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## *Family Ties*

The woman and her mother finally settled back in the taxi that would take them to the station. The mother counted and recounted the two suitcases, trying to convince herself that they were both there. The daughter, with her dark eyes, to which a slight squint gave a constant gleam of derision and indifference, assisted.

"I haven't forgotten anything?" her mother asked her for the third time.

"No, no, you haven't forgotten anything," her daughter replied, amused but patient.

She still retained the impression of the almost farcical scene between her mother and her husband at the moment of de-

parture. During the older woman's two-week visit, the two of them had barely endured each other's company; the good-mornings and good-evenings had resounded constantly with a cautious tact which had made her want to smile. But suddenly at the moment of departure, before getting into the taxi, the mother had changed into the exemplary mother-in-law and the husband had become the good son-in-law.

"Please forgive anything I might have said in haste," the older woman had said, and Catherine, with some enjoyment, had seen Tony, unsure of what to do with the suitcases in his hands, stammer—perturbed by his role as the good son-in-law.

"If I laugh they will think I am mad," Catherine had thought, frowning.

"Whoever marries off a son, loses a son, but whoever marries off a daughter gains a son," her mother had added and Tony took advantage of his cold to be able to cough. Standing there, Catherine knowingly observed her husband as his self-assurance disappeared to give place to a slightly built man with a dark complexion, forced into being the son of that grey-haired little woman. . . . It was then that her desire to laugh became stronger. Fortunately she never in fact laughed when she felt the urge: her eyes took on a knowing and restrained expression, they became more squinted, and her laughter showed in her eyes. It always hurt a little to be capable of laughing. But she could do nothing about it: ever since she was a little girl she had laughed through her eyes, and she had always had a squint.

"I still think the child is too thin," her mother said, resisting the bumps of the taxi. And although Tony was not present she was using the same tone of challenge and accusation which she adopted in front of him. So much so that one evening Tony had become exasperated.

"It's not my fault, Severina!" He called his mother-in-law Severina because before the marriage it was decided that they would be a modern mother and son-in-law. Right from her

mother's very first visit to the couple, the word Severina had become awkward on her husband's lips, and now, despite the fact that he addressed her by her Christian name, it did not prevent. . . .

Catherine watched them and smiled.

"The child has always been thin, Mother," she replied. The taxi drove on monotonously.

"Thin and highly strung," her mother added decisively.

"Thin and highly strung," assented Catherine patiently.

He was a nervous and distracted child. During his grandmother's visit he had become even more distant and he had started to sleep badly, disturbed by the excessive endearments and affectionate pinching of the older woman. Tony, who had never really given much attention to his son's sensibility, began to make sly digs at his mother-in-law, "for protecting the child. . . ."

"I haven't forgotten anything . . ." began her mother again, when a sudden slamming of brakes threw them against each other and sent the suitcases toppling.

"Oh! Oh!" the older woman exclaimed, as if overtaken by some irremediable disaster. "Oh!" she said, swaying her head in surprise, suddenly aged and poor. And Catherine?

Catherine looked at her mother and the mother looked at her daughter. Had some disaster befallen Catherine too? Her eyes blinked with surprise, and she quickly rearranged the suitcases and her handbag in her attempt to remedy the catastrophe as quickly as possible. Because something had, in fact, happened and there was no point in concealing it. Catherine had been thrown against Severina with a physical intimacy long since forgotten, and going back to the days when she belonged to a father and a mother. Although they had never really embraced or kissed each other. With her father, certainly, Catherine had experienced a much closer relationship. When her mother used to fill their plates, forcing them to eat far too much, the two of

them used to wink at each other in complicity without her mother even noticing. But after the collision in the taxi and their composure had been restored, they had nothing further to say to each other—both of them feeling anxious to arrive at the station.

"I haven't forgotten anything?" her mother asked with a resigned note.

Catherine neither wanted to meet her eyes again nor make any reply.

"Here are your gloves!" she said, picking them up from the floor.

"Oh! Oh! my gloves!" her mother anxiously exclaimed. They exchanged another glance only when the suitcases had been lifted onto the train and they had exchanged a farewell kiss: her mother's head appeared at the window. It was then that Catherine noticed that her mother had aged and that her eyes were shining.

The train was still waiting to depart and they both lingered without knowing what to say. Her mother took out a mirror from her handbag and studied her new hat, bought from the same milliner patronized by her daughter. She studied herself, putting on an excessively severe expression that betrayed a certain satisfaction with her own appearance. Her daughter observed her with amusement. "No one else can love you except me," thought the woman with a smile in her eyes; and the weight of responsibility put the taste of blood into her mouth. As if "mother and daughter" meant "life and repugnance." No, no, she could not say that she loved her mother. Her mother distressed her, that was it. The old woman had put the mirror back into her handbag and looked at her affectionately. Her face, which was lined but still very expressive, seemed to be forcing itself into making some impression on the other passengers, and here the hat played its part. The station bell suddenly sounded, there was a general movement of alarm, and

several people began to run, thinking that the train was already pulling out.

"Mother," said the woman.

"Catherine!" said the old woman. They exchanged frightened glances—a suitcase carried on a porter's head interrupted their view and a youth running past caught Catherine by the arm as he went, disarranging the collar of her dress. When they could see each other again, Catherine was on the point of asking her if she had forgotten anything. . . .

"I haven't forgotten anything?" her mother asked. Catherine, too, had the impression something had been forgotten, and they looked apprehensively at each other—because, if something had really been forgotten, it was too late now. A mother dragged a child along the platform and the child was crying. Once more the station bell sounded. . . .

"Mother," said the woman. What had they forgotten to say to each other? But now it was too late. It seemed to her that the older woman should have said one day, "I am your mother, Catherine," and that she should have replied, "And I am your daughter."

"Don't go sitting in a draught!" Catherine called out.

"Now dear, I am not a child," her mother shouted back, still obviously worrying about her appearance. Her freckled hand, somewhat tremulous, delicately adjusted the brim of her hat and Catherine felt a sudden urge to ask her if she had been happy living with her father.

"Give my love to Auntie!" she shouted.

"Yes, yes."

"Mother," said Catherine, because a prolonged whistle could be heard and the wheels of the train were already moving.

"Catherine!" said the older woman with a gaping mouth and frightened eyes, and with the first jerk the daughter saw her lift her hands to her hat: it had fallen forward covering her nose,

so that only her new dentures were showing. The train was already moving and Catherine waved. Her mother's face disappeared for a second and now reappeared, hatless, the topknot on her head undone and falling in white strands over her shoulders like the tresses of a madonna—her head was leaning out and she looked serious, perhaps no longer even able to perceive her daughter in the distance.

Amidst the smoke, Catherine began to walk back down the platform, her eyebrows drawn in a frown and in her eyes the sly look of those with a squint. Relieved of her mother's company, she had recovered her brisk manner of walking; alone it was much easier. Some men were watching her, she was sweet, her body a little on the heavy side perhaps. She walked confidently, looking modern in her outfit, her short hair tinted a reddish brown. And things had disposed themselves in such a way that the sorrow of love seemed to her to be happiness—everything around her was so tender and alive, the dirty street, the old tram cars, orange peel on the pavements—strength flowed to and fro in her heart with a heavy richness. She was very pretty at this moment, so elegant: in harmony with her time and the city where she had been born, almost as if she had chosen it. In her eyes anyone would have perceived the relish this woman had for the things of the world. She studied people with insistence, trying to fix on those inconstant figures a pleasure still moist with tears for her mother. She avoided the cars and managed to approach the bus, circumventing the queue and staring ironically; nothing would prevent this little woman who walked swaying her hips from mounting one more mysterious step in her days.

The elevator droned in the heat of the beach. She opened the door of her apartment with one hand while extricating herself from her little hat with the other; she seemed disposed to take advantage of the largesse of the whole world—a path her

mother had opened and that was burning in her breast. Tony scarcely raised his eyes from his book. Saturday afternoon had always been "his own" and, immediately after Severina's departure, he returned to it with pleasure, seated at his low desk.

"Has *she* gone?"

"Yes, she's gone," replied Catherine, pushing open the door of her little boy's room. Ah yes, there was her child all right, she thought with sudden relief. Her son. Thin and highly strung. Since the moment he had found his feet, he had started to walk steadily; but, now nearly four years old, he spoke as if verbs were unknown to him: he observed things coldly, unable to connect them among themselves. There he was playing with a wet towel, exact and distant. The woman felt a pleasant warmth and she would have liked to fasten the child forever to this moment; she drew the towel away from him in reproach.

"What a naughty boy!" But the child looked indifferently into the air, communicating with himself. His mind was always somewhere else. No one had yet succeeded in really catching his attention. His mother shook the towel in the air, screening off the view of the room.

"Mummy," said the child. Catherine turned round quickly. It was the first time he had said "Mummy" in that tone without asking for something. It was more than a verification: "Mummy!" The woman continued to shake the towel vigorously and asked herself whom she could tell what had happened, but she did not find anyone who might understand what she herself was at a loss to explain. She stretched the towel out neatly before hanging it up to dry. Perhaps she might be able to tell if she were to change the form. She would relate that her son had said "Mummy, who is God?" No, perhaps "Mummy, child wants God." Perhaps. The truth could only be captured in symbols, and only in symbols would they receive it. With her eyes smiling at her necessary lie and above all at her own

foolishness, escaping from Severina, the woman unexpectedly laughed in fact at the child and not only with her eyes; her whole body laughed, broken, her exterior breached and a harshness appearing like a fit of wheezing.

"Ugly," the child then said, examining her.

"Let's go for a walk," she said, coloring and catching him by the hand. She passed through the room, without stopping she advised her husband, "We're going out," and she slammed the apartment door.

Tony had barely time to lift his eyes from his book, and, surprised, he surveyed the room that was already empty.

"Catherine!" he called after her, but the noise of the elevator descending could already be heard. "Where were they going?" he asked himself perturbed, coughing and blowing his nose. Saturdays were "his own," but he liked his wife and child to be at home while he pursued his private occupations. "Catherine!" he called impatiently, although he knew that she could no longer hear him. He got up, went to the window and a moment later spotted his wife and child on the sidewalk.

The two of them had stopped, the woman perhaps deciding which direction to take. And suddenly she was off.

Why was she walking so fast, gripping the child by the hand? From the window he saw his wife holding the child's hand with force and walking quickly, her eyes fixed straight ahead of her; and, even without looking, the man could see the hard expression on her lips. The child—who knows by what dark understanding?—was also staring fixedly ahead, startled and ingenuous. Seen from above, the two figures lost their familiar perspective; they seemed to be flattened to the ground and darker by the light of the sea. The child's hair was blowing in the breeze.

Her husband repeated the question which, even beneath the innocence of a commonplace expression, disturbed him. "Where

are they going? Preoccupied, he watched his wife leading the child away and he feared that at this moment, when they were both beyond his reach, she might transmit to their son . . . but what? "Catherine," he thought, "Catherine, this child is still innocent!" At what moment was it that a mother, clasping her child, gave him this prison of love that would descend forever upon the future man. Later her child, already a man, alone, would stand before this same window, drumming his fingers on the windowpane: imprisoned. Obligated to respond to a dead man. Who would ever know at what moment the mother transferred her inheritance to her child. And with what morose pleasure. Now mother and son were understanding each other within the mystery they shared. Afterward, no one would know on what black roots man's freedom was nourished. "Catherine," he thought, enraged, "the child is innocent!" They had, however, disappeared along the beach. The mystery shared.

"But what about me?" he asked in alarm. The two of them had gone away on their own. And he had stayed behind. Left with his Saturday. And his cold. In the tidy apartment, where "everything worked smoothly." Who knows, perhaps his wife was escaping with her son from the room, with its carefully selected pieces of furniture, its curtains and pictures? This is what he had given her. The apartment of an engineer. And he knew that if his wife had taken advantage of his situation as a young husband with a promising future, she also despised the situation, with those cunning eyes, escaping with her thin, highly strung child. The man became distressed. Because he would not be able to give her anything more except—greater success. Because he knew that she would help him to achieve it and at the same time would hate what they achieved. Such was the nature of that serene woman of thirty-two who never really spoke, as if she had lived since the beginning of time. The relationship between them was so tranquil. At times he tried to

humiliate her by entering the room while she was changing her clothes, because he knew that she detested being seen in the nude. (Why did he find it necessary to humiliate her?)

Meantime, he knew all too well that she would only belong to a man so long as she was proud. But he had got used to making her feminine in this way: he humiliated her with tenderness, and now she was already smiling—without rancor? Perhaps from all this their peaceful relationship had grown, from those quiet conversations that created a family atmosphere for their child. Or this irritated the child at times. At times the child became irritated, he stamped his feet and shouted in his sleep because of some nightmare. From where had that vibrant little fellow emerged, unless from that which his wife and he had cut from their daily life? They lived so tranquilly that, if a moment of happiness approached, they quickly looked at each other, almost ironically, and their eyes said mutually, "Don't let's waste it, don't let's stupidly throw it away"—as if they had lived forever.

But he had watched her from the window, he had seen her walk quickly away, holding the child by the hand, and he had said to himself, "She is taking her moment of happiness—alone." He had felt frustrated because for some time now he could not live with anyone but her. Yet she was able to find her own moments—alone. For instance, what had his wife been up to between the station and the apartment? Not that he suspected her of anything, but his mind was troubled.

The last light of evening fell heavily on the objects in the room. The parched sands cracked. The whole day had languished under the threat of irradiation which did not explode at this moment, although it became more and more deadened and droned in the uninterrupted elevator of the building. When Catherine returned they would dine, warding off the moths. Their child would cry out before falling into a deep sleep and

Catherine would interrupt her dinner for a moment. Wouldn't that elevator halt even for a second? No, the elevator would not halt even for a second.

"After dinner we'll go to the cinema," the man decided. Because after the cinema it would be night at last, and this day would break up like the waves on the rocks of Arpoador.