

My Mother's Luck

By Helen Weinzwieg
Dramatized by Dave Carley

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My Mother's Luck is a stand-alone piece taken from the play **A View From The Roof**. It has been lightly adapted from Helen Weinzwieg's story of the same name in her award-winning collection "A View From The Roof" (publisher: Gooselane Editions). In the stage play, **My Mother's Luck** completes the first act.

My Mother's Luck was first produced at the Tarragon Theatre as part of the 1995 Summerworks Festival. The role of MOTHER was played by Maria Vaccratsis and Esther Arbeid played DAUGHTER.

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The background sound – here and throughout – should be a restless mix, suggestive of motion, displacement, travel, trains both benign and evil. The soundscape should be carefully evocative of the 1930s. There can be trickery in the sounds – for e.g. a train whistle could turn out to be a steam kettle. The chug of a train could be a rhythmic chant.

The time is 1939. DAUGHTER (now age 24) is standing, holding a suitcase. She is remembering her MOTHER from 1931.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

(DAUGHTER sets her suitcase down and enters the 1931 scene. MOTHER sits painfully on a chair.)

MOTHER: *(Long sigh.)* I have decided to go with you to New York. To see you off. You sail in four days, who knows if we will ever see each other again.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: No no, stop it. I cannot stand slobbering over me. Anyway, what are you crying for? I thought you wanted to go to your father. I am only trying to do what is best for you. You should be happy, traveling about in style, like a tourist. Not the way we came to this country eh – steerage, like cattle. Hardly what you'd call a pleasure trip. But then, how would I recognize pleasure when I have been working since I was nine?

My feet, my poor feet. I cannot remember when my feet did not hurt. Get me the white basin, the deep one. And pour the water – it should be hot enough now.

(DAUGHTER washes and massages MOTHER's feet while MOTHER talks; the washing is a ritual.)

We will have a talk while I soak. Ah, that feels better already. I am looking forward to sitting on the train. They told me it takes fourteen hours from Toronto to New York. Just think, I will be off my feet a whole day. No beauty parlour, one whole day!

Why do you look so miserable? I just do not understand you. First you drive me crazy to go live with your father and now you sit like at a funeral. Tell you what. In New York we will have a little party before your boat sails. We will go to a big fancy restaurant. Me and you and Sam.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: Yes. You heard me right. I said: Sam is coming with us.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: You might as well know. He is moving in with me next week. Your room. No use leaving it empty. And you do not need to look so worried. I am not marrying him. What for? To give satisfaction to the old yentes, the gossips? Now get a little hot water from the pot.

(DAUGHTER moves off.)

So tell me, have you got your underwear and stockings clean for the trip? Your shoes need a good polish. You do not need everything new. Let your “rich” father or his fancy new wife from Venice buy you something. I have supported you for sixteen years. That is long enough. God knows as He is my witness I can do no more. And you remember: it was your idea to get in touch with your father. Whatever happens you will not be able to blame me.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

(DAUGHTER pours new water in pot.)

MOTHER: Ah, that is good. Of course, you can come back if you want. You have a return ticket. You can thank Sam for that. It was Sam that said a girl sixteen is old enough to make up her own mind if she wants to live with her father. You do not deserve Sam’s consideration. The way you treat him – not talking to him when he greets you on his Sunday visits.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: I know what you say about him to your friends. And I can still give you a good licking if I have to. Remember, the smell of sweat is the smell of honest work. Sam smells a bit; I do not like it either, but I have had enough from the educated ones, such as your father, who know everything except how to raise a sweat. So what is the

difference to me whether they know to take a bath. Sam will learn. He is a good man, he works hard. And he has his union to see he gets a decent wage. What protection has a scholar got? Or me?

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: I hope you will have it easier than me. Your father, now he's so rich, can give you the education your teacher said you should have. There are good schools in Munich. All I have from life is sore feet. Look at how calloused and shapeless they have become. From standing all day. Once I had such fine hands and feet. So thin. They said I had the hands and feet of an aristocrat. If you are really so smart as they say you are, you will not have to slave like me.

Your father tried to educate me. He taught me to read and write in German. Oh, I could always tell there was going to be trouble when he said, "Lily, try and understand..." Next, a lecture. You would think that after your father I would not again be trapped by fine words. But I was. I could never resist a man with a soft voice and clean fingernails. They would give me such compliments; they would quote poetry to add to the feeling. I jump at fine words like a child at candy. Each time I'd think, this time, it will be different. But every man was your father all over again, in a fresh disguise. Sam will be different. A slight smell is a good sign for me now.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: Fetch me the towel. The one I use for the feet, the torn one. You are sometimes like a stranger around here, having to be told everything.

You can stay up a little tonight – I feel like talking.

Your father and you will get along, you are both so clever. Words, he had words for everything. No matter what the trouble was, he talked his way out of it. But mouth work alone brings no food to the table. How was I to know that, young and inexperienced as I was? When I was married, I was only a year older than you are now. I was barely seventeen when your father came home to Poland on a visit from his university in Zurich. It was before the war, in 1912. I was only a child when he fell in love with me. Yet it can hardly be said I was ever a child. I was put to work at nine, gluing paper bags. At fourteen I was apprenticed to a wigmaker. What did I have to look forward to but more work, more misery and, if I was lucky, marriage to a butcher's son, with red hands.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: So you can imagine when your father began to court me, how could I resist? He wasn't much to look at. Short. Pale. Bad teeth. He imagined he looked like Beethoven. He did. Same high broad forehead, same angry look. But he had such fine manners, such an educated way of saying things, such soft hands. He was a man different from anyone I'd ever met. He recited poetry by Goethe and Rilke, he called me "blume" – flower – from a poem that starts, "Du bist wie eine blume". He did not want a dowry, I would not have to cut my hair. He was a modern man.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: So we were married by a rabbi and I went back with him to Switzerland. Four years later, just before you were born, we married again in the city hall in Zurich, so you'd be legal on the records. Let me see, how old is he now? It's 1931, so he must be 47. I bet he never thought he would see his daughter again. He will not be able to deny you – you are the spitting image. Pale like him. Same forehead, those red spots when you get nervous... Even the way you sneaked around, not telling me, writing to Germany until you got his address in Munich.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: He was an anarchist. The meetings were in our small room. Every other word was "revolution". Not just the Russian revolution, but art revolution, religious revolution – sex revolution. At first I was frightened by the arguments – until I realized that these intellectuals did not have to do the things they argued about. Where I come from, I was used to real trouble, like sickness and starvations and the pogroms. So I did not pay too much attention until the night we all had a big argument about Nora.

This play, "A Doll's House", shocked everybody. Before you were born, your father sometimes took me to a play. It was a money-waster, but I went anyway, because it was nice to sit in a warm theatre, in a soft seat and watch the actors.

That night, we talked to three in the morning about Nora. For the first time I was able to join in. I was the only woman who sympathized with the husband! He gave her everything, treated her like a little doll, loved her like a pet – this is bad? So they have a little argument, she says she must leave him and the children? Leave the children?! Did you ever hear such a thing! The servants

know how to run the house better than I do, she tells her husband. Servants! I said to myself – there is your answer. She had it too good!

The men all agreed with me: it was stupid to leave a good life, even a bourgeois one, just to go slave for someone else as a dressmaker. The women – they wore their hair shingled and smoked cigarettes and beside them I felt like a sack of potatoes – the women were disappointed in their comrades. Could these revolutionaries not see Nora was being exploited by her husband? And back and forth like this, the rest of the night.

But the next day, I could still think of nothing but what Nora did. It never occurred to me that a woman leaves a man except if he beats her. But it made sense.

From that time on, I began to change. I shingled my hair, I sat in the cafes and smoked. When I got pregnant I refused to go for an abortion like your father wanted, and you were born. Your father had to leave university and be a clerk in a shoe store. He hated the job, he hated me. You cried a lot. Nothing in your father's books explained why you cried so much. Then he talked me into going back to work; they were glad to have me back at the beauty parlour. Your father was glad to get back to his books.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: One day, winter, I came back from work to our cold room and dirty sheets, and our six dishes and our two pots sticky with food. There was not a penny for the gas and I could not heat your milk. You cried, your father yelled he could not study. After going to university for four years, I could not understand why he needed still to study. I had to get up six in the morning to take you to the crèche at one end of the city, and go to work at the other end. You would not stop screaming and I spanked you. Your father said I was stupid to take out my bad feelings on an innocent child. I sat, down, beaten.

In that moment I knew I was going to leave. There is a second, no longer than the blink of an eye, when husband and wife turn into strangers. They could pass in the street and not know each other. That's what happened that night.

DAUGHTER: My mother said.

MOTHER: So I found a way. There was a judge. I knew things about him. I did his mistress's hair and she would talk. That's all you need to know. He could have sent me to jail. I risked that. But this judge... I stood my ground. He was weak and he gave me my divorce papers. And with it came a train ticket and some money. The judge wanted me to start a new life in America. And I agreed. I remembered I had a cousin in Toronto. Two days later I left our room with you. We took the train to Hamburg. I bought underwear for us, a new sweater for me and a nice little red coat for you. We took the boat to New York. A sailor gave you a navy blue sailor hat with the name of the boat, "George Washington", in gold on a ribbon around it. You wore it day and night, on Ellis Island, on the train to Toronto.

(Travel, train montage rises, under.)

One o'clock already! We should be in our beds! First, wash the cups. Hannah; you know I cannot stand mess in the kitchen. Remember, never leave dirty dishes around. Show your father I brought you up right. Which reminds me, did you buy rolls like I told you? Good. Sam likes a fresh roll with lox for Sunday. Just think, in a week you will be on the ocean and not so long after that, Germany.

DAUGHTER: My mother said...

MOTHER: Go already. I will turn out the light.

DAUGHTER: My mother said...

MOTHER: Go! Go my little flower! Go!

*Travel sounds come up over MOTHER.
DAUGHTER returns to 1939, picks up her
suitcase and takes a few steps back.*

Black.