

Sally and Her Mom

I was sitting in a beautiful hotel room in Prague, watching a German soap opera. I recognized three words: “wow”, “man”, as in *oh, man*, but without the *oh*, and “outfit”. I’d seen the word “sexy” on posters all over Amsterdam and in Prague, too. And I heard the word, “okay” everywhere. I guess it really is universal.

I didn’t mind the change in plans. Lang said something urgent had come up in reference to Josef and I shrugged my shoulders. Why argue? One outrageously expensive hotel room is very like another and I was looking forward to a trip to the clock tower. Lang said that Prague’s old section was very beautiful.

The hotel phone rang, interrupting an extremely tense moment on the soap opera – two people in an apartment were arguing.

I answered and in perfect English the desk clerk said, “Mrs. Watson is here to see you.”

“Mrs. Watson?” My mind was a blank. Absolutely. Then, in the background I heard my mother’s voice, as she wrestled the phone from his grasp. “Here, give me that. Sally, darling, I’m in Prague! Isn’t it wonderful? What room are you in?”

I was stunned. I was floored. I was speechless, but only for a second. “Uh, Mom. Now is not a good time. Could we schedule something for, um, later?”

“Later? Darling, I’m not here that long. So, what room are you? Please don’t leave your poor old mother waiting in the lobby.”

Oh, Christ. My mom is a gale-force wind and my skies just darkened. I felt defeat roll across my chest as I unwillingly recited. “Room 411.”

I hadn’t seen my mother in over five years. She was living in Phoenix with her most recent husband, Fred, and, quite honestly, we’d never been that close. I’d moved away from home at seventeen and never looked back. Well, I’d looked back long enough to use her residency to get into college. But after that, I never looked back.

Lang was in the shower and I knocked at the door and walked in. It was so steamy, my face got wet. “Sweetheart, my mother is on her way up.” I waited for my words to sink in. Finally, he peered out. “What? Did you say your *Mother*?”

I nodded and widened my eyes meaningfully. “What do you want to do?”

“Well, I am not staying in the shower. I have to meet Josef.”

“What if I bring you a book?”

“What if she wants to use the toilet?”

Oh. That was a complication. “Give me five minutes. I’ll figure something out, I promise. Have you got something to read?”

He glared. “Five minutes,” he said.

Okay, I thought. I have to get her out of this hotel room. How do I do that? She can be very.... *Annoying*... no, stop it. *Stubborn*. Extremely. The promise of a parrot that poops diamonds won't budge her if she wants to stay.

I ran to the mini-bar and pulled a split of champagne from the fridge. There were glasses and flutes on the shelf. I grabbed two. From my luggage I retrieved a small packet of medicine-cabinet items. Pamela had given me a couple of pills in case the time change upset my sleeping schedule. I dropped one into a flute and ground it fine with the butt end of a ball point pen. I poured champagne on top of it and watched bits of pill float about the bottom. Stirring it broke up the few remaining clots and the champagne bubbles diffused the remainder of the tablet.

I wasn't happy about this plan, but not out of guilt. I was unhappy because, regardless of her state of sobriety, my mother always said what she thought, and what she thought was usually unpleasant. Drugs, drink, or in this case, drugs mixed with drink, only enhance her talent for insult. *When wine is in, restraint is out* and that's true of Mary Jane Watson.

I know, I know. Relationships are tough, and with parents relationships rest on a scale anywhere between "horrible putrefying wound" to "great." Mine was not close to *great*, nor was it *putrefying wound*. But it was on the low end of the scale.

In church, I learned that our ability to negotiate relationships helps smooth rough edges off our personalities and makes it easier to share a community – to live together. But if I'd continued living with my mother, I'd now be a small pile of rubble. My mother's hobby was to chip away at my self esteem. But not with a hammer and chisel. No, with a spike mace which she forced down my throat and which ate away at me from the inside. *Ugh*.

I can never go back to retrieve all those lost shards of my persona – parts of *me* lost over the years. But, even in high school, I began to shore myself up so that I never again lost any bits that I truly wanted to keep.

My mother likes tearing me down. And I like myself just the way I am. It's crazy, I know!

The day I first truly comprehended the craziness was early on a Sunday morning. I'd spent the night with my friend, Mandy. Her mom had just dropped me off in time for church.

When I stepped through the door, the tension was palpable.

"Where have you been?" demanded Todd. I stared at him, surprised by the ferocity of his attack.

"Your mother has been worried sick."

Since mom drove me to Mandy's house on Saturday, I couldn't imagine she'd be worried. But I never got the chance to speak because my participation in her little drama was a walk-on part only. It was a pity ploy – an attempt to keep Todd from cooling off and losing interest.

My mother sat quietly on the sofa, staring at her hands. She was the picture of motherly martyrdom and she even made a little sniffing sound, as though tears had recently been in evidence. When she looked at me, I saw the worry that I'd blow her cover by spilling the entire story to Todd.

Before I could even consider my options, Todd pulled out a verbal machete and lopped off my head. "YOU ARE A TERRIBLE PERSON!" he screamed, and stormed off to the bedroom.

Mom watched him leave, wearing the expression of a prizewinner, though in this case the trophy was an emotion that fit like a key in the labyrinth lock of her mind. A strange little *something* there had been satisfied. When she saw my face, she resumed inspecting her hands, but the smugness remained.

I didn't cry. I clammed up and went to my room. Todd did leave and I never spoke another word to him. Of course, I had to speak to my mom. She was my parent (air quotes go here). But I was angry for a long time.

The weird thing is, after Todd, she changed. His departure and the brush of my anger colored her. She seemed even more bitter and unhappy – even desperate. Utterly exasperated by my withdrawal, she said, "You don't know what it is to get old."

I answered, "Apparently, it makes you mean."

She was nicer after that, maybe a bit humbled or even ashamed of her behavior, yet still justified in her thinking that I didn't have a right to be angry. She bought me some new clothes and took me to the movies and traded her way into my good graces – not the first parent guilty of bribery.

Now that I realize how tentative relationships are, the fact that I don't like my mother worries me because I want to have a good relationship with my children.

Can my mother and I be friendly? I can only try. But not right now. If I can't convince her to leave, I have no qualms about drugging her. Since removing her from the hotel room was my primary concern, any real reconciliation between us will need rescheduling.

I heard her knock at the door.

I put on my MOM face - something between nursely concern and a funeral director's smile. By the time I reached the door, I was already exhausted and realized I hadn't changed my clothes. Prepared for a long day of sightseeing, I was wearing a lightweight linen dress over an athletic style bra and bike shorts. Far too casual for mom. Oh well.

I wiped my hands down the front of my dress and opened the door. There she stood, as slender as a model, in a gorgeous suit and heels entirely unsuited to Prague's cobblestone streets.

I look nothing like her.

My mom walked in, air-kissed my cheek noncommittally and stepped back to give me the once over. She looked me up and down and said, "Well, you haven't put on any weight, so that's good."

I internally rolled my eyes so far back in my head, I was looking at my own ass. Yep, all mine - the ass and the mom.

"Hi, mom." My smile had melted into a grimace.

"It's wonderful to see you. What are you doing in Prague?"

"Uh, well, on vacation, actually. And just about to go out for lunch. Does that sound good? There's an excellent restaurant next door."

She waved a dismissive hand. "Let's order room service, darling. My feet are killing me."

Okay, *Plan A* is out, thanks to my mother's crazy ideas about appropriate footwear for sightseeing.

"Come sit, Mom. I poured us some champagne. Would you like some?"

"Of course." She settled herself on the sofa and looked around the suite appreciatively. "Fred sent me out to shop and I said, 'Shop? Darling, do you think we're in Milan?' But of course, he has no idea, poor thing. I called you at home and a nice young woman named Patricia said you were in Europe and I said, 'Where?' Isn't it a coincidence, dear, that I was so close? Are you on vacation from that place? Where is it you work?"

"Uh, not actually, Mom. Here," I handed her the drugged champagne and took a big swig of my own. I watched her expression for any sign that the medication had contaminated the flavor. Not that she was a connoisseur, but I was worried she'd notice. She didn't.

"You look well. And this is a very nice hotel room. I think it's as large as ours."

"Yes, it is."

"Do you still get those headaches?"

Ah, *there it is*. I haven't seen this woman in... how many years? And this is the first question out of her mouth. *Are you still weird?* Is what she wants to know. *Headaches* translates to the visions I began receiving shortly after my guardian angel rescue.

She was never happy about them. She used to say, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." In my case, what didn't kill me made me *stranger*. And in her eyes, that was a sin.

Too lumpy and too large, I was not the petite flower clone she'd expected in a daughter. She'd say, "You've got your father's genes," using a weary voice that implied no good would ever come of it.

When the visions first began, she'd been honestly concerned. When no one could find anything wrong with me and there was nothing physical to blame it on, she decided to ignore them – and me. She moved to Maryland, married and moved on with her life.

But back to her question. "Not so much anymore, Mom." I hadn't had a vision in quite awhile and I was happy about that.

She nodded, considering whether or not to comment. She decided *not*.

Good plan.

When I first moved to Maryland, I stayed with them for awhile – Mom and Fred. They'd met while she was visiting friends in Chevy Chase. Wealthy friends who knew a wealthy man they thought would like my mom. Fred had nothing to say to me. Ever. I think my mom told him that I was "*mental* but harmless" and he may have been a bit frightened of me.

It's possible that I may have been too direct for him. He wouldn't be the first man put off by my blunt-force demeanor. Where men were concerned, my mother was a charming, guilt-tongued image of feminine allurements. Not to me, of course. She didn't waste her charm on me.

"How's Fred?" I asked.

"As always." She smiled.

I watched the bubbles in her glass, recalling a phone conversation she'd had with one of her girlfriends. The woman on the phone had asked what Fred was like. "Darling!" she'd replied, "Like all good husbands, he's a sex god."

Now doesn't that sound sweet, generous, even? But she was perfectly serious because after a response from her friend, she said, "If you're not living with a sex god, darling, *move on!*"

I smiled to myself when I realized I was living with a sex god. It was a good feeling.

"Fred's working," she continued. "Junior runs the business now but Fred's never really retired. He's over here negotiating a deal. They need dentists, if you can imagine. A U.S. company is opening a training school in Prague and where they need dentists, they need..." She gazed at me expectantly.

"Teeth?"

"Dental equipment, darling! So why are you in Prague? Vacation, is it?" She changed the subject casually, looking for that next move, ready to pounce with further *mots* about my headaches. Or my weight.

"How're the grandkids?" I asked. She hated the idea of being a grandmother – not that they were hers.

She waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, there are *more*. Junior's wife just keeps breeding. She's always bringing them over and dumping them at my house."

"You babysit?" The idea was shocking on several levels.

"Of course not. The maid watches them. So, what are you doing in Prague?"

"I'm here on vacation with my husband." I waited a few seconds to let that sink in – my retaliatory bombshell. *And I'm just getting started.*

She smiled at me sweetly and then tilted her head, "Did you say your husband? You're married?"

I nodded solemnly. "Yes, Mom. I got married."

Like the fox she was, her gaze instinctively flicked to my left hand where she caught the flash of my ring. Her eyes widened in appreciation. "Oooh, is that your engagement ring?"

I held it out for viewing. "Have more wine, Mom."

She took a sip. "Why wouldn't you tell me? I mean, something as important as that, why wouldn't you let me know? Did you have a wedding?"

I thought for a moment before replying. I wanted to blame her, make it all her fault, say something like, 'Well, you were never all that happy with me,' but that didn't seem fair. It played a part, certainly. But my life with Lang was extremely cut off... Okay, maybe I had established my own fifty-foot emotional restraining order, and never served her with the papers. But quite honestly, I never thought I'd see her again. And that hadn't seemed such a bad idea.

When I didn't respond immediately, she continued, "I can't get over it. I've been telling everyone you're a lesbian."

She looked hurt and I did feel a bit sorry about it. But only a little. "A lesbian? Mom, really?"

"Well, they're more interesting than simple spinsters, Sally. What was I supposed to say?"

I breathed a silent *argh!* and stood to rummage through my luggage for the photos of the children. Time to drop my next bomb. I handed the leather travel frame to her and said, "Here."

She set her wine glass on the coffee table and opened the leather booklet. There was a photo of Jeremy and Anna together on the left and individual shots on the right.

"Who?" She asked.

"These are your grandchildren. That's Jeremy and the baby's name is Anna."

She was totally silent as she stared down at the frame, taking in all this new information. When she finally lifted her face there were tears in her eyes. "Why, Sally? Why didn't...?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. There are circumstances relating to my husband that make it difficult for him to live openly in the United States. It was safer that you didn't know."

"Safer? Is he in the witness protection program or something?"

Gee, that's a good idea, why didn't I think of that?

My mom continued, "I thought they gave you new identities so no one would find you?"

Oh, yeah. That won't work. I wracked my brain for a good reason. "It's a political issue, Mom."

"Political? What do you mean?"

Never a good liar, I was inventing my story at light speed. "He's a foreign national, Mom, and is, uh, in hiding from people in his homeland."

"What is he, royalty or something?"

Perfect! I love it when people lie for me. Why exert myself? “Yes, exactly. He’s royalty and we can’t let anyone know where he is.”

But she hadn’t heard me. Her eyes had glazed over and she looked truly awed. I thought the drug must be taking effect, but then she said, “*Royalty?*”

Oh, great! She’s a royalty hound. “Yes, Mom. He’s royalty and it’s too dangerous for him. So we live in secret.”

Her eyes widened in shock. She was totally buying it! Obviously impressed, she reached for my left hand to admire my ring. Sucking in her breath, she said, “It’s huge! How big is it?”

“*Big, Mom.*”

She narrowed her eyes for a moment and then tilted her head, birdlike. “So, how would you meet someone like that? *Royalty*, I mean.”

Hmm. how do I explain that I’m one of the few humans on the planet who can see a Vlkodlak who doesn’t wish to be seen?

Before I could concoct an answer, she said, “And why exactly would someone royal want to...?” She caught herself, recognizing the insult. For once!

“I mean,” she continued reasonably, “What could you have in common?”

Nothing that she could imagine. “It’s the headaches, Mom. He likes them. A lot.”

This answer confused her entirely and, since she wasn’t sure if I was kidding, she decided to let it go. She took a large gulp from her glass before leaning back on the sofa and closing her eyes. “This is a lot to take in, you know. I’m a grandmother! A *real* grandmother!”

She lifted the photo frame and gazed down at her grandchildren. “He must have his father’s eyes,” she said, indicating Jeremy with a tilt of her chin.

I didn’t say anything. She drained her champagne glass and I opened the fridge to fetch the bottle.

“Because he doesn’t seem familiar at all. Not really like you.”

“Yes. He looks like his father.” I said as I refilled her glass.

“She has your eyes.” She smiled at Anna’s photo. “Yours were blue like that. Did you know that?” She looked up at me before returning her gaze to my daughter’s photo. “They were blue for a long time. Until you were five or six. Then they started to get muddy and it seemed like overnight they changed. Finally, they turned hazel. Isn’t that odd?”

She smiled at me crookedly and I realized the medicine was working. Beyond drunk, she had found her sweetness. Maybe this is what greeted Fred every evening. It felt a bit unfair. This was the nice person she might have been with me, but never was. Or was I remembering

everything all wrong, based on some bias I'd formed in anger? Had I restructured all my memories to fit that viewpoint?

That's just crazy talk! I waved an imaginary, dismissive hand in the air. I wasn't remembering wrong, she really is annoying. Just not at this moment.

"Do you think they'll stay blue?" She asked.

"What, Mom?"

"Her eyes. What's her name?"

"Anna. I don't know what her eyes will do." I lifted my shoulders in a small shrug. Lang had wondered the same thing. When I mentioned that blue was not a dominant gene he'd said, "Not among humans, certainly. But I think your DNA is dominant over mine. In all things." I'd been surprised by this and he explained. "Humans have had years of evolution to strengthen their DNA through crossbreeding. We, on the other hand, have had years of limited partners – too much inbreeding, no matter how hard we work to avoid it."

I refilled my mother's glass and rapped briefly on the bathroom door as I passed. It had been longer than five minutes and I was sure Lang was losing patience. I said, "So, Mom, you don't think Jeremy looks like me at all?"

"Oh, he's going to be a heartbreaker. I can tell, you know. I thought you'd be one and I think you broke what's his name's... But maybe he deserved it..."

Oh yeah, she sounded sweet – now. As though her being drunk makes all of history null and void. I had to remind myself that anything drunks say is bullshit, regardless of it being nice or hateful, it's all bullshit. Okay, I've heard, *In Vino Veritas*, but that just means the drinker lost inhibition and the sense of "better not" which is probably a bad thing.

I stood in front of the bathroom door, attempting to block my mother's line of sight. As she lifted the picture frame, Lang slipped from the bathroom, but my mother looked up in time to see Lang's naked backside turn the corner. She dropped her jaw *and* the photos before pitching headfirst over the coffee table. I caught her glass only because it tilted toward me.

"Lang!"

He peered in.

"Can you give me a hand with her? Let's get her on the sofa. Why did you let her see you?"

He easily lifted my mother's tiny frame and placed her gently on the loveseat. He was still naked, distracting *me* now. Fists to hips and obviously exasperated, he said, "I did not intend for her to see me, but she did. Which may go a long way to explaining why you can." He considered her for a moment. "She is so tiny. Petite, right? That is the word?"

I nodded, thoughtful. So he was trying to be invisible but she caught a glimpse of him anyway. I wondered how drunk she was and how much she'd remember. I was certain that if she got a good look at Lang's backside, her vision wouldn't have moved beyond that. It was too striking

not to admire for as long as possible. Actually, his front is pretty nice, too, but that's mine alone to admire.

"Well, she thinks you're royalty and now she's all awed. Which means she might forgive me for not telling her anything... about us, I mean." I blew air between my lips, feeling the weight of absolute guilt in its purest form – lying to your mother. I shrugged it off and smushed it under my heel.

Lang came around the table and gave me a hug and a kiss and pulled back to stare at me pointedly. "You cannot feel guilty if you do not truly care."

Okay, so maybe I cared a little. But just a little.

"I am off to see Josef but will call you before I leave. We can meet somewhere for dinner, if you like. That restaurant next door looked good."