

Mother's Excitement Over Father's Old Sweetheart

Bess Streeter Aldrich

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Mother's Excitement Over
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It reaches white heat just as he starts for a class
reunion which the hated rival is to attend

MRS. HENRY Y. MASON'S years numbered fifty-two, which means that she stood on that plateau of life where one looks both hopefully forward and longingly back. Life had been very gracious to Mother Mason. It had brought her health, happiness, and Henry; and sometimes in a spasm of loyal devotion, Mother decided that the greatest of these was Henry.

To-night, as she sat knitting by the library table, her heavy figure erect, her plump face, under its graying hair, radiating energy and kindliness, her health was evident.

As for the happiness, the source of a goodly share of it was apparent. Sounds of youthful laughter came with the scent of lilacs through the open windows. They were all out there in the yard: serious-eyed Katherine home from the University for spring vacation, lovely eighteen-year-old Marcia, merry sixteen-year-old Eleanor, and troublesome, lovable twelve-year-old Junior. Even Bob, good, steady Bob, her eldest, was out there, too, just leaving with Mabel, his bride of a year, for the little home two blocks down the street. Yes, Mother had known much happiness.

Which brings us to Henry. That big, calm, conservative president of the Springertown First National Bank was just sitting down on the opposite side of the library table and unfolding the "Evening Journal" when Mother began:

"Henry, you wait a minute. I want to talk to you about something that has been on my mind all day."

Henry looked up politely, but hung on to his paper.

"This morning I was cleaning out the drawers of that old bureau in the attic and I began reading scraps of letters and looking at the pictures of my old college classmates, and I just got hungry to see them all. I kept thinking about my girlhood with those old chums, and I was so homesick to see them I could taste it. Why, if I could hear Nettie Fisher laugh and see Julie Todd's shining, happy face!"

She dropped her knitting and turned to her husband.

"Henry, I've a good, big notion to plan to go back to Mount Carroll for Commencement."

"Why, sure! Why don't you, Mother?"

Henry prepared to plunge into the paper as though the matter were settled, but it seemed Mother had more to say. For twenty-six years Father had been a patient, silent boulder in the middle of the stream of Mother's chatter.

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"You know, Father, Junior would be all with the girls to look after him. And then there's this: Of course I knew when Bob was married that he'd probably have children — and it's right, too — I wouldn't say this to a soul but you — for I am ashamed of it — but ever since the day Mabel told me her secret, and was so happy about it — poor child! — I've just resented the thought of being a grandmother. Why, Henry, I don't feel like a grandmother, and I'm not ready to be one."

"I don't see any way to stop it, Mother."

Henry stole a surreptitious glance at a tempting editorial.

"Of course not!" Mother was too much in earnest to be frivolous. "But before I'm a grandmother — it'll be in July — I want to go back to Mount Carroll and be a girl again. If I could just get with that old crowd it would bring my youth all back, I know. I'd just live it over. Why, Henry, I'd give the price of the trip to have five minutes of real girlish thrill — "

"All right, Mother." Father boldly dismissed the subject. "You just plan to go and get your thrill."

IN THE busy weeks that followed Mother moved in an exalted state of mind, thinking of nothing but plans to leave the family comfortable and the exquisite pleasure before her. She wrote reams of messages to Julie Todd and Nettie Fisher and Myra Breckenridge and a dozen others. To be sure, they had all possessed other names for a quarter of a century, but Mother deigned to use them only on the outside of the envelopes.

There were clothes to be planned. Mother thought the town dressmaker could make her something suitable, but the girls protested.

"You're not going back there looking dinky, Mama, that's sure."

And Henry added his voice, "That's right, Mother; you doll up."

So Marcia and Mother journeyed to Capital City and chose a navy blue tailored suit, and a stunning black and white silk, and a soft gray chiffon gown, "in which she looks perfectly Astorbiltish," Marcia afterward told the assembled family. These, with hat and gloves and a pair of expensive gray suede shoes that hurt her feet, but made them look like a girl's, came to a ghastly sum in three figures, so that Mother felt almost ill when she wrote on the check, "Henry Y. Mason, per Mrs. H. Y. M."

On the evening before the wonderful journey back to the Land of Youth, Father made his startling announcement. He had been reading quietly in his accustomed place by the library table. Mother, who had been putting pictures of all the family and views of the new house into her grip, came into the library.

"Mother" — Henry put down his magazine — "I've decided to go with you to-morrow and on to Midwestern while you are at Mount Carroll." Father's university was in a state farther east than Mother's Alma Mater. "When you get off at Oxford to change, I'll go right on, and then next Thursday, after Commencement, I'll be on the train coming back, and meet you there."

MOTHER was delighted, reproaching herself severely, in her tender-hearted way, for not having thought of the same thing. Father had attended to business so strictly all these years that this arrangement had not once occurred to her.

"I've been thinking what you said about seeing your old chums, and, by George! I'd enjoy it, too," Henry went on. "I can't think of anything more pleasurable than meeting Slim Reed and the Benson boys, and old Jim Baker."

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So Father got his hat and went back to the bank to attend to some business; for with that nonchalant way a man has of throwing a clean collar into a grip preparatory to a long journey there was nothing for him to do at home.

Kind-hearted Mother's cup of joy was bubbling over. Happy moisture stood in her eyes as she got out Father's things. How well he deserved the trip!

Hurrying back into the library to get a late magazine for him to take along, her eyes fell upon the one he had just been reading. It was the *Midwestern University Alumnus*. Smiling, Mother picked it up. Under the heading "Class of '89" — that was Father's — there were a couple of commonplace items. Her eyes wandered on. "Class of '90." There was a clever call for a reunion signed by the Class Secretary, Laura Drew Westerman. Mother sat down heavily, and *The Thing*, after a long hibernating period, awoke and raised its scaly head.

Now, there is in the life of every married woman a faint, far-away, ghostly personage known as *The Old Girl*. Just how much they had meant to each other, Mother had never known. She did know that every spring and fall for twenty-six years she had cleaned out a box which contained, among other trinkets, an autograph album and a copy of Lucile and a picture of a dark-eyed girl in a ridiculously big-sleeved dress, all marked "To Henry from Laura." Laura Drew was Henry's old girl.

So from this lack of knowledge and the instinct inherited from primal woman had been hatched a little slimy creature, so unworthy of Mother that she had refused to call it by its real name. That had been years ago. With the coming of children and the passing of years, *The Thing* had shriveled up, both from lack of nourishment and because Mother laughed at it. A *Thing* like that cannot live in the white light of Humor. But now, quite stunned by the sudden surprise that *The Thing* was alive, she could only listen passively to what it was saying:

"So! even though he has been kind and loving and good and true to you," It said tragically, for it loves to be tragic, "across the years she has called to him."

On the train the next day, Mother steeled herself to venture, quite casually: "I saw by your *Alumnus* last night that Laura Drew is to be there."

"Yes, I saw that, too," Father said simply, and the subject was dropped.

On the station platform at Oxford, Mother clung to Father's arm for just a second, he seemed so boyish and enthusiastic. She stood for several minutes by the side of her grips watching the train curve around the bend of the bluff, carrying Father down the road to youth — and Laura Drew.

THEN, with characteristic good sense, she determined to put the thought completely out of her mind and devote herself to the resurrection of her own youth. So she walked energetically into the station, spread a paper on the dusty bench, and sat down. Her feet hurt her, but the trim girlish appearance of the gray suede shoes peeping out from under the smart suit was full compensation for all earthly ills.

A little gray-haired, washed-out woman in an out-of-date, limpsy suit was wandering aimlessly around the room. In the course of her ramblings she confronted Mother with a question concerning the train to Mount Carroll. Mother, in turn, interrogated the woman. It was Julie! Julie Todd, whose round, happy face Mother had crossed two states to see. Poor Mother!

After the first shock, she drew Julie down beside her on the bench and the two visited until their train came. Julie had no permanent home. Her husband, it seemed, had been unfortunate, first in losing the money his father had left him, and then in having his ability underestimated by a dozen or so employers. He was working just now for a dairyman — it was very hard on him, though — out in all sorts of weather.

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There were seven children, unusually smart, too, but their father's bad luck seemed to shadow them. Joe, now, had been in the army, and had left camp for a little while — he had fully intended to go back; but the officers were very disagreeable and unjust about it. And on and on through an endless tale of grievances.

It was late afternoon when the train arrived at Mount Carroll. The station was a mass of moving students, class colors, arriving parents and old grads. Mother's spirits were high.

Em met them and took them to her pretty bungalow on College Hill. Em had never married. She was Miss Emmeline Livingston, head of the English Department, and she talked with the same pure diction to be found in "Boswell's Life of Johnson." Also, she was an ardent follower of a new cult which had for its main idea, as nearly as Mother could ascertain, the conviction that if you lost your money or your appetite or your reputation, you had a perfect right to believe that there had been chaos where there should have been cosmos.

Nettie Fisher and Myra Breckenridge had arrived that morning, and were there to greet Mother and Julie Todd. Nettie Fisher was a widow, beautifully gowned in black. She had enormous wealth; but the broken body of her only boy lay under the poppies in a Flanders' field, and she had come to meet these girlhood friends to try and find surcease for the ache that never stopped.

MYRA BRECKENRIDGE had no children, dead or living. Her sole claims to distinction seemed to be that she was the champion woman bridge-player of her city, and that her bulldog had taken the blue ribbon for two consecutive years. She wore a slim, flame-colored dress cut on sixteen-year-old lines. Her fight with Time had been persistent, as shown by the array of weapons on her dressing table. But Time was beginning to fight with his back to the wall.

They made an incongruous little group, as far apart now as the stars and the seas; but it had not evidenced itself to Mother, who, with blind loyalty, told herself during dinner that a noticeable stiffness among them would soon wear off.

After dinner, Mother unpacked her grips and hung the pretty gowns in a cedar closet. But the photographs that had been packed with happy anticipation she left in the bag. It would be poor taste to display the views of her cherished sun-parlor and fire-place and mahogany stair-way to poor Julie, who had no home. It would be cruel to flaunt the photographs of all those lovely daughters and sturdy sons before Nettie, whose only boy had thrown down the flaming torch. So Mother closed the bag and went down-stairs to meet the three boys of the old class who had come to call.

One of the boys was a fat judge, with a shining, bald head and a shining, round face behind shining, round tortoise-shell glasses. One was a small, wrinkled, dapper dry-goods merchant. And one was a tall doctor with a Van Dyke beard. This completed the reunion of the Class of '90.

There were numberless seats and chairs on the roomy porch of the bungalow, and it was there that they all sat down. The hour that followed was not an unqualified success. The reunion appeared not to be living up to its expectations. The old crowd was nothing but a group of middle-aged people who were politely discussing orthopedic hospitals and the reconstruction of Rheims. Occasionally, someone referred with forced jocularly to a crowd of jolly young folks they had once known. Ah, well! After all, you can't recapture Youth by trying to throw salt on its tail.

Sensing that things were lagging, Mother proposed that they walk up to the old school, with Em to show them around. They found a dozen unfamiliar buildings, an elaborate new home for the president, and a strange campanile pointing its finger, obelisk-like, to the blue sky. Only the green-sloping campus smiled gently at them like a kind old mother whose sweet face welcomed them home.

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ON MONDAY they attended the literary societies' pageant. As the slowly moving lines of brilliantly costumed girls came into view, Mother's heart was throbbing in time to the notes of the bugle. With shining eyes she turned to the little widow.

"Nettie," she said solemnly, "we girls started this parade day."

"I know it. We all had big white tissue paper hats with pink roses on them — "

"And we stole the Beta's stuffed monkey so they wouldn't have a mascot — "

"And got up at four o'clock to pick clovers for the chain."

They had made the first chain, and now, gray-haired, they were standing on tiptoe at the edge of the crowd trying to catch a glimpse of the lithe, radiant, marching girls — Eternal Youth forever winding in and out under the shimmering leaves of the old oaks!

It was like that for three days. They seemed always to be on the outskirts of things, looking on. For three days they went everywhere together — class plays, receptions, ball games, musicals — this little lost flock of sheep. For three days Mother exerted herself to the utmost to catch one glimpse of the lost Youth of these men and women. Apparently they saw everything with mature vision, measured everything by the standard of a half-century's experience.

On the evening of the last day Mother gave up. She was through, she thought, as they all sat together on the porch. There was to be a concert by the united musical organizations, and the old crowd was ready to go and sit sedately through the last session. Very well, thought Mother, as she chatted and rocked, she would try no more. They were hopelessly, irrevocably middle-aged. She was convinced at last, disillusioned, she told herself. You can never, never recapture Youth.

Then, quite gradually, so that no one knew just how it began, there came a change. Someone said, "Remember, Myra, the night that red-headed Philomathian came to call on you, and we girls tied a picture of your home beau on a string and let it down through the stove-pipe hole into his lap?"

And someone else said, "Remember, Em, the time you had to read Hamlet's part in 'Shake' class and Professor Browning criticized you so severely, and then said, 'Now you may continue,' and you read in a loud voice, 'Well said, you old mole?'"

AND the doctor said, "Remember, Jim, the note you pinned on your laundry to the washlady:

"If all the socks I've sent to thee
Should be delivered home to me,
Ah, well! the bureau would not hold
So many socks as there would be,
If all my socks came home to me"?

And before they were aware, they were going off into gales of laughter.

It came time for the concert, but no one suggested starting. Each succeeding anecdote heightened the merriment so that the undergrads streaming by said patronizingly, "Pipe the old duffers!"

"Remember, boys, the Hallowe'en we girls hid from you, and you had to furnish the supper because you didn't find us by nine o'clock?"

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They all began talking at once about it, the men protesting that the girls had come out from the hiding place before nine.

"If you girls hadn't niggled on the time, we'd have found you," the men were arguing. There was a perfect bedlam of voices. Youth, which up to this time had eluded them, had slipped, slyly, unbidden, into their midst. Mother was thrilling to her finger tips.

"It was a night almost as warm as this," the judge said, "and the moon was as gorgeous as it is to-night."

Mother, in the stunning black and white silk, jumped to her feet.

"Let's do it again!" she cried with an impulsive sweep of her hands. "To-night! It's the nearest to Youth we'll ever come in our whole lives." She turned to the men on the steps. "The rules are the same, boys. Give us fifteen minutes' start, and if you can't find us by nine, we'll come back here and you'll buy the supper. If you find us, we'll buy it. Come on, girls."

As Joan of Arc may have led her armies, so Mother's power over the others seemed to hold. In a wave of excitement, they rose to her bidding. Light of foot, laughing, the five women hurried across one corner of the campus. In the shadow of the oaks Mother stopped them.

"Is the same house still standing?" she asked breathlessly of Em.

"Yes, but others are built up around it now."

"Come on, then!" With unerring feet, down to the same house where they had hidden twenty-nine years before, Mother led them.

"What if someone sees us?" giggled Nettie.

"We should worry!" said the head of the English Department, which was really the most remarkable thing that happened that night.

There it was — a house no longer new — but still standing, and as dark as the others near it. Evidently the occupants had gone to the concert. By the light of the moon they could see its high cellar window, still yawning foolishly open, waiting for them, just as it had waited before.

Against the window they placed a sloping board and climbed slowly up, one by one. Em went first, then Myra, and Nettie, and Julie, and, last, Mother. At least, Mother's intentions were good. The window was about eighteen by twenty; and Mother, quite eighteen by twenty herself, stuck half way in and half way out. Up the street they could hear the old whistle — the boys calling to each other. Laughing hysterically, tugging desperately at her, the other four, after strenuous labor, pulled Mother down into the cellar, where, groping around in the dark, she found the cellar stairs and sat down. They were all shaking with laughter—spasms, that kind of digestion-aiding laughter which comes less often according to the ratio of the number of years you are away from Youth.

For some time, whispering and giggling nervously and saying "Sh!" constantly to each other, they sat in the black cellar.

SUDDENLY, an electric light snapped on over Mother's head and the door above her opened. "What are you doing in my cellar?" snarled a voice as gruff as the biggest bear's in "Goldilocks."

The giggling died as suddenly as though it had been chloroformed.

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Cold as ice, Mother rose and faced the darkness above her. Then she said with all her Woman's Club dignity — which is a special de luxe brand of dignity — "If you will allow us to come up there I think we can make a very satisfactory explanation."

"You can explain to the town marshal," answered the sour voice, and the owner of it slammed the door.

They sat down dismally and waited. They heard the telephone ring and then the wooden shutter of the cellar window was banged down and fastened.

"He needn't have done that," Mother said stiffly. It is claimed that house-breakers are often sensitive about their honor.

During the long wait every fiber of Mother's brain concentrated on one word — disgrace. If the papers got hold of it! Even if they wrote it up as a joke! Imagine — to be written up as a joke at fifty-two!

There were footsteps overhead, and then the gruff voice, "Come up out of there now!"

Slowly they filed up the narrow dark stairs. Mother went first. As she had led them into this sickening dilemma, so would she be the first to face the music.

"May we have some lights?" she asked frigidly.

"Certainly."

LIGHTS were turned on. Three men stood there: A fat one with tortoise-shell glasses; a little, wrinkled, dapper one, and a tall one with a Van Dyke beard — all fiery red from silent convulsions brought on by ingrowing laughter. As the women filed in, the pent-up laughter rolled forth from the men in shrieks and howls. Then the shouting and the tumult died, for Nettie and Julie were smothering the fat one with someone's sofa pillows, Myra and Em were taking care of the bearded one, and Mother was shaking the little one, while he motioned feebly with his hands that he was ready for peace.

"Kamarad!" gasped the fat judge when he could get his breath. "Anyway, you'll admit we were speaking the truth when we said we could have found you."

"Now, let's dig out," said the doctor, whose respiratory organs were again working, "before the folks that own this house come home from the concert and send us all up."

Breaking out into hilarious laughter at intervals, they walked down to the store at the foot of the hill, and there the girls bought a lunch to make angels weep. It consisted of buns, bananas, wienies, chocolate candy, and dill pickles.

Across pastures, crawling under barb-wire fences, went the cavalcade, to build a bonfire down by old Salt Creek. Gone were the years and the family ties. Forgotten were the hours of failure and the hours of triumph. They were the old crowd, singing "Solomon Levi." Youth was in their midst. And the moon, bored to the point of ennui, at the countless hordes of students it had seen roasting wienies in that identical spot, brightened at the novel sight of the old duffers taking hold of hands to dance around the huge fire.

As chimes from the campanile striking twelve came faintly through the night, Youth suddenly dropped her festive garments and fled, a Cinderella that could not stay.

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The little straggling procession started soberly back across the meadow. Julie's rheumatism was beginning to manifest itself. The head of the English Department was painfully aware that in the place where she had stowed that awful collection of indigestibles there was chaos where there should have been cosmos. Far, far behind the others came the judge and Mother; not from any sentimental memory of their past friendship, but because, being the possessors of too, too solid flesh, they were frankly puffed-out.

FATHER swung off the steps of the train at Oxford and took Mother's grips.

"Well, did you get your thrill, Mother?"

"I most certainly did." Mother was smiling to herself.

They walked down the Pullman to Father's section, which he had chosen with careful regard to Mother's comfort.

"And you — did you have a good time?" Mother questioned when they were seating themselves.

"Fine — just fine!" Father was enthusiasm personified.

A quick little tug at Mother's heart reminded her that The Thing was still alive.

"Were there many of your old class-mates back?" she parried, giving herself time to bring out the real question.

"Two, just two." Father was glowing at the happy memory of some unuttered thing. "Just old Jim Baker and I. Jim's kind of down and out — works around the University Cafeteria."

"Was — ?" It was coming. Mother braced herself. "Was Laura Drew there?"

"Yes." Father's face shone with the light of unspoken pleasure. "Yes, she was there."

The Thing seemed to bite at Mother's throat and wrap a strangling tail around her heart. With the pleasure with which we turn the knife in our wounds, she asked in a tense little voice:

"Is she — does she seem the same?"

Father drew his rapt gaze from some far-away vision to look at Mother.

"The same?" he repeated, a trifle dazed. Then he said cheerfully, "Why — maybe — I don't know. I didn't see her."

"Didn't see her?"

"No. I didn't see much of anybody." Father grew confidential. "The fact is, old Jim Baker and I played checkers 'most all the time for the three days. He got off every morning at eleven and we'd go around to his room. By George! It was nip and tuck for two days. But the last day — I beat him."

"Checkers!" Mother breathed but the one word, but the ingredients of which it was composed were incredulity, disgust, merriment, and several dozen others.

Then she laughed, a bubbling, deliciously girlish laugh, and The Thing relaxed its hold on her heart, turned up its toes, and died.

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Surreptitiously, Mother reached down and pulled off the expensive suede shoes. "Now," she announced, "there's one grateful bunion in the world."

Then she fixed herself for the long ride to the west. "Henry," she laid a plump hand on Father's arm, "you are such a comfort to me. Won't it be nice to get home and settle down to being a grandfather and a grandmother?"