

LAST LISTS OF MY MAD MOTHER

Julie Jensen

Scene I: "Sassing Sister"

(Lights up on MA sitting at a table. She is recreating a time from her past as a teacher. DOT is her student.)

MA

Whistling white whippets
Whirling wherever.
What does it mean when
Whippets are whirling?
All the while whistling
When they are whizzing?
What is the meaning?
All together now, say it with me:

(DOT joins in haltingly.)

Whistling white whippets
Whirling wherever.
What does it mean when
Whippets are whirling?
All the while whistling
When they are whizzing?
What is the meaning?

DOT

My mother carried out a life long war against lazy speech. She also cared desperately about indefinite articles and subjunctive moods. There were people in town who actually believed that it was the intransitive verb that got her, that finally drove my mother crazy.

(MA begins laying out a Solitaire game in the rhythm of the conjugation.)

MA
(Correcting.) Today I see.
 Yesterday I saw.
 Many times I have seen.

DOT
(Teasing.) >Today I seen.
 Yesterday I seen.
 Many times I have...saw.

Today I done.

MA
 Today I do.

DOT
 >Yesterday I done.

MA
 Yesterday I did.

DOT
 >Many times I have...did.

MA
 Many times I have done.

DOT
 My mother never cared much whether she was well liked, and she wasn't. In part because she believed that it was her job to tell all people great and small what she thought of them and what they should do to improve.

Before she completely lost her mind, she had weighed in on every decision any of us ever made. And that included people in town as well as people in the family. It was common for her to say something like, "Oh, we don't believe in that. We believe in this." That was because she always spoke for more than just herself.

And now my mother's on the decline, rapidly leaking her beans. But that does not prevent her from rendering an opinion or running the show.

She keeps a rigid schedule that does not vary day-to-day by as much as a minute. It's her way of keeping the holes in her mind from showing.

(MA is playing Solitaire.)

MA
Dorothy, what time is it?

DOT
>It's 10:23, Ma.

MA
What time does it say in the living room?

DOT
>10:23, Ma.

MA
No. Go look.

DOT
>It says 10:24, Ma.

MA
See, they're different.

DOT
>Yeah, they are. But what does it matter?

MA
It matters because we have to get the mail at 10:30.

DOT
>We have to?

MA

Yes, we have to.

DOT

>Why do we have to?

MA

It's what we always do.

DOT

>What if we don't do it like that today?

MA

We don't like to do it any other way.

DOT

>Who's we?

(MA looks up, impatient.)

MA

Go change your shoes. You can't wear those shoes down town.

(MA moves a card in her Solitaire game.)

DOT

My mother plays Solitaire. A hundred games a day sometimes. She cheats like hell. But she doesn't play to win. She plays to prove she can still count backwards.

(MA places the cards in rhythm with the recitation of her schedule.)

MA

At 10:30 we get the mail and go for a little ride. At 11:30 we have a little lunch. At 12:30 we take a little nap. At 1:30 we go for a little ride. At 2:30 we have a little dinner. At 3:30 we have a little bath. At 4:30 we watch a little "Jeopardy" and a little "Wheel of Fortune" and then we go to bed.

DOT

>What if we don't do it like that today?

MA

Daddy likes it like that.

DOT

>This has nothing to do with Daddy.

MA

Of course it does. Daddy likes it like that.

DOT

>Daddy doesn't give a damn about the mail.

MA

Daddy does too, so do you.

DOT

>I don't give a damn about the mail.

MA

Oh yes you do.

DOT

>This schedule has nothing to do with Daddy, and nothing to do with me. It has to do with you!

(MA moves a card then looks up.)

MA

What are those things on your ears?

DOT

>Earrings, Ma.

MA

We don't like those things. Hussies wear those things.

(Counting her piles of cards.)

Four, three, two, one. See there, I've won again.

(Looking up with a sense of completion.)

What color is that blouse?

DOT

>Grey.

MA

We don't like grey. We don't look good in grey.

DOT

>What color do we look good in?

MA

Dusty rose.

DOT

>*(Laughing.)* You know what, Ma? You would have made a wonderful mother for a couple of gay guys.

MA

(Calling to an absent person.) Come on, Daddy, it's time to go to the post office.

DOT

>I'll take you to the post office.

MA

No, Daddy will take me.

DOT

>How about if I take you today?

MA

No, Daddy likes to take me.

DOT

>I know, Ma. But I'll do it today.

MA

But Daddy needs to go to the post office.

DOT

>I don't think so, Ma. He doesn't feel so good.

MA

He always feels like going to the post office.

DOT

>No, Ma. I'll take you today. Go get in the car.

MA

Your hair is in your eyes. You should cut your bangs. *(Calling.)* Come on, Daddy. It's after 10:30.

DOT

>Daddy is resting.

MA

Daddy wants to go.

DOT

>Daddy is sick.

MA

Daddy likes to get out.

DOT

>Daddy needs to sleep.

MA

Oh pooh! Daddy sleeps too much. He needs to go for the mail.

DOT

>Mother, look at me. Daddy is sick. He is not going to take you to the post office. I am. Is that clear?

She looks at me, as if trying to decipher a sentence from an unknown language. Then she stamps her foot like an angry Shirley Temple. And sasses me.

MA

Nya-nya-nya--nya! You can't tell me what to do.

DOT

>That's it!

(DOT grabs MA by the elbow.)

>I've had enough out of you today!

MA

YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!

(DOT slaps MA on the butt.)

DADDY, SHE'S HITTING ME!

DOT

>AND I'LL HIT YOU AGAIN IF YOU DON'T MIND.

(MA ducks and scurries out of reach.)

The two of us stand there eying each other, two wrestlers in a ring. I feel more powerful than I've ever felt before.

>Mother, you sit down at that table. I've had enough out of you today. Sit down. Right now.

(MA sits reluctantly.)

>That's better.

(They eye each other warily. Silence.)

Then she pokes me with her cane. AND I WANT TO KILL HER!

(DOT grabs the cane.)

It's at this point that I'm supposed to remember the difference between "cannot" and "will not." My mother cannot do any better.

(Long pause. DOT returns to the table.)

I pick up her deck of tattered cards. I'm trying to make amends.

>Here, Ma, play rummy with me. How many do I deal?

(As she deals.)

>One?

MA

One.

DOT

>Two?

MA

Two.

DOT

>Three?

MA

Three.

DOT

>Four?

MA
Four.

DOT
>Five?

MA
Five.

DOT
>Six?

MA
Six.

DOT
>Seven.

MA
Seven.

DOT
>Seven. Is that right?

MA
Seven. Is that right?

(They play several seconds. MA picks up two cards from the discard pile.)

DOT
My mother can't remember how many cards to pick up from the discard pile. She doesn't seem to care. But I'm committed to the rules.

>You can pick up one or all.

(DOT takes them back.)

MA

I want only two.

DOT

>I know. But you have to take one or all.

MA

Why?

DOT

>It's the rule. So go ahead. Draw.

(MA takes two cards.)

>No. You can't take two. You have to take one or all.

MA

I want only two.

DOT

>You can't take just two. You have to take one or all.

MA

Why?

DOT

>It's the rule. So go ahead, draw.

(MA takes two cards.)

DOT (cont.)

>No, you can't take two. You have to take one card or all the cards in the pile.

MA

But I want only two.

DOT

>You can't take two. You have to take one or all.

MA
Why?

DOT
Because!

MA
But I want only two.

DOT
>Okay, take two!

(MA picks up the cards and plays out her hand.)

MA
That's how I play it. I play it with two.

DOT
>Good work, Ma. You won.

MA
That's how I do it. I play it with two.

(MA remembers her schedule.)

Come on, Daddy, let's go!

(DOT grabs her hands and keeps her there.)

DOT
>No! You stay right where you are.

We stare at each other like two cats through a fence.

>Please don't start this again, Ma.

I let go of her. She doesn't fly, but something has changed. She may have forgotten how.

(Beat. The phone rings. Cross fade.)

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Entr'Scene I:

(DOT runs down left and picks up the receiver. SIS is down right. She is busy with something.)

SIS
How's your day?

DOT
Long.

SIS
That's because you're not thinking enough positive thoughts.

(DOT coughs loudly.)

Are you doing that on purpose?

DOT
I think it's caused by not thinking enough positive thoughts.

SIS
Everything is a joke with you.

DOT
Jump and laugh. Jump and laugh. Puff and Sally jump and laugh.

(Pause.)

SIS
Are you finished?

DOT
Yes.

SIS
That negative energy is like a stop sign on the freeway of life. It affects everything you do, everyone you're with.

DOT

“The Power of Positive Thinking.” Norman Vincent Peale. 1956.

SIS

It’s not the power of positive thinking. It’s imaging with affirming energy.

DOT

What’s the damn difference?

SIS

I will not have you making light of my beliefs. You could use a few yourself.

DOT

Right. A girl scout is always cheerful.

SIS

Yes!

DOT

Let’s get something straight here. You are not allowed to tell me what to do.

SIS

I’m not telling you what to do.

DOT

You’re not?

SIS

No.

DOT

Then what are you doing?

SIS

I’m helping you.

(DOT's eyes float up to the ceiling.)

DOT

Well, if that's the case, thank you very much.

SIS

You're welcome. So...apart from your attitude, how are you?

DOT

Great! Gained five pounds since last Thursday. Ma's lost four.

SIS

That is terrible.

DOT

I know.

SIS

You've got to do something.

DOT

What should I do?

SIS

Stop eating.

DOT

What a good idea. I hadn't thought of that.

SIS

Listen, I was over at Clayton House this morning.

It is really nice. I could live there. They have table cloths, a little bud vase and a live flower on every table. They take them shopping every week. They take them on field trips.

DOT

And the people are all young and smart. With tons to look forward to.

SIS

They teach classes from junior college over there.

DOT

Our mother can't remember how many children she has.

SIS

She'll be around other people.

DOT

Except she hates other people.

SIS

I know, but there are all sorts of activities.

DOT

Every morning, after she moves into the old folks home, our mother will rush from her bed, fling open the window, and shout to the sky that she is happy to be alive.

SIS

(Matter of factly.) Yes.

(Lights out on SIS and up on MA.)