



**ATLANTA  
REVIEW**

**Twilight**  
*of the*  
**Millennium**



Fall / Winter 1999

U.S. \$  
U.K. £  
IRE. £  
CAN. \$  
AUS. \$  
S.A. R

## Maternal Instinct

Laurel DiGangi

Mother and I arranged to switch bodies for a week. We made a pact. She wouldn't sleep with my husband and I wouldn't sleep with Father. The former concerned me little. Mother never liked Lenny and claimed I could've done better. And as Mother had not shared a marital bed with Father for close to a decade, I'd have no worries there, either.

The arrangement should have been equitable for us both. I needed a vacation from work and Mother just wanted to get out of the house.

"Father is driving me bonkers," she said.

"You should just ignore him. That's what I'm gonna do." That and watch plenty of Oprah. Let Mother take two buses downtown to answer the "New Me" Haircoloring 1-800 number. Let Mother advise the diptwits against bleaching their brows and lashes, or highlighting their pubes. As for me, I planned to soak in a steaming tub of bubbles with Steven King while bingeing on chocolate chip macadamia nut cookies without adding an ounce to my beautiful body—only to Mother's.

I warned Mother that if Lenny got amorous she should tell him she had a real bad period. And what do you know, right away Mother did get a real bad period—mine.

"It's been fifteen years!" Mother whined, "You shoulda warned me! Where do you keep your pads?"

"I don't use pads. There's tampons under the sink."

"I can't use tampons!"

"If I can, you can."

It wasn't like I enjoyed living inside Mother's body. Aging thirty years and gaining forty pounds in the time it took to grind a few goat's teeth and chant a couple incantations didn't exactly thrill me. A taut rubberband of pain stretched from my left butt cheek to my toes—so that was sciatica! My knees felt swollen with gravel, and my feet were like pins and needles. I now understood Mother's grating complaints about her body no longer feeling like her own—and while I was trapped inside it I was doubling up on the painkillers.

Father was no help. I broiled us a couple chicken breasts and whipped up some stir-fried vegetables and all he did was complain. "Why'd you take the skin off for Chrissake? That's the best part," and "These carrots are like rocks."

So I phoned Mother for her goulash recipe.

"I can't talk now. I'm at work," she said, although I'd already told her she could screw up. I was hoping to collect unemployment.

"Just tell me where you keep your goulash recipe, cause all he does is complain about my cooking."

Then she said: "You two work out your own problems. Leave me out of this," sounding just like me, word for word.

Mother's life was not conducive to the relaxation I hoped for. When I wasn't waiting on Dad hand and foot—fetching him his *TV Guide* or nasal spray or fresh pack of cigarettes—I was dumping his cigarette butts, beer cans, and soggy Kleenex in the trash. A long pair of barbecue tongs gave me the extra reach I needed for removing his underwear and socks from the floor and tossing them into the hamper. I was relieved Mother'd be back before laundry time.

But a week later she refused to return my body.

"Just a few more days," she whined. "I had your period the whole time."

"And I have your fucking osteoporosis!"

"Watch that potty mouth! Just because I'm inhabiting your body doesn't mean I'm not still your mother. Besides, what's a few more days? I thought you'd want more time off from work!"

I was furious. "Like what I do isn't work! Do you know what a slob Father is?"

She emitted an evil laugh, a sound unlike anything I've ever heard from either of us.

"Well I don't care. *You* married him. I want my body and I want it now!"

Mother said, "I gave you that body!"

By now I really missed Lenny. The first week of my and Mother's arrangement his evenings had been taken up by a new software seminar, but this week he'd be home nights—and hankering. Not that I expected Mother to have sex with him, but I easily imagined her tactless refusals causing a serious rift in my marriage.

But soon that would be the least of my worries, because Mother, my very own flesh and blood, ran off with my body.



Her best friend, that is, *my* best friend, informed me that Mother had started dating one of "Real Me" Haircoloring 1-800 callers, an older man with a thick head of salt and pepper hair. He had asked mother if "on-the-town medium brown" would work for a man. My colleagues and I were trained to answer "certainly," but Mother coyly replied that grey hair on a 47-year-old man was sexy. As our calls are often monitored, Mother lost my job—not for flirting with him, but for advising against the dye-job

She left a note for Lenny, claiming she needed to "find herself." He hoped that I, his "mother-in-law," might have some insight into my "daughter's" sudden turnabout. "Our last evening together was beautiful," he said, "I don't understand."

The cops laughed and told me my 32-year-old "child" was too old to put on a milk carton. Father was barely fazed by his "daughter's" disappearance. "I always figured she'd do something stupid like this. Maybe she joined a cult."

But at least now I had an excuse for my strange behavior: I barely ate, barely slept; all I did was sit by the phone and wait for her to call. I feared for her physical safety and well-being. No, I take that back. Truthfully, I feared for my own skin. Why should I worry about the psychic damage she might be imposing upon herself, when she could be giving me sexually-transmitted diseases?

Lenny and I hired a private detective, but the "Real Me" Haircoloring Corporation could not, for legal reasons, provide him with the phone number of Mother's paramour. Without any leads, his search came up blank.

Months passed. Gradually I became more comfortable inside Mother's skin. Not that I enjoyed it, but I learned to make the necessary adjustments. I sold Mother's jewelry, and with the money bought a small computer. The attic would have been an ideal workspace, had it not been packed with Mother's dust-mite-infested clothes she'd been collecting since the 1950's.

So I threw a yard sale—a big success thanks to overwhelming support from neighbors who empathized with me over my "daughter's" disappearance. Mother's poodle skirts were quickly swept up by a young girl with pierced eyebrows. My neighbor cried out from across the fence, "It must be tough giving away your youth like that." If she only knew.

That evening every bone and muscle ached. The excitement was too much for my 63-year-old body, too much hauling stuff up and down

the attic stairs. Father was worthless, and Lenny had chosen that weekend to visit his family in Cleveland. I worried: what if he meets another woman? In his mind I had abandoned and betrayed him, and deserved his sweet revenge. I tripled up on the painkillers

But with my new cash I bought a huge freezer for the basement and filled it with Lean Cuisine® and Swanson Hungry-Man® dinners. My cooking days were over. I showed Father how to use the microwave and began enjoying my new attic studio.

To forget Lenny and my lost middle age, I plunged myself into my work: an animal-rights revisionist version of Moby Dick, from the whale's point of view. In fact, the day Mother arrived I was in such an intellectual reverie I never even heard the doorbell. Father's incessant shouts of "Get the door goddam it!" finally roused me.

The experience of seeing my body again standing on the front porch was overwhelming enough, but imagine how I felt to see me there with dyed-platinum hair and a huge, pregnant belly.

Mother had gotten me knocked up with her very own grandchild.

What did she want to do, anyway, give me a heart attack? I collapsed on the Barcalounger and fanned myself with a *Reader's Digest*.

"Vince is in the car," Mother said, "I'd like you to meet him."

I hurled the magazine directly at her pregnant gut, but it landed in the fish tank instead. Mother said, "I hope Daddy's already read that," and I said, "What do you care? You're *me* now!"

"I should leave," she said, "but I won't because I'm your mother and all mothers must suffer for their children."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm ready to switch."

Of course she had her terms, and being in no position to compromise I quickly agreed. First, Father and I were to have her and Vince over for Sunday afternoon dinner. She told me where to find her goulash recipe,

I didn't expect Vince to look like Al Pacino, only taller, (Mother had always preferred Waspy, fair-haired boys like Robert Redford and Dan Quayle) nor did I expect him to profusely compliment my cooking skills, nor help me with the dishes, nor totally ignore the Bears game Dad had going on the kitchen TV. He had a slight accent: Hungarian, Slovak, I couldn't tell, but it was somewhat sexy and I had to compliment Mother on her taste.



Mother also insisted on seeing my poor husband Lenny again. He phoned me as soon as she left to cry on my shoulder. I tried to patch things up between them, or what I hoped someday soon would be us.

"I'm betting that any day she'll change her mind and come back to you begging forgiveness." I blamed amnesia and manic-depression. I even fabricated a story about psychological disturbances from repressed memories of sexual abuse suffered at age nine from my beloved Uncle Harvey, may he rest in peace. But Lenny was inconsolable. "She's in love with another man!" he wailed. "She's going to have his baby!"

I drove to Vince's home, looking for Mother, outraged. Why did she insist on torturing me? If she intended to keep my body why wave it in front of my nose like a carrot on a stick? I was so hysterical that the neighborhood with its meandering private driveways leading up to eight bedroom Tudor homes didn't register. Only when I found the address painted on the curb and saw a Mercedes *and* Porsche parked in the driveway did I realize that Vince was wealthy.

Mother wasn't there. She was off shopping for baby clothes, according to Vince, who showered me with unexpected hospitality: walnut-encrusted brie, crackers, and a couple glasses of a stunning Chardonnay with an intense, buttery richness. Although Mother's medications were not to be mixed with alcohol, given my frantic state of mind I drank the wine voraciously. Vince understood why I had come: my "husband" and I were now facing a family scandal. But what would I prefer—a little embarrassment, or a lifetime of unhappiness for my "daughter," a "regular old-fashioned girl," who reminded him of his dear departed mother? He felt that he could provide her with the love and stability she needed. Lenny was too selfish, a miser, and a hypochondriac.

Suddenly I felt woozy, not from the wine, or the painkillers, but from the sudden realization that Mother and Vince were right. I had married a man who made me check the moles on his back each month, on the first, but had never offered to check my breasts for lumps or at least suggest I do so myself. I had married a man who once took an ambulance to the hospital for indigestion, but refused to bring home Haagen Dazs® when I asked, claiming it was too expensive and generic was no different.

Vince suggested I lie down in one of his guest rooms until I felt better. As I lay beneath a real down comforter, my head resting on real down pillows, I imagined how shocked Mother would be to find me here.

But she wouldn't. Instead, a ringing phone and Vince's anxious voice awakened me. Mother had begun having contractions while buying a white lace christening gown, and had managed to take a taxi to the hospital. Vince insisted I continue resting, but I splashed cold water on my face and demanded to ride along. "After all, she's my daughter."

Seeing my body lying in a hospital bed panting like a dog and groaning in pain was not pleasant, but I knew if I wanted to inhabit it again, I'd have to share Mother's suffering.

I pulled the pouches of cramp bark, blood root, and ground goat's teeth out of my handbag and persuaded Vince that Mother and I needed to perform an ancient good luck ritual handed down from our Celtic ancestors. Mother needed no persuading. The thought ran through my mind that this transformation might hurt the baby, but it quickly passed.

Switching back was an awesome experience. To feel it all at once, my youthful, fertile body, the baby straining to escape my womb! For a brief moment I understood the whole pleasure/pain continuum. Mother collapsed in a chair, not expecting the pharmacological havoc I'd been playing with her body, but regained consciousness just in time to witness the birth of Hillary Jeanine.

Suddenly this beautiful baby girl was the sole reason for my existence. I wasn't sure if I could ever straighten out the mess Mother had made of my life, but whatever turn my life took next would be in the best interests of Hillary.

One thing for sure, I couldn't go back to Lenny. The bond of trust was broken, and convincing him I'd never run off again would be as difficult as convincing him that Mother and I had been living in each other's skins. And even if Lenny did accept my beautiful Hillary Jeanine as his own, Vince had the financial resources to wage a mean-ass custody battle.

Yet it was hard imagining Vince being mean or vindictive. The next day at the hospital, he brought me a dozen yellow roses and a pint of Haagen Dazs® macadamia nut. Two days later it seemed only natural to move into his home, where Mother had furnished a charming nursery. The recuperation period—six weeks without sex, under doctor's orders—relieved me from having to rush into wifely duties (even though technically I was still married to Lenny). For six weeks Vince served me breakfast in bed—he had taken a leave of absence from his rare gem import business—and hired a wonderful live-in nanny to change



Hillary's diapers. In between feeding Hillary I caught up on my Steven King reading, chocolate chip cookie eating, and slowly fell in love with the man who showered my face with kisses each morning after brushing the cookie crumbs from my lips.

Mother likes to take credit for the whole thing. "I picked him out for you," she says, "Is this the thanks I get?" whenever we insist on spending equal time with Vince's parents over the holidays.

But her guilt-trip won't work, as I know for certain that I've enriched her life as much as she's enriched mine. Her experience at the "New Day" Rehabilitation Clinic for her little painkiller dependency problem opened up her social life quite considerably. She's finally coming to terms with many thorny issues, and is much more assertive with Father. She loves her new computer, and confides in me regarding her occasional online flirtations.

As for Father, the enormous changes that have taken place in his family have hardly made a dent—although he does love his new granddaughter one heck of a lot. If he only knew she was the product of his wife's infidelity. On second thought, I doubt he'd even care.

Oh, one more thing. Mother had taken another liberty that I discovered soon after I came home from the hospital. Checking my body in the full length mirror, I was shocked to discover an image tattooed to my left butt cheek. Not a rose, not a trendy geometric abstraction, but none other than Winnie the Pooh. Now I understood why some of the "oh how cutes" I heard from the hospital staff seemed to be directed not at Hillary but at my ass.

I also understood the larger implication. When I was a child I loved Pooh. Mother sang me to sleep with the Pooh song, decorated my room with a Pooh bedspread, dressed me in Pooh pajamas. Mother tattooed me so I wouldn't forget that no matter what happened between us, I would always be her daughter. We would share an inextricable bond of closeness that at times could be suffocating, yet at times liberating. It was a bond that I never understood until we bore my first daughter.

## Bamboo

My mother loved the bamboo tree.  
Bamboo has a thousand uses, she said.  
Not one part is wasted. Bamboo shoots  
are good to eat. We use the leaves  
to wrap food. Old bamboo makes walls  
and windows, tables and chairs for poor folk.  
We have bamboo bridges, bamboo poles  
for carrying burdens, to pick fruit on high trees,  
to hang laundry out to dry. We weave young canes  
into baskets to catch fish, to winnow rice.  
And a young cane will beat the naughtiness  
out of children.

Bamboo is what we are, she said. We bend  
with the rain and the wind, we do not break.

*Hilary Tham*