty she shouldn't have looked so old, but she was sick, sick and gray, gray-skinned and ashen and hollow and yellow, hollow despite her heaviness, some concavity more spiritual than physical. A flimsy folding table by her elbow threatened to fall under an ashtray of brown-yellow-clear glass filled with ash and butts and a smoldering cigarette, a Bic lighter, upright and white with a red flicker, a green bottle of wine, and a half-dozen prescription bottles, orange with white caps flipped upside down. A remote control.

We used to eat TV dinners off those folding tables. I would sit with my sister on the couch in front of the TV. I remember the aluminum trays with elastic gravy burned into the corners, clinging to edges, and compartments of turkey in gravy, stuffing and peas and a baked desert like apple crumble. My favorite was the Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes, green beans in butter sauce, and chocolate cake, all frozen, thawed, steaming—chocolate cake in beef gravy and a glass of red Kool-Aid on a TV tray.

The room reeked of cigarette smoke and ammonia, un-bathed old flesh, sweaty and close, and it had the settled close, cloying feel of having not been cleaned in years—stagnant, putrid, salacious—with stacks of magazines on the floor, on a coffee table, stacks fallen onto paper plates that scattered the floor like tiles with dehydrated food bits, an overflowing waste basket in the corner, used plastic forks, and a drift of napkins and crumpled Kleenex. Clothing, a blanket were piled onto a soiled cloth sofa under a gold-framed picture against the back wall—a tilted pink sunset and ocean waves white-capped on black velvet.

Here was my mother, the citadel of the family, my greatest influence. She was drinking purple wine from a Solo cup while watching game shows and waiting to die. I could see her scalp shining in places through her matted, curling hair. I felt embarrassed, like seeing nakedness, too personal, too deep and acute. *I have a pain...I have a pain in my mother.* A philosopher named Derrida wrote that. *Where does it hurt? I have a pain in my mother.* The room was suffocating, stifled; it must have been ninety degrees in that room and no fan, no air moving, no window open, no fresh air, no life, just the blare of canned laughter and forced applause. A dead plant sat on a windowsill. The room, the mess, the scene, decay, frustration, strange and familiar and obscene, and the wonder of it all.

But none of this mattered. It didn't even matter that she was dying or that she would be dead in a year. We're all dying. What does it matter if we die now or a year from now or fifty years from now, or if we're a mess while we're alive? What mattered was that she was my mother, and more, that she was herself. And I watched her drink from her cup, Rosicrucian, sacramental, as the television lit her face flickering absolutions—*I absolve you, I absolve you.*

I didn't understand, couldn't understand, alcoholism when I was a child. I knew my mother drank and was often sick and sometimes angry, sometimes crying, always unpredictable

and unstable, sometimes frightening, sometimes absent. But she was my mother, an addict, but those things weren't talked of then, addiction, alcoholism, mental illness. My father avoided her and worked outside as much as possible, and my sister, Tami, stayed away from home when she could, with friends, anywhere, a boyfriend, but I lived in wonder of my mother's demons, her tremors, her moods, I was present and in wonder, present and wondering what afflicted her, and wondering if I could help or soften or intercede, and sacrifice myself (*I absolve you*); I wondered with a cluelessness and wonder that confuses me even now.

My mother smiled and spoke something incoherent to the TV. Her teeth showed violet, dark rose, wine-stained, grotesque, her wrinkled skin creviced, spotted, puffy, sunken, but her eyes, despite a yellow-tinged rime, sparkled like children's eyes, mischievous, innocent within her haggard face. Her eyes, the same since birth, infant's eyes in their size and ways, defied, or betrayed, and I could see this in my mother at times, see her child-self, her girlhood, still beneath whatever had tortured her, and there in her eyes lingered her youth, lost, never lost, a youth untouched from before, some part of her that had escaped the cynicism and trauma and bludgeoning from whatever had crippled and clutched her haunting. I could see this sometimes in her, the dream of her, a child I never knew and her happiness (was she ever happy?).

I spoke. "Momma?"

"Well," she started a little, but not much, a kind of hiccup of the body, still gripping her red plastic cup. "It's the prodigal son, returned. Shall we kill the fatted calf?" She laughed, joking? No. "But you're too late, son; your father's already dead. Too late for a celebration, and you're too late for a funeral." Her eyes shone at me. Was it anger? She rocked gently, habitually, content or agitated in her place.

"Hi, Momma."

“Well, there you are, my boy, standing in the doorway, sheepish as I remember you. And how you’ve grown. My, could I have given birth to you? Such a large thing. Come in here more and let me see you.”

I took a couple steps into the room and stood. I could see the TV now, a box television tabled above mess, not the flat panel kind, black and noxious and blaring, bright; its plastic panels vibrated with distorted sound. The whole room vibrated, prismatic, too bright like a migraine—the windows uncovered, too hot, too bright, too sunny, an arboretum, a greenhouse with that sick, slick feeling one gets walking through a nursery in summer, the nitrogen and chemical fertilizer sweet and stiff steaming stinging the brain behind the eyes with each choked breath.

She said, “You’ve got your health back, boy, got your strength back, even though you’re tottering there like a child without composure, wondering what to do with your hands—in your pockets or folded or dangling at your sides? Indecisive. Always indecisive. Yes, you’re my young man all grown up. I can see it. And how the ladies must like you, such a tall, strong one.”

She eyed me up and down, and I pulled at my breaths open-mouthed, one, another, another. It’s funny how we fall back into patterns, how the cart slides into the ruts. Coming home again I was a disobedient child standing in front of my mother waiting for my punishment, inevitable, and it was an unavoidable a trap for both of us, like a drama, a farce we were forced to play out and purge, the working out of a splinter in the soul. Those habits. When I was a child, we had a sick dog, dying, an Anatolian shepherd. He jumped the fence at the veterinarian’s hospital and ran twenty miles back to the farm so he could die next to the sheep he guarded.

“I understand you live in Visalia, never left after your hospital stay there,” she said.

“Yes, that’s right, in Visalia, in the old part of town, southeast part of town. You might like it there.”

“I might, you think.”

“I like it there, the old houses. It’s quiet, lots of shade, lots of old oaks, no cul-de-sacs. The building is all on the other side of town, the new stuff. There’s a creek close by, a dry creek, but I guess kids used to float down that creek in tubes, years ago. I’d like to see that, if it rains, kids floating in tubes. I don’t know where they end up, though, floating.”

“And you work on a farm?”

“No, I did. Now I work for a nursery, a commercial nursery. Doing tractor work, skid-steer loaders. I plant trees, mostly.”

“Trees? What kind of a job is that, planting trees? Little trees? Big trees? What kind of trees?”

“All kinds of trees. I guess, it’s just temporary; it’s a temporary job. I’ll figure something out, something more...but, I like Sycamores and Raywood Ashes—the box trees survive the gophers best...and Chinese Pistache. After two years, they can survive on their own, the trees, without watering, once they’re established; they have to get roots down. That’s the critical thing. If there’s a little shade, I like Japanese Maples. They’re awfully pretty, leaves quite delicate, but they burn in the sun.”

She rocked more aggressively, maybe impatient, and then seemed to catch herself and slow to a lull. I could feel sweat beading on me, the room too cloistered.

“It’s so hot in here, Ma.”

“Why didn’t you come to your Pa’s funeral?”

“What’s wrong with the AC? Can I turn on some air?”

“The air conditioning doesn’t work. The unit was twenty years old. They wanted six thousand dollars to replace it, said it couldn’t be fixed. Why didn’t you come to your father’s funeral?”

“I’ll get you a window unit, a little unit, here, to keep the room cool. You can’t live in this kind of heat; it’ll make you sick. It’ll kill you.”

“Make me sick? Do you think the *heat* will kill me? The *heat*? Oh, I’ll die, but not from the heat. Why should I fear the heat with my cold heart? My blue blood barely trickles. I’m an iced orchid with rotting flesh lying in my hothouse. And you won’t answer me. Your father died. You didn’t come to his funeral. Why?”

“I wasn’t well.”

“You were well enough.”

“Then I didn’t want to come.”

“Stop it! To your father’s funeral? Show respect! You didn’t come because of me, is that right? You didn’t want to deal with me, see your wicked mother?”

“I didn’t want to come home.”

“To me!”

“To everything. Dad was dead; you were half dead.”

“Bite your tongue and show respect!” She jerked back in her chair, tipping, rocking, seemed to remember her cigarette and picked it up with a shaking hand. Her hands were thin, fine, bluish and speckled like a robin’s egg, translucent. She sucked smoke through pursed, pale lips, then looked back up at me and said, “I had to go away for awhile, after your father died, to get clean.”

“I know. I was away, too.”

“It builds up in me, you know, this...” She gestured at nothing.

“I know.”

My mother inhaled from her cigarette, deeply, cocked her head, and blew a great cloud into the air. “Do you have a girl? Where you live? Is there a girl?”

“Yes, I have a girl.”

“What’s her name?”

“Mary.”

“How very Biblical,” she grinned, almost sweetly, and pointed her cigarette at me.

“Mary. And what does Mary do?”

“She works at a bar.”

“Oh, child, you know better than that! A bar?” and she grimaced, a frown, a smile, something in between. She opened her mouth with purple teeth garish, her purple tongue clicked from the roof of her mouth, a tsk, and she looked through me. “Sit down, boy, on that chair, there, close to me so I can see you on my level. You stand too looming in this room. You’re a giant, and I don’t know how you got that way. You belong in the fields, like your father, never domesticated, but maybe your Mary will domesticate you. Is that what you want?”

She took another drag on her cigarette, and I could hear it crackle above the din, red heat glowing, and a pop from her lips as she pulled the cigarette away, exhaled dry and gray and hot. I sat in a cane-and-wood chair that had been pulled from the kitchen table, and I looked for my mother in a silvery haze.

She said, “Let me ask you something. Does it make you jealous knowing that men hit on Mary every night at work? Do you think about it? The men? Does it worry you that they want to have sex with her? That they flirt with her, that they over-tip her and try to buy her? Does that

bother you? And does she flirt back, just for tips, maybe? Just for fun? Do you wonder, son, if she likes the attention?”

“It’s just a temporary job...”

“Yes, yes, everything is temporary. You’ve already said that, temporary jobs. Breathing is temporary, every pulse of the heart is temporary, here, gone, here, gone. Life, this temporary life, is built on shifting sands. What isn’t temporary?” She grabbed the wine bottle by the neck and poured her cup full. I watched her hands, graceful despite her fury and ague, her hands and eyes always betraying, communicating, animate.

“Mom, how are you? Tami said you’ve been sick.”

“Oh, did she? And how would she know, my daughter? She visits almost as rarely as you do, and I hardly know my own grandchildren. Do you know she keeps them from me—they’re mine—she visits and doesn’t bring them with her? In school, she says. How can they be in school, so young? Am I such a witch?”

“She said you have cancer. And you’ve stopped treatment. She said you’re doing hospice.”

“We all have cancer, boy, some of us just don’t know it. There’s a cancer in you, growing. There always has been. And treatment, there is no treatment for me. I’m beyond treatment. And as for hospice, well, you know, they give you opium. Opium and wine and cigarettes for me, now. They wanted to give me weed, too, but I’m not a hippie.”

“Marijuana helps with pain.”

“I’m not a hippie. Tell me about the girl.”

“Are you in pain? I want to ask about you.”

“No, I want to hear about you and the girl and your intentions. What are you doing with your life? You’ve always been a quitter; do you know that? It’s a weakness in you. You quit. You walk away. Why do you do that, run from one thing to another, everything temporary, looking for what? What are you looking for? And now a relationship. To run from? You’ll quit that, too, of course. You will. Or she’ll quit you. That’s really what you’re afraid of, isn’t it, she quitting you? Is that it? Yes, I can see, now. That’s it.” She smiled her plum smile again, overripe, dulcet and grim. “Now I see the fear and worry and uncertainty, the specter of being alone. Yes, the specter. That’s the temporary inside of you, isn’t it? Your demon?” She sipped her wine. “How old is the girl?”

“She’s twenty-seven. We’re a lot alike. She likes to read. She was an English major in school—English and Anthropology. She reads and she paints a little. We’re good together, everything so easy, at least, at times so easy, most times.”

My mother took a long drink from her cup and kept her eyes on me over the rim. “Reads and paints and twenty-seven. And she’s not married at twenty-seven? And working at a bar?”

“She’s divorced, or, it’s not, finalized yet, it takes time, there’s a time thing that’s required, but she’s going through a divorce. She was married before.”

“She’s married? Now? What a fool you are to trust a cheating woman! And married! And did she have an affair with you? Are you the cause of the adultery? And not finalized; nothing ever is finalized! We’ve already been over that, haven’t we, boy? And now I suppose you live together with this married woman?”

“Yes, we live together.”

“In sin.”

“She had a very hard time; it was a complicated situation.”

“Yes, life is complicated, isn’t it?”

“But she got out. She’s free, she got herself free.”

“Free? Is anyone free?”

“I want her to be free. And we have a dog. We have dog named Nora.”

“Why would anyone name a dog Nora? And you say you’re happy; you live happily?”

And you love her, despite this mess?”

“Yes, completely. I love her very much.”

“Well, which is it, completely or very much?”

“Completely. Absolutely. With all my heart.”

“And you want her?”

“Yes, I want her, and it’s not such a mess.”

“She’s already proven in divorce she’s not worth loving, hasn’t she, not worth having.”

“No, she’s worth loving. I love her. She’s free from all that, the former stuff.”

“You’re never free.”

“I want her. I live for her.”

“Oh, stop, boy, *live for her*, stop with your sentiment.”

“It’s not sentiment. This is important to me. This is my love. It’s my love, and it’s important to me.”

“Yes, yes.”

“My love, and I give it to her, my love. I love her, Mary, not what she does or has or was, not the way she looks or acts or because she’s smart or funny, or that she paints or reads or anything else. I love her, her *self*.”

“Her free self? With your love?” she mocked.

“And my love isn’t cheap or conditional or fragile and petty, not jealous or weak or afraid or temporary, and it isn’t rational or irrational or unethical. I may be all of those things, all of them, but my love isn’t. I’m in love.”

My mother looked away from me and into the television. What was it she saw with those eyes? She reached across her body and set her cup down on the tray, poked at the remote control and silenced the television. The room fell into a serene quiet, a sonic break, psychic break. Dust particles floated through sunlight and settled on her robe, on her hair, her chair. She spoke. “My shows, you know. They pass the time.” She picked up her cup and looked inside but didn’t drink. “And this is what you want for your life?”

“This is what makes sense to me. Being in love. Building a life on love. That is purpose. It makes things meaningful. Life without a purpose has no meaning. It’s just stuff people do, without a story or narrative.”

“Life doesn’t have to mean anything. It’s a crooked thing, life, and love is a crooked thing, too, son. It’s not so simple and pure and straight.”

“No, I know it’s not simple. But seeing things the way they are, seeing them and still loving them, not perfect, not the dream, seeing the ugliness and the truth, the real things, and thinking, ‘That’s beautiful. And that’s simple. Life is beautiful.’ I want that.”

“You want the ideal. You’re being idealistic.”

“No, I don’t. I want the busted up, broken and shattered, put-back-together reality. I want to see it and understand it, and then I can love it. I want to see the perfect in imperfection. And I want to love, and I want my life to make sense to me, and I’ll open up, I’ll take the risk and fall and fail and ache and go on without fear. *Fear no more, says the heart.* That’s life. Stand there, face it, look it in the eye.”

“You want real life, but the real will crush you. Life is tragedy and pain and loss. I want the dream for you, son, not the real. Look at you, there, half lion, half child, and fevered. I want you to sleep and dream forever and never wake.”

She looked at me steadily, then took a long slow drink of wine, swallow after swallow. She asked, “Do you want some of this wine?”

“No, I don’t want that wine!”

“Well, now, I’m just asking you,” she smiled. “Now, boy, tell me why you came here?”

“I came to see you. I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry. Life is for the living, and you need to live. So, you’ve seen me. And I’ve seen you. You get to see how broken I am, and maybe that gives you pleasure. I know I’m not the easiest woman to love, and my love is like a record gone out of fashion; I don’t think you can understand it. We appear and appear and disappear, and we’re damned for what we’ve done.” She rocked a few times in her chair and looked at me. “And will I meet this woman, Mary? This awful, trumpy, godforsaken divorcee who seduced and stole my son?”

“Yes, if you like.”

“And will you marry her?”

“Yes, I’ll marry her.”

“And have children with her?”

“Yes.”

“And will you be happy to have her as your wife and the mother of your children?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll meet her.”

My mother looked down at the ashtray. She inhaled weakly from her cigarette, and as she let the smoke trickle from her nose, she pushed the cigarette slowly down into the ashes, spilling ash over the side of the brownish glass.

“Tomorrow is Sunday. I want you to take me to church tomorrow.”

“Oh, Momma, I don’t...”

“I want you to take me to church tomorrow, and I want you to take me to lunch. I want people to see me with my son. Do you have church clothes?”

“No.”

She looked at my boots and jeans. “You’re a fool.”

“Yes.”

She looked at my hair, my face, my shoulders. “My first baby died right after birth; you know this story, but not all. It’s not for you to know all. That baby lived less than an hour. Isaac Ingmar Erickson. Isaac was my grandfather’s name, and Ingmar, your Daddy’s middle name. I have the birth certificate still. Born in San Luis Obispo, in a new maternity ward, steel beds and spread your legs and medication to dull the pain. I never touched that baby. They took him away blue and upside down by the feet.

“That baby wasn’t your Daddy’s baby. But your Daddy married me. That baby was the Devil’s own, and that’s all I’ll say about that. And maybe that’s why it didn’t live. And maybe that’s a good thing. *Better to be dead than livin’, and better yet, never to have lived at all!* That’s what it says in *Ecclesiastes*, and that’s the only book in the *Bible* that ever made sense to me. Your Daddy’s buried next to that baby now. Later, I want you to drive us out to the cemetery if I’m feeling better, but first I need to rest. I get tired.

“Now I want you to go in my room. I have Grandma’s ring. I’ve kept it these years for you, the ring my Daddy gave her. It’s in a blue box wrapped in tissue in the top drawer of my dresser, the carved dresser in my room; you know the one. I want you to go in there and get that ring and bring it to me, and then I need to rest. Then you can go outside and have you a look around. Now, go on and do as your Momma says.”