

HOW TO MURDER YOUR MOTHER

Patricia Duncker

Nobody takes any notice of white-haired women in their mid sixties, especially if they are wearing flat shoes and carrying unfashionable handbags. But these two are desperate lovers, hiding out in a chic, slick café, on the watch for Maman, who might, at any moment, come rampaging down the boulevards, dark glasses lowered, the prize bull at the *corrida*, entering the ring, late in the afternoon. One of the women crouches near the window on the first floor level of the café, keeping her glass of unsweetened tea close to her face for protection.

‘You must involve the clinic now, ma chère, ‘ she hissed. ‘If she does commit suicide it will all fall on you.’

Maman had thrown a dramatic fit that morning at breakfast, armed with a large bottle of whisky and sixty paracetamol, spread out on the tablecloth in symmetrical rows. She had even yelled ‘When I’m dead, you’ll be sorry!’ The elderly lovers remained divided.

‘She’d sick the lot up. She can’t bear whisky. It’s all theatre.’

‘Don’t be so sure. She’s working up to something. I know it.’

The lovers lived two houses and one cul-de-sac away from each other. At first, when Maman still possessed most of her marbles, this had been extremely convenient. What could be more natural than close neighbours becoming closer friends? In and out of each other's houses, watering plants and feeding cats, putting out dustbins and sharing builders, even perusing the January Sales, first through the catalogues then ransacking the shops. But now the problem was Maman. The old lady, aetat eighty-four, sporting a cluster of white hairs on her jutting chin, looked small, thin and frail. Poor dear, sighed the district nurse, not long for this world. But Maman's duplicitous physique disguised a lithe and wiry energy; she simmered with bottled-up aggression. The early stages of Alzheimer's glittered in her milky eyes. Her mother and her mother's mother had both been carried off by the disease, at first forgetting to eat and to wash, and eventually forgetting how to breathe. But both these women had first passed through a lengthy stage of murderous venom, when their native selfishness, egotism and savagery knew no limits. At last, the end of respectability and good manners. I can do what I like, say what I like, mangle everything within reach. For who shall fathom the depths of a woman's anger? Who will contain her ingenuity? For every calm old biddy rocking her ancient wisdom to her wizened chest, there are ten, no, dozens of frustrated, ageing witches, who glimpse their diminishing territory and fading powers, and who decide to explode, one last time, in a Catherine wheel of malice and

hatred, conducted with volcanic intensity. My daughter is my victim, mine to denigrate and criticise, mine to persecute and destroy. Before I dwindle into darkness I will wreck your life too, and if I can I shall take you with me.

The doctor who suggested that Maman should eat more fruit and vegetables and drink two litres of water every day, decided that the old girl was not yet mad enough to be sectioned. He rationalised the situation. The daughter could hold on for a few more years. The old lady was still in good health and nippy on her pins. She might make it to ninety before being banged up in one of the locked wards. But this cruel diagnosis took no account of that successful hell on earth that two women, living in domestic proximity, can create for one another, especially when their family history is one of silent animosity and undercover guerrilla tactics.

The descent presented itself as a gradual, uneven degeneration into muddle and gloom. Maman sometimes sat nodding peacefully at the television games shows or crouched over her table concocting crossword puzzles, which never quite worked. She even dabbled in a little embroidery. There were days when the old woman watched her daughter and the beloved neighbour leaving the house armed with shopping bags and umbrellas without uttering a murmur; no snap interdictions or threats, no emotional declarations of menace or blackmail. But as the weather improved Maman's internal engines began

to ratchet up the scale, increasing from a low growl to a gigantic roar. The beloved neighbour served as the main target.

‘Get that woman out of my sight,’ she shrieked at her daughter, ‘she wants you to enchant you away from me. She’s trying to persuade you to put me in a home and lock me up.’

This was true.

‘Do you think she really cares about you? She hasn’t got a car and she can’t drive. Why do you think she circles round you like a buzzard? She only wants someone to drive her around and take her out shopping.’

Most of this was true too.

‘She hopes I’ll die. And that you’ll get the house. Then you’ll both be cosy and rich with all my money. And you can dig a swimming pool in my vegetable patch.’

This idea had indeed been mooted as an eventual possibility. Maman had abandoned her vegetables years ago and the browned grass waving in the patch, unsightly and abandoned, figured in vague future plans hatched by the daughter and her beloved neighbour. Maman’s cunning seemed to respect no earthly boundaries. She overheard secrets even when she was not present; she divined their thoughts like the shrivelled sibyl at Delphi. She lurked behind doorways in kitchens, thwarting their careful arrangements. She went on hunger strike until the holiday bookings for five meagre days in Spain were cancelled. She

rang up her grandchildren and wept down the phone, then sat, tranquil and malicious, while her daughter fielded their legitimate anxieties.

Maman no longer allowed her only child to leave the house alone. She settled like a black widow spider on the back seat of the car and complained about the heat, the air conditioning, the journey, the shops, the obligation to walk ten yards to the chiropodist. Her paranoid accusations blossomed into colourful fantasies of conspiracies and plots, hatched by her daughter and the beloved neighbour, to whisk her into the clinic and abandon her there or to eliminate her altogether in a carefully devised accident. Her behaviour became so atrocious that at last they left her screaming on the doorstep and drove off at speed to take tea in town.

They crept home at five only to be confronted by the fire brigade, two police cars and the SAMU parked before Maman's door, with all the neighbours gathered in the street, whispering.

'Mon Dieu,' breathed the daughter. 'She's done it. She's killed herself.'

Their horror and relief bloomed before them, like an emergency air bag. A neighbour rattled the car window.

'It was me,' confessed the excited *voisine*, 'I saw the smoke and called the fire brigade.'

And lo, there was Maman, bristling with courage, wrapped in a blanket, supported by two handsome men in uniform, applauded for her

daring enterprise and startling strength. Stranded on the terrace stood the daughter's favourite armchair, still smouldering gently, the springs charred and hot.

'She must have fallen asleep with her cigarette still alight,' explained the *capitaine*. 'We found the whole place full of black smoke. It's a wonder that she wasn't asphyxiated. She had the presence of mind to cover her face with a damp towel and pushed the thing out onto the back terrace. The neighbours saw the smoke and called us at once.' He lowered his voice. 'Excusez – moi, Madame, but I don't think that you should leave a fragile old lady of eighty-five completely alone all afternoon.'

'She's eighty-four,' snapped the beloved neighbour, 'and she doesn't smoke.'

But the daughter stood, white-faced, confronting her mother, who took a few faltering steps, tottered unsteadily, then gasped,

'Ma fille, ma fille ! Thank God! My daughter has come back to me.'

The smoke damage was so bad that the entire household, Maman, her daughter, two cats and one poodle were all forced to move into the beloved neighbour's house while the painters set to work. Maman had the whole thing redecorated in vile greens and pinks; she oversaw the improvements with sinister zeal. The grandchildren dove past on their

way to the rented beach villa and made a fuss of her. The old lady basked in their attentive warmth; she had forgotten all their names.

Maman took a taxi to the Inner Peace Emporium and returned armed with josticks and incense, which she lit in every room of the beloved neighbour's house, claiming that it stank. Yet she settled in, grim and intent, despite her discomfort in the slandered slum, and consented to be waited upon, from dawn to dusk. She had her own property re-valued.

'Lovely place,' declared the notaire's agent, looking at the new tiling and polished wooden stairs, all paid for through a lavish insurance claim. 'There's enough space in that vegetable patch for a swimming – pool.'

Maman hired a gardener to clear the rampant weeds. Was she enjoying a late burst of rational behaviour? Alas, when the gardener arrived bearing strimmers, forks and shears she accused him of intending to bury her in the wasted patch. Everybody heard her screaming from the terrace steps. 'It's the fire,' they agreed, 'it's affected her brain. Poor thing. She's still in shock.'

Maman commandeered the beloved neighbour's television set to follow her game shows and soap operas. She reorganised the kitchen and the furniture. She threw out all the potted plants. The daughter found her beloved friend sitting cross-legged on the bedroom floor, staring at a Tarot pack.

'What are you doing?'

'Working out how to murder your mother.'

The date set for their removal back into the redecorated house was September 1st. Maman refused to purchase any furniture and the plush, fresh rooms stood empty, reeking of paint. Instead she took to walking the streets of their *quartier* with her arms and legs wrapped in bandages, a hat pulled low over her dark glasses.

'Are you going out disguised? You look like The Invisible Man.' Her daughter refused to let the old lady wander the streets alone and traipsed along just behind her, carrying handbags and parasols.

'It's the radiation,' growled Maman, 'the radiation levels have risen to a dreadful height, well beyond the permitted maximum. I must protect my skin.'

These Chernobyl fantasies persisted for weeks despite the heat. Maman even appeared in the Post Office with her face swathed in white cloths. Shoppers stared. A crowd of Arab children ran after her, begging a peak beneath the mask. The beloved neighbour seethed within her corset of self-control as the chorus of well-aimed casual insults, delivered daily by Maman, began to rise towards an evil climax.

The showdown came during the August fiesta. The streets were filled with drunken revellers dancing on the boulevards, brass bands,

rock bands, a symphony of accordion players and a twirling gaggle of flamenco gypsies. Juicy smoke rose from a thousand open-air grills and the cicadas roared amidst the magic paper lanterns strung between the trees. Come on, get drunk, enjoy yourselves.

Maman forbade her daughter to go out. She turned on the neighbour.

‘Why don’t you go by yourself for once?’ she snapped at her daughter’s elderly lover. Then we can have a pleasant evening without you.’

There was a dreadful pause. And then, for the first and only time, the beloved neighbour answered back.

‘ This is my house. And you are a guest in my house.’ The woman’s voice gurgled forth in a ghastly whisper. Maman glared at her adversary, egging her on.

‘ It’s not a house. It’s a tip. It’s full of rubbish and it stinks.’

She began chanting abuse, each barbed slur more vicious than the last, and rose up from her post at the table, pointing at the other woman’s chest. Everyone began screaming. The neighbour’s hand closed over the kitchen knife.

Nobody knows what happened in the kitchen, but hundreds of people saw an elderly lady, swathed in bandages, apparently leaking

blood from every crevice, yet surprisingly agile and dynamic, tearing through the fiesta crowds and actually dancing before the Polynesian musicians to the tune of 'Everybody loves Mamba!' The old lady's body could not be found. Her house had been sold weeks before, her accounts drained, her savings spirited away, her passport vanished. The plot was utterly clear. The daughter and her malevolent companion had cashed in and hidden all the old woman's assets, then planned to bump her off. Both protested their innocence, but they would, wouldn't they? Maman's signature was there on the *Compromis de Vente*. You forced her didn't you, argued the Inspector. Maman herself, covered in bandages, had removed all her savings. But she had given an appalling hint to the now tearful cashier that the bandages masked dreadful incriminating bruises, meted out at home when she had refused to eat up her lettuce. She seemed so vulnerable, pathetic, wailed the cashier, I blame myself. I didn't report those two monsters.

No blood was ever found at home. Not even on the kitchen knife, despite all the latest forensic techniques. The daughter and her companion were remanded in custody as the circumstantial evidence against them mounted beyond reasonable doubt.

But where had they hidden the body?

Every centimetre of the neighbour's flagstone patio and rose garden was ploughed up in the great search for final proof. The abandoned vegetable patch behind the old house became a crevasse

beneath the digger's jaws. Nothing, of course, was ever found. But the new owner was delighted and instantly created the blue tiled swimming pool of his dreams.

Where, oh where is Maman?

The clinic overlooks the sea and the old French lady, perched on her sunlit balcony, surrounded by palm trees, can no longer remember her own name. She likes the island's traditional music and whenever the nurse comes to check her blood pressure or to help her eat, she turns up the volume and sings along with her favourite band. ' Maman loves Mamba!'

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