

# MOTHER SAYS

"Mother Says"

Craig Ensor

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FICTION

A JAR OF FAT SITS ON A SHELF IN the lounge room, alongside books and family photos. It is my mother's fat. Last Christmas, as a treat to herself, she had the fat vacuumed out from her thighs and bottom. Then, all the fat went into the glass jar. It is a large jar. Mother would disagree with me about how large it is. Mother says it is a medium-sized jar.

Having the fat on the shelf is sort of like having Mother around when she's not here. That happens a lot, her not being here. Mother goes out on dates a lot - every Saturday night and sometimes, if she likes the guy, during the week. Most nights during the week, Mother works as a receptionist at a hotel in the city. She meets men that way. Other ways, too. But I don't know those ways. She's on a date tonight with a man called Enrico. That's why she's not at home this time.

Overall, I like being at home by myself, but not when it is windy. It is windy outside tonight. The trees are banging on the house like they want to get inside, out of the wind.

While Mother's out, I get into her wardrobe and dress up in her dresses and underwear and jewellery, then parade around the house. Mother is my height, so everything fits just fine.

I sit on the edge of her bed and, taking her hairbrush, I brush my hair in long strokes with my head tilted to the side. I pretend that I am going out on a date. I collect her eyeshadow and mascara and foundation, lipstick as well, and make myself over in front of the mirror on her wardrobe. Then, when I hear tyres unzip along our street, I rush back to the lounge-room window that faces the street and look through the part in the curtains to see if my date has arrived, as Mother does.

When I look through, I am really looking for a car pulling up in the driveway with Mother in it. Sometimes, she surprises me and comes home earlier than expected. Mother says that this is when the man doesn't say and do the right things.

By the way, I am too young to date.

Mother tells me a lot about men. Mother says that she didn't get the fat vacuumed out of her thighs to get a man. She says she did it for herself. She tells me that when I start dating, I should

satisfy my wants first, then everything else will follow, love and the rest.

Mother wants to get larger breasts. She stands in front of the mirror before a date and helps up the ones she's got with her hands. Her breasts are always trying to slip through her fingers. Mother says her breasts look tired. She tells me that my brother and I sucked the youth out of them. Next month, Mother goes into hospital to get the youth put back in them. She says she is doing it for herself, to feel better about herself. Mother tells me to do things that make me feel better about myself.

Tonight, I am going to pierce my ears. This will make me feel better about myself.

The first step is to take a needle from Mother's sewing kit and some ice cubes from the freezer, then fill the washbasin in the bathroom with cold water. Then, with a felt-tip pen, I draw a little dot on

I brush my hair out once again and pin it up on top of my head so the earrings are on display. Then, I model around the house. From time to time, I return to Mother's full-length mirror to swivel and pout and look over my shoulder at the fit of the dress at the back then pose as if the mirror is a wall of flashing cameras.

each ear lobe where I want the holes to go. The dots appearing like unsqueezed blackheads. I hold the ice up to my ear until it goes numb, then I take the needle. The needle panics in my hand. It shakes like my grandfather's hand used to shake. I take a deep breath and, with one eye looking at the mirror to get the aim right, I prick the tip of the needle on the dot and, holding the needle steady, push it through my right ear lobe.

The flesh tears. The pain is too much.

I stop and look into the mirror and a three-inch needle is stuck halfway through my ear lobe. I pack more ice onto my ear until the numbness takes over. It is sleepy-arm numbness. Then, I have another go and, this time, the needle slides through my ear lobe and pops when it comes out the other side. Not my hands, but an energy inside me pushes

the needle through. It's the same energy I feel when I feel Mother's clothes against my skin. I swab the blood away with wet tissues. I take Mother's dangly sapphire earrings from her jewellery box and slip the gold rod through my hole then clip the earring shut. I shake my hair out like Mother does when she swallows a pill and the earring dangles and electrifies in the fluorescent bathroom light. Only then do I feel satisfied all over.

As I finish the other ear, the telephone rings.

"It's me."

It's my father. "Hi Dad."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Watching TV."

The receiver hurts my ear lobe, so I hold it away from my ear. The hurting stops, but his voice sounds distant and foreign as a result.

"Where's your mother? Can I talk to her?"

After a pause I say, "She's in bed. She's got a migraine."

"That's no good."

"I don't want to wake her up," I say.

Mother says not to tell Father where she is when she's out on a date. Last time I did that, Father showed up on the front lawn at three in the morning, banging on the house like the trees are doing, knocking hurt into the house. The migraine stopped the hurting. Mother says that migraines and fat are one and the same thing - they both make men go away.

"Okay," Father says. "Tell your mum that I called. You looking forward to tomorrow? We can go to the beach if you like. Remember to tell her that I called."

"Yes, Dad."

"Goodnight. See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Dad."

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## FICTION

>> I wait until Father hangs up. Sometimes, he hangs on and listens long after he has said goodbye. For one reason or another, he likes to be the last to put the phone down. Or, he doesn't want to be the first. This is one of those times. I wait awhile, listening to the television going on the other end of the line, in Father's apartment, then hang up the phone.

I wonder if Father is on a date, too.

I check the receiver. There are mosquito smears of blood on the phone, which I swab clean with wet tissues. Then, I put the phone back on the hook. My ears sting a little but the thrill of seeing the earrings in the mirror numbs any pain. Mother says that the cost of being beautiful is the pain we go through to become beautiful.

Afterwards, I raid Mother's wardrobe for her black glittery evening gown – the one she wore to the opera that time with the doctor, as well as the highest heels she has on her shoe rack – and spread the dress out on her bed. Then, I put it all on. I brush my hair out once again and

Whenever I do the vacuuming, I think of Mother, her thighs. Mother likes to have the house spotless for when she brings dates back home. Mother says that men are still looking for a woman who cleans and washes and cooks, like their mothers did. Mother says we sometimes have to give up a little to get all of what we want. Keeping the place spotless was the giving up part. But this was only for the first date.

By the third or fourth date, the place could be untidy – or natural, as she put it. Mother says that by then, they are in her power. She laughs when she talks like that. Mother says that women are the most powerful animals on earth.

I like the third and fourth dates the best. Then I don't have to clean. Enrico, tonight's date, he is a first date. So I have to get everything perfect for Enrico.

About 11, the telephone rings. At first, I think it is Mother saying she is going to be late. But it is Father. "It's me again. You're still up," he says.

"Mum said I could stay up," I say.

I feel that connection. But only that. He waits for me to hang up the phone. And I do.

I look around the living room, up on the shelves that hold the books and the jar of fat and the family photos. None of the family photos have Father in them. Mother took all those ones down over the past year. Now, there are just photos of Mother's family, different friends who she has picked up since the separation, and me.

After the split, Father got to keep my brother and the car while Mother got the house and me. One night, when I was supposed to be in bed, I heard my uncle say it was an even split, a fair split. My uncle is in the photo nearest the jar of fat, with his girlfriend and me. Mother is behind the camera.

Mother doesn't like photos with her in them. She says she's not proud of the way she looks, but proud of the way she will look. Mother says that you can't take a photo of the way you will look.

Mother wants to get the tat put into a special glass container, with a wooden stand and a little gold plaque, to give it a permanent look. At the moment, I am saving my pocket money to get that done for her, as a present for when she comes out of hospital, after she has had her breasts done.

Outside, the wind is picking up strength. It is making the vertical blinds fight among themselves on the windowsill.

I watch television for a bit, until it is almost 12, then I get out of the evening gown and the high heels and wipe the mascara and eyeshadow and lipstick off my face. Mother is always on time. This means that I have to be on time, too.

I take out the dangly sapphire earrings and put in gold studs from her jewellery box. Mother has 20 years' worth of earrings and rings and bracelets in her jewellery box. Whenever I look through it, I wonder what jewellery Father gave her, and whether she still has the jewellery he gave her while they were dating.

I wonder. I wonder until the wondering hurts.

Enrico stands and reaches up to take the jar of fat off the shelf. He is tall and can reach easily. He takes it down like it is a supermarket grocery. He brings the fat up close to his eyes ... "This is fat?" "From Mother's thighs. And her bottom." I make to grab where on her bottom the fat was sucked from, but there is nothing to grab on me.

pin it up on top of my head so the earrings are on display. Then, I model around the house. From time to time, I return to Mother's full-length mirror to swivel and pout and look over my shoulder at the fit of the dress at the back then pose as if the mirror is a wall of flashing cameras.

It is 10.30pm. Mother said I could expect her home by midnight but that I am to be in bed by 11. She gave me a list of chores to do while she was out, sorting clothes that she pulled off the washing line earlier in the day, washing the dishes, vacuuming the bedrooms. I do the dishes in the evening gown and high heels and pink rubber dishwashing gloves. I sort the clothes. I vacuum the bedrooms.

"Okay. I just wanted to check on how your mother's doing. Does she feel any better?"

"She's still asleep. Sleep is the best thing for it, the migraine."

"Well, don't wake her. I just wanted to see how she was. That's all."

"She's fine, Dad."

"Okay. Remember to let your mother know that I rang. I'll call tomorrow. Tomorrow morning."

"Goodnight, Dad," I say.

"Take care. Take care of your mother."

I hold the phone away from my ear. I can hear his breathing at the other end, the television talking, no one else. It is talking the same things in our house.

I LAY ON THE LOUNGE IN FRONT OF the television, half-asleep, when I hear the keys rattle and the key pierce the

lock and turn, then the door opens with Mother behind it. She has a handbag and Enrico on her arm. They look drunk, which is usual. They both have the same smile on their faces. That is usual also.

"What are you doing up, darls?"

"Waiting up for you. I'm scared."

"What is it, pet?"

Mother sits beside me on the lounge and touches my hand. She looks at me sideways. She doesn't see my earrings.

All the time, Enrico stands by the door like a door-to-door salesman.

"The wind's making funny noises."

"Did you shut all the windows?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's okay now, pet. I'll make some coffee." Then she turns to Enrico and says, "Black with one sugar, isn't it hon?"

"Yes, thanks," Enrico says.

Mother goes into the kitchen and I hear the fridge door open and the kettle click on. Enrico walks around the coffee table slow, as if the carpet has needles in it, and sits down on the lounge – not back on it, on the edge – and looks up at the shelves that cover the walls of the lounge room.

At first, he is interested in the books. Then his eyes choke on the jar of fat.

"That's Mother's fat," I say.

"Her what?"

"Her fat. She had it sucked from her thighs and bottom."

"Really... liposuction, you mean?"

"That's what the doctors called it. They put it in a glass jar, to keep. I'm supposed to get it mounted for her with plaque made of gold. But don't tell her that. It's a surprise."

Enrico stands and reaches up to take the jar of fat off the shelf. He is tall and can reach easily. He takes it down like it is a supermarket grocery. He brings the fat up close to his eyes.

Out in the kitchen, the kettle boils and a spoon tinkles on a ceramic mug. The fridge door shuts. Enrico rolls the fat jar around in his hands and brings it up to his eyes again and makes this face so that two chins appear.

"This is fat?"

"From Mother's thighs. And her bottom."

I make to grab where on her bottom the fat was sucked from, but there is nothing to grab on me.

"I don't know whether I want to be looking at this... the colour of it... I've never seen that colour before," he says.

Enrico is right about the colour of the fat. Even Mother says there is no other colour like it on earth. Mother says it is

Enrico smiles back while looking at her legs, where her black miniskirt holds back her thighs.

Mother pulls the covers and lets me slide into bed. I turn my head to the side on the pillow and draw the blankets up

The telephone rings. It's my father. "Hi Dad." "Where's your mother? Can I talk to her?" Mother says not to tell Father where she is when she's out on a date. Last time I did that, Father showed up on the front lawn at three in the morning, banging on the house like the trees are doing, knocking hurt into the house... Mother says that migraines and fat are one and the same thing – they both make men go away.

the colour of neglect. "All this fat they took from her thighs?"

"The doctors did. They can do anything. They can make anyone look beautiful."

"I better put it back."

Enrico sees my earrings and stares at them like he has been staring at the fat.

"Take the lid off if you like. It smells like medicine."

"No. I'll put it back."

Enrico weights it in his hands one last time, as if he is deciding whether to buy it or not, then slides it back onto the shelf. He makes a face that is the opposite of the face he made when Mother and he walked through the front door.

After a while, Mother comes into the lounge room carrying a tray with two mugs of coffee on it and a row of chocolate biscuits. Mother doesn't eat chocolate biscuits. She likes people to think that she can eat chocolate and still look as perfect as she does. Mother says that she likes people to think that her beauty is effortless.

"Come on. Let's get you off to bed," Mother says.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, come on. No arguing."

Mother takes me by the hand and turns to Enrico.

"I won't be long," she says to Enrico and smiles and touches him.

to my chin. Mother sits on the edge of my bed and combs my hair away from my face.

Not a thing does she say about the gold studs pierced through my ears. I figure it is because she is drunk.

Being drunk makes her miss things.

"Now, you rest well. Did anyone call?"

"Father called."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to speak to you."

Mother's eyes look tired. She wants to fix that too, the tiredness in her eyes.

"You told him..."

"I told him you were sick in bed. Migraine."

"Good."

"He said he would ring in the morning. He wanted me to let you know he rang."

"Okay, darl. Now you get some sleep like a good young man. I'll see you in the morning," she says.

Mother kisses me on the cheek then turns off the bedroom light. She closes the door behind her and the latch clicks shut and my whole room is dark.

Usually, when she doesn't have a man home, she leaves my bedroom door open. Tonight is not usual.

Outside, the wind tears like ripping flesh. □

Craig Ensor was a runner-up in last year's HQ Short Story Contest.