

The Missing Mother

When I research gothic literature, I type in keywords such as isolation, injustice, hysteria, despair, and grief, preceded by “gothic woman” and followed by a literature adjacent term. I am met with a long list of research studies, dissertations, and academic texts that dissect the characters' complexities or lack thereof, particularly as it pertains to women. In *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans makes meaning out of the repetitive motifs in the genre, which are the absent wife and missing mother. “She outlined the strategy of ‘literalization,’ which was typical of women's writing and the Gothic genre, where metaphors take literal form. Homans discovered that “because difference does not open up between her and her mother in that same way that it does between mother and son, the daughter does not experience desire in the Lacanian sense.” For the daughter, the mother continues as a presence instead of becoming the necessary absence that Freud, Lacan, and their successors locate as the precursor to the development of symbolic language.”¹ In the gothic text, a woman is mysterious. She is submissive. She is fragile. She is entirely good or evil, sinister or innocent. Shoved into a box nailed tight enough to devoid her room to breathe and any contradictions she might hold.

On an ordinary night in 2002, I slowly skimmed the shelves at Borders in an attempt to locate a book that caught my eye. I dragged my fingertips along the individual spines, and I stopped when I reached the one covered in fabric. I wedged my thumb and pointer finger between the sandwich of books and pulled it out like I would a single pickle who deserved to be devoured independently. The front cover illustrated a tall, skinny man tapping his fingers together in a steeple while he grimaced at a little girl, a baby, and a small boy with glasses. The preface serves as a warning to the reader that from the very first page of the novel, they will be exposed to the perpetual misfortune these orphans suffered—akin to the gravitational pull between a magnet and metal. I ignored the flimsy caution tape Lemony Snicket hung in front of me and asked my uncle to buy it for me, which he did without hesitation, as a fan of gothic literature himself.

I discovered an unfamiliar sensation, which I now recognize as resonance when I read the stories about their miserable lives: their absent parents, their evil uncle, and the overflowing pot of despair that bubbled inside their guts. Before I met them, the three orphans named Violet, Sunny, and Klaus, I was acquainted with hopeful and innocent young girls. I read about Pippi Longstocking, who lived a happy life apart from her adventurous parents and had a thriving community surrounding her. And Ramona Quimby, whose mother loved her so much, was so devoted to her that it made her want to stay a little girl forever. I couldn't sail on the seven seas alone, nor did I have the strength to lift a cow above my head like Pippi, and I couldn't wait until I was no longer a little girl because I thought that when I became an adult, I would feel a little less alone.

¹ Ruth Bienstock Anolik. “The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode.” *Modern Language Studies* 2003

I keep two wallet-sized, weathered photographs of each of us on the wooden desk in my room, the landing pad for the contents of my pockets, and any mementos from the day. A purple glass

lamp sits in the corner of the desk next to a box of unopened tarot cards and a stack of envelopes with mysterious insides. I told myself that I would dust the lamp every Sunday, or at least that I *should* dust that lamp every Sunday, because Sunday is the day I scrub myself raw—a clean canvas for tomorrow.

On that specific day, I move the clothes from the rug to the desk chair, fold a t-shirt or two, and eventually redirect myself to something shinier, like vacuuming. I reorganize the piles accrued throughout the week into other, better-developed piles. Clothes, books, empty contact lens cases. I toss the wads of crumpled paper onto the older, now-forgotten words. And when I'm finished, I slide my back slowly against the wall until I reach the hard floor and imagine how I could kill off that week's version of myself. I want to make up for the fact that I am nothing more than my sorrow.

When I was seven years old, a constellation of freckles lived on the bridge of my nose, and my hair swung against my cheeks to meet my jawline because I had proved myself untrustworthy with a pair of scissors. That summer, my legs were covered with badges from my adventures, which ranged from hues of blue and purple and green, and they were perpetually sticky from the pops the ice cream man sold. I climbed every sturdy tree in the backyard and played with self-made mud. I threw earthworms at my cousin and held small twigs against my lips to make it look like I had a cigarette. I rode my bike further than I was allowed to, and I swam in the pool when no one was home to monitor me in case I started to drown.

Hans Christian Andersen was a Danish author famously known for his published stories *The Little Mermaid*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and *The Ugly Duckling*. He wrote fairytales about love and loss, faith and betrayal. He didn't guide the reader toward sympathy for his characters by holding their hand through complex plot structures, nor did he find elevated language useful; rather, he illustrated their conspicuous vulnerability and generously anthropomorphized the gloomy world they lived in.

The two photographs in the same frame are now sun-bleached and have begun to fade in the spots where I touch them with my fingers the most: the corners, the faces. She was not in her twenties in this photo—the period when she maintained cropped and tame hair. Her hair was long and curly, and kissed her collarbone, and the lines around her eyes told me that she had lived a happy life. The radiation from the sun, not her chemotherapy, covered the bridge of her nose with tiny brown freckles. She smiled just wide enough that the dimples on her cheeks emerged, and it was almost as if I could feel myself pressing my fingertips on her soft skin to indent them further into her face. It must have been windy on the water that day because the brown tortoiseshell sunglasses intended to keep her hair out of her face were not much help—a few of her chestnut-colored strands escaped and flew loose.

In about a thousand or so words, H.C. Andersen described the final day of a young girl. It

was the last day of the year, and the promise of the impending reinvigoration of life and joy permeated the air. Despite the cold weather and the cheerful attitudes of the crowd that surrounded her, she could not sell any of the matches that she had brought. Everyone else wore shoes and hats and jackets to keep themselves warm, but she had lost her mother's hand-me-down slippers. Rather than return to her home, whose roof was covered with rags and straws and a father who was sure to beat her, she forced herself into a cold corner on the snowy street. “the absence of the mother from the Gothic text allows for narratable deviance to flourish in the text, a deviance that allows the text to thrive.”²

When the temperature dips below forty degrees, I'm allowed to bring some warmer clothes out of the cracked storage bin from the garage. That storage bin sits next to another black, unlabeled storage bin and under the Robin Egg blue cruiser bike that I did not ride this summer, even though I promised myself I would at least try.

The little girl walked up and down the street with her bare feet, now numb and blue from the cold. Her tattered apron, where she stored the bundles of matches, hung from her neck by a thread. Although many people were walking around her, none looked at her.

There is a curved silver handrail behind her, smooth and shiny. She must be in the front of the boat. Even though the sun was setting and the world around her grew dark, she remained illuminated.

As she shivered in the corner, she rubbed her frozen fingers together before cautiously pulling out a single match from her apron. She struck the match against the wall beside her and watched as the bright flame came to life. She held it as close to her hands as she could and imagined herself sitting in front of a warm brass woodstove. The flame shed a tiny glow on her cheeks, and she could relax her shoulders for a moment until the flame touched her fingertips and left her in the darkness again.

I prefer to think that the person who took this photo loved her, and she maybe loved them in return. Her mouth was parted; captured mid-laugh. I imagine that it is the flavor of laughter that

² Ruth Bienstock Anolik. “The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode.” *Modern Language Studies* 2003
reverberates in the deep recesses of your chest—the one that allows you to be unapologetic and free.

The photo of me is in the same frame, but hers is above mine and preserved behind the glass. Mine is wedged into the corner and guards the frame. Mine is exposed, and if I dropped the frame and the glass broke, it would be me who was poked-prodded-irreparable.

I am much younger than her in my photo; probably six or seven, when my messy brown hair met

my jawline and remained perpetually tucked behind my ears. In the photo, my ears popped out from my head and grew to a point at the tips of their tops—which have softened with the passing years. Tiny gold hoops dangled from my earlobes, probably an attempt at distraction, probably a plea to remain unseen.

Hesitantly, she lit a second match and immediately found herself sitting under the most magnificent Christmas tree. She looked up at the sky, and the lights of the Christmas tree became the stars in heaven, which reminded her of the only person she truly loved. One night, she whispered in her ear, whenever a soul ascends to God, a star falls. The person who loved her was a star.

The purple sweater I have in the photo is one of the four I owned in fourth grade, as we couldn't afford to buy new clothes every time my body grew. It had a bright orange heart stitched in the middle, with a blue border that emphasized the curves. My smile was forced, and my eyes were sad—I was beginning to forget the sound of her laugh.

She drew another match against the wall, and her star suddenly appeared. She wanted to keep her close, keep her with her, and when the short flame started to diminish, the star began to fade. The little girl cried out, "Please take me with you! You disappear when the matches burn."³

Now desperate, the little girl dragged an entire bundle of matches against the wall, and the star took her by the arm. They flew into the bright sky, into the Christmas lights and the stars in heaven, where she would not be cold or scared because they would be two stars with God.

Some days, I don't look at those two photos that live in the same frame on my desk. There are some days that I forget they are there, but those are the days when I come home after midnight. There are some days that I don't want to look at them or see those two sets of the same eyes, so I toss a t-shirt on them or build a stack of books to hide them. And there are some days when my eyes automatically lock on the photo; on those days, I am seven years old again.

As the sun began to rise on the first day of the new year, a little girl with a smile sat stiff and frozen to death on the ground in a corner. The matches and the burnt bundles lay in front of her legs. As the villagers walk by, they say, "Poor girl, she wanted to warm

herself."⁴ None of them knew or could have imagined the beautiful things she saw as she entered the new year.

Sometimes, I imagine a world where I am in the same room as her, where she's the same age as she was, and somehow, I've caught up to her. We sit crooked across from one another and fantasize about the life we should have lived together. She cradles my face in her hands and kisses the wrinkle between my eyebrows.

We straighten our spines and walk toward the pier in search of food, and she suggests pizza, mushrooms for her, extra cheese for me. She weaves her fingers with mine, and I lean my head to rest it on her soft and sturdy shoulder. We walk toward the ocean, step onto the cool, forgiving sand, and drop down to sit on the blue blanket she used to wrap me up in when I was too young to talk.

Without warning, it all disappears, and my heart falls into my stomach, sinking into the grave that my grief dug just for her. I am not on a beach sitting next to my mother. I am in the congested lobby of an old building, where there is a mess from the unfinished construction work directly in front of me. On my right is a steel, sterile-looking elevator that can take me from this floor to the basement, and on my left is a young girl mesmerized by her phone.

At that moment, I realize that my pain is demanding to be seen. It shouts and tells me this isn't how it was supposed to go, and it gets on its knees and begs me to explain why. It pounds its small fists against my chest as if trying to wake up my heart, and that's when I see her, with her short hair and desolate eyes. She lunges toward me and grabs me by the throat to redirect the pain, and with a forced smile, she reminds me that this is how it is.

³ Hans Christen Andersen *The Little Match Girl* 1845

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