

# The Queen of Peter Street

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ELEANOR ALBANESE

*L'auteure se rappelle les nombreuses visites de sa tante qui voulait dorloter sa mère en lui offrant manucures et coiffures pour l'embellir et la faire ressembler à une reine ou encore à sainte Cécile. Sa fille la revoit plutôt avec un balai à la main, un tablier taché autour de la taille et des épingles à la bouche tout en changeant les couches du bébé.*

There are so many aunts who pop in and out of our house, like ladies jumping on and off the Ferris wheel. Some aunts are crabby and some are nice; some wear long black nun's cloaks and others wear pumps with matching mini-skirts and jackets; some smoke cigarettes and some turn up their noses at the smell of smoke. When the non-smoking aunts come over to our house, I hide out in my room playing dolls and trying to stay out of their hair. They'll cook up a massive pot of stew or clean out the closets or vacuum up the floors. My Mom is so glad when they do the vacuuming because you need two hands and usually one of her hands is holding one of my little sisters. When the smoking aunts come to visit—Auntie Lorraine and Auntie Bernice and Auntie Jeanie—filling up the ashtrays

with half-smoked butts and rings of red lipstick that circle around the filters like lucky red horseshoes, I sit as close to them as I can. They fill up the house with cackles of laughter. They pluck their eyebrows bald, and draw black eyebrow pencil lines that curve above their eyes like Chinese brush strokes. Sometimes Auntie Lorraine gives me loose change, pressing a quarter or dime firmly into my hand. After that, I'm glued to her like a baby kitten to its mother.

The smoking aunts usually come over to the house to cheer up my mother or take her out. Sometimes they paint shiny red nail polish onto her fingernails. The nail polish lasts an entire eight days, even if my mother does have her hands in dish water or laundry soap for most of the day. I watch as my mother's red nails slowly chip off, becoming tiny flecks of red dots as if her fingernails have the red measles. Today, my aunts have brought my Mom to the Nu-Fashion Beauty Parlour to get her hair done. When she comes in through the front door, she is wearing a new blouse with sea shell buttons and a white kerchief on her hair. She looks like she just floated up from the big lake—a pearly

water angel. When she takes off the kerchief, I see she has shiny hair with soft curls sitting like a crown on top of her head. I wonder if maybe there are little flowers or birds hiding inside her curls. I'm pretty sure if I asked her to do cartwheels, she would do it. Or if I asked her to take us to the beach, she would scoop us out the door—like the moms on television with pink lipstick and not a hair out of place. But it's winter and by the time summer comes, she will be back to her old self—a mop in her hand, an apron with sticky splotches and safety pins clenched between her teeth as she gets ready to change a diaper.

But it doesn't matter because today she is perfect; she is the queen of Peter Street and prettier than all the other moms.

My Mom is smiling at us from the hallway when my aunts tell her to sit down and relax. She is about to sit on the orange couch with upholstery that looks like a manic cat chewed it to bits. But before she sits, my Auntie Dee scoots us all off the couch and puts it back to the way it is supposed to be. (It isn't really one couch; it's three little couches sectioned together, like a wiener dog candy dish with one

part of the dog fitting into the next part. But because my sisters are always bouncing up and down on the furniture, the parts separate and clothes and toys get stuck under the cushions or in between the couch sections.) I snuggle up beside my Mom until I'm close enough to smell her hair. It smells like perfume and soap and potatoes. Her hair-do is put together

a tiny bit of sugar. I love the taste of tea, how it feels warm floating down my throat. My best friend Suzie-Ann drinks coffee. She fills a mug half way, then adds carnation milk and a heaping teaspoon of sugar. She dips her toast into the coffee until the toast gets so soggy, the bottom part almost drops off from the crispy part. When I'm there, I drink coffee too but my

"pet" or "little one." It doesn't matter how big you are. You could be a little girl or a very big lady or man and if my Auntie Lorraine likes you, she will call you "little one."

"Let's take her for the driving test this week," says Auntie Dee. Auntie Dee likes to do things right away. She doesn't like to wait. Every year almost, she has another baby and I think it's

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**When my mother begins to climb down the staircase, the aunts stop talking. I'm glad to see that none of the bobby pins have fallen out of her hair and the visit to the bathroom hasn't changed how she looks. She is still perfect. She is St. Cecelia and the Queen of Peter Street rolled into one beautiful lady and it doesn't matter one bit if she learns to drive.**

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with hidden bobby pins that match the colour of her dyed hair. I know I shouldn't touch her hair because I might muss it up, so instead I touch her hands. Soft, puffy veins run like blue rivers along the tops of her hands.

"Mom, you look like the picture of St. Cecelia at the convent," I tell her.

My aunts laugh. What's so funny? Just then, my little sisters begin to crawl all over my mother. Don't they realize they're going to mess her hair? I wish my aunts would tell them to "go play." I wish they'd go upstairs to their rooms or sit quietly beside my brother on the piano bench. Finally, Auntie Dee takes charge and says, "Monica, see if Mary and Andrea will play with that doll by the piano. And Philip, make your mother some tea."

My brother Philip gets up from the piano bench and slowly walks into the kitchen. I am pretty sure he doesn't know how to make tea any more than he knows how to knit doilies. But he's not going to argue with Auntie Dee. Nobody argues with Auntie Dee. Philip wanders in circles in the kitchen until my mother gets up to help him put on the kettle and set out the tea bags. I wonder if today my mother will allow us to have tea with milk and

fingers started shaking and my teeth feel funny. I'm happy that in our house we drink tea instead.

After my mother helps Philip, she heads upstairs to the bathroom. My mother is the only one who doesn't make creaking sounds when she moves around our old house. It's as if she's a friendly ghost who doesn't walk, but floats up the staircase. I whisper to myself the word "staircase." I like the way it sounds in my mouth. It's what the girls in England would say. They would never say "steps" or "stairs." They would only say "staircase." I wish I could be a little English girl with pretty ringlets in my hair and a room full of dolls and doll houses and blue birds in golden cages. Instead I'm stuck on a cat-eaten couch.

"She doesn't do enough for herself," my Auntie Dee says, as soon as my mother is out of sight. "It's pretty hard when you don't drive. She has to ask Phil every time she needs something." ("Phil" is my Dad. He does all the grocery shopping and all the "everything" shopping.)

"She should get her driver's license," my Auntie Dee says.

"Yes pet," Auntie Lorraine says. Auntie Lorraine calls everyone pet-

because she doesn't like waiting too long for her babies.

"Who's going to talk to her about it?" asks Auntie Lorraine.

"There's no talking necessary," Auntie Dee says. "We'll bring her there and that's all there is to it. I'll pick up the manual today. It only takes a few hours to study the rules. The written test is easy."

As Auntie Lorraine takes a long drag on her cigarette, the lines all around her mouth get little creases in them. Smoke trickles out of her mouth and nose as she talks, like she's a genie that someone has rubbed and made a wish from. "She's pretty tied up with the kids. When is she going to find time to practice?"

"No, no, no. We can't start that. Maybe the kids can eat sandwiches one night. Maybe they have to wash their own socks if they want clean socks."

"If it's what Geri wants. But we should ask her first."

"Of course it's what she wants."

"Have you asked her?"

"I don't need to."

When my mother begins to climb down the staircase, the aunts stop talking. I'm glad to see that none of the bobby pins have fallen out of her

hair and the visit to the bathroom hasn't changed how she looks. She is still perfect. She is St. Cecelia and the Queen of Peter Street rolled into one beautiful lady and it doesn't matter one bit if she learns to drive. Where would she go, even if she could drive? She belongs here sitting on the couch beside *me*—her daughter, the princess. Together we will hold hands and read stories to each other and drink tea with sugar. And my brothers and sisters can all go live with Auntie Dee. Because Auntie Dee knows just what to do with bothersome children.

*Eleanor Albanese's plays for young audiences have toured nationally from coast to coast. Recent productions include Under the Moon with Aunt Birdie with Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra, an adaptation of the folk tale East of the Sun; West of the Moon with Motus O, and Dancing on Salt 'n Snow with Broken Moons Collective.*

## JOCELYN WILLIAMS

### Like Mother

Until my nights felt  
like days, I believed her  
less for asking

about him.

Until I dreamed  
of the boy from twenty  
years ago that left me  
blushing, no, bruising,  
I knew  
lies.

*Jocelyn Williams is a professor in Calgary who writes about women and trauma and teaches about poetry and prose. Her novel, Pillow Talk and Other Files, is forthcoming.*

## A. MARY MURPHY

### my mother would put ribbons

my mother would put ribbons  
bows of bright red ribbons  
in my tightly braided hair  
and I hated those red ribbons  
bigger than my head  
pulled them out on the school bus  
stuffed them in my lunch kit  
before I got to school grade one  
grade two grade three  
and now for the touch  
of my mother's hands  
I would tolerate those ribbons  
I promise you I would

*A. Mary Murphy is a Canadian poet. She has a Ph.D. in English, specializing in Life Writing. Her poems have been placed in numerous journals in Canada and also in the United States, France, England, Wales, Australia, and New Zealand. Her first book, Shattered Fanatics, was published by BuschekBooks in 2007. Her second collection of poetry, The Hungry Grass, is forthcoming from Inanna Publications in 2014.*

## SUSAN MCCASLIN

### Enna

I meet my daughter in a field

and know she is thinner  
gather her in my arms, weeping.

Burden of light,  
light load sifting through my fingers

falls to a scale, suspended  
balance, where Maat weighs

the dead against a feather.  
O, give the soul its lightness and levity,

the body its heft of flesh.

*Susan McCaslin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*