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Mother's Dumplings

By Brooke Gardner

"Elizabeth! Come downstairs for dinner!" A bellowing, deep voice erupted from the downstairs kitchen. Bloodshot eyes as blue as the ocean peer within a dusty, ornate mirror. Dark, mauve bags hang from her eyelids, contrasting from her porcelain skin. Thick, bushy eyebrows furrow in disgust. *Damn, that man. Won't he ever leave?* She thought, sighing in frustration. She stood up from her desk, still looking over pictures of her late father. *We used to be so happy. I'd give anything just to see him again.*

"I'm coming!" She called as she ran down the creaky staircase. One step after another, she felt the heat rising to

her freckled cheeks. *Mother should have never married this man. They only knew each other for what? 6 months? How could she trust someone she barely knows?* Upon noticing her mother's absence, her face grew hot. As if the last step were the edge of a cliff, Elizabeth clung her toes onto the lip of the step. "Um...John? Where is Mother?" She asked timidly.

"Whatever do you mean?" replied John, a smile curling up onto his aging face. The tall, aged man stood over the stovetop, admiring a peculiar-looking dish. He wore an apron tied to his waist. "Why, she is just out at the shop. She cooked these dumplings for you, darling. I asked her to run to the shop—you know, O'Hare's—for her dear old husband. Now, sit down and eat this delicious meal before it goes cold. You don't want to disrespect your mother, do you, Elizabeth?"

"What did you need so desperately, John?" Now, more suspicious than ever, Elizabeth stayed put on the last step. Her bony, pale arms crossed over her petite chest. "What did you need so desperately that you ask her to leave right before we sit down for dinner?" Her cheeks felt as hot as a burning stove. Her heart began to drum harder inside her chest. Numbness began to tingle on her fingertips. Ashamed of looking frightened, she attempted to sound confident in her words. "Why would she leave right before dinner?"

"Elizabeth... tsk tsk tsk. You know better than to talk back to me." John took a step closer. Like the same sides of a magnet repelling against one another, Elizabeth took a step back up the staircase. "Just sit down and eat your dinner."

"Where is my mother?" She asked, digging her sharp nails into the skin of her arms. Sweat began to expel from her forehead and her underarms. Fresh blood began to pool in her mouth from the nervous biting.

"Sit down, Lizzy." Raising his hands in surrender, John took another step closer.

"Where is she?" Elizabeth looked down at John's apron, noticing specks of an unidentifiable red liquid.

"Elizabeth--"

"John! Where is she?"

"EAT YOUR DINNER, ELIZABETH!" Rage burned in his eyes as he grabbed her arms and forced her down the stairs. She dragged her heels on the ground as hard as she could in protest. The tile beneath her left friction burns on her bare feet. He violently sat her down at the dinner table and slammed a bowl of dumplings down in front of her, cherry-red sauce splashing up and splattering onto her face and the table. A napkin sat next to the bowl with glistening silverware. John took a deep breath, trying to regain his bearing. "Now, you will eat these dumplings. Your mother put her heart and soul into them."

Tears streamed down Elizabeth's cheeks. Deciding it would be better for her sake, she picked up the fork and shakily began to eat the food in front of her. *There's ground pork in these dumplings? That's not how Mother usually makes it.* She closed her eyes and wished for this to be nothing but a bad dream. It wasn't until the third bite that she bit into something rather hard.

"Ow!" She spat out her food. *What is this? Mother doesn't put walnuts in her dumplings. This isn't like her. I certainly didn't lose a molar, did I?* She reached up to feel her cheek. Upon examination, she found that her mouth was perfectly intact. Her eyes grew wide. Sweat began to cascade down her forehead. She began to cough, reached into her mouth, and pulled a long, black strand of hair out of her throat. "John, what is this?" She jumped up from the table and backed away, shaking. Soon, it became crystal clear. Her eyes grew even wider. "NO! MOTHER!" She called, darting out of the kitchen.

Strong hands grabbed her shoulders, stopping her in her tracks. "Not so fast, darling." he said, grinning a devilish smile as deep red blood dripped from his crooked mouth.

"Why?!" She cried, attempting to push back with all of her weight.

"You're next," he whispered.