

"Unchained Melody"

An hour and seventeen minutes.

An hour and seventeen minutes standing in line to claim a half-filled Hefty bag. And then all the forms in triplicate – press hard so the mark goes through white, canary, and pink. This is not worth the trouble – she isn't worth the trouble – but then an hour and seventeen minutes later I leave the Office of Records with the pink form in my left hand and all my mother's worldly possessions rattling around the Hefty bag in my right.

I brush away some of the silky grey dust that collected on the bag while it waited for me these last ten years, and I shift its weight over my shoulder as I trudge toward the parking lot.

Back at my apartment I take the stairs two at a time, bolt the door behind me, and head to my room. I stretch the plastic of the bag until it tears, and a pile of memories spills onto the bed. The nightshirt my mother always wore. I can still imagine her pale, bird-like legs sticking out of its hem. By the end, the flesh on her legs had turned almost grey, and the muscles of her calves had shrunk so that, in the nightshirt, she looked like a tent on stilts. I raise the material to my nose and inhale. After all this time, the stench of dog food and decay still clings to the cloth. Shuddering, I throw the shirt into the corner. I'll burn it later.

The music box! Nearly hidden under a pile of rubbishy, faded receipts and crumpled notes written in a child's scrawl. I recognize the writing and realize with a jolt that I still write my m's the way I did when I was eight years old. "I love you mommy." "I'm sorry mommy. Please come out." How many of these did I slip through the crack under her door? How many nights did I sleep on the floor next to that slender rectangle of light, waiting for her to come out or to tell me goodnight? How pitiful. After awhile, she had stopped talking at all, stopped answering my questions through the door. The only sign that she was alive at all was the shadow

slipping past the door, the sight of her birdlike ankles, and the sound of that music box. There's got to be a special place in hell for mothers who desert their children.

That music box. The ivory-colored bone porcelain box with the shepherdess embossed on top and cabbage roses rising from the sides. A gift from my father, mother used to say, a parting gift before he left us. I didn't know him; he left before I was born. Still, when things got bad with mother, I would dream of his knock at the door, and of how it would feel when he raised me to his strong shoulders to carry me away somewhere safe and clean and happy. When I was very young, mother kept the box high on the mantel. Sometimes, when she was busy and out of sight, I would drag my stool to the mantel. Standing on the tips of my toes, I could just reach its perch. I used to run my fingers along the pattern, never daring to open the lid; the notes rising from the box would betray my secret, and my punishment would have been bad.

The lid is heavier than I had imagined it would be. It swings open on tiny brass hinges to reveal a small, oval compartment lined with shiny red silk. Inside the lid hangs a square mirror with beveled edges, just large enough to reflect my face when I hold it at arm's length. I have never seen the inside of the box before. The notes don't play when I first open the lid but I find a tiny key on the bottom of the box. I take it between my index finger and thumb and turn it clockwise, noting with satisfaction the rhythmic clicks as it winds. When I reopen the lid, I can hear the individual notes as tiny metal divots on the spindle push against the mechanism's metal teeth. Listening closely, I recognize for the first time the name of the song that I had heard through the door so many times. I know its name: Unchained Melody.

The spindle sings all for me this time. I smile a little to myself and run a fingertip along the surface of the red silk. Suddenly, something catches my eye. A movement at the edge of the mirror. Not solid, but foggy and strange like oily smoke from green wood. I blink hard and squint, thinking that perhaps a fleck of goop has floated into my field of vision to cause the

distortion, but there is no tickle under my eyelid. I pass my hand in front of my face and it is clear and sharp. The fog is on the mirror, not in my eye. I pull a corner of my sleeve into my hand and wipe at the smudge, but it spreads further. Suddenly a shape begins to form in the fog. I stand and drop the box onto the bed, but my eyes remain fixed on the mirror. The shape resembles a human and I gasp in fear, dreading to see my mother's face gaping at me from beyond the grave for daring to touch her precious music box, daring to take it for myself. But it is not her figure that I see. It is me, my own shape: my slouching shoulders, my dyed hair, my turned-out feet. I pick the box up again and bring it closer to my face so I can see the shape more clearly. In the mirror I am wearing my favorite sweater and my hair is done; I've fixed myself up, probably for my date tonight. Another figure appears. Though I can't make out the face, I can tell immediately that it's Frank, my sort-of boyfriend. The fog changes shape and we are in Frank's car with the top down, wisps of smoke-hair blowing to and fro into my smoke-face. Thinking of riding in that car, top down, radio up, Frank's warm hand in mine, the corners of my mouth turn up into a wistful smile. Frank and I blow along, moving without moving, invisible wind in our features, solid and immaterial at once. Laughing, smiling at one another, but then our features contort into horrifying pantomimes of screams. The car flips, once, again, end over end and then erupts into greasy fog-flames. Suddenly, the fog dissolves into an ugly, black smear. The mirror clears and the tinkling notes slow to a stop.

An accident. I think I just saw my own death. A sick, lurching feeling seizes me and I convulse with a violent shiver. Someone just walked over my grave. I lower myself, shaking, onto the corner of the bed and drop my head into my lap.

I don't know how long I've been sitting like this, but I know that people have come and gone. I heard Frank come to the door when it was time for our date. But I couldn't go. How could I leave with him, get into that car, after what I had seen? I couldn't even think of a way to

explain without sounding crazy, so I just stayed quiet and waited for him to leave. I think he called later, too; I heard the answering machine beep followed by an angry male voice, but I couldn't make out the words through the bedroom door and I didn't trust my knees to carry me – they had turned to putty and refused to move.

The vision in the mirror was a warning, I'm sure of it. I don't know how it works or how it knows what it does, but I can feel in my bones that it's right. That music box is a gift. The problem is that I can't tell when exactly the episode in the vision was taking place. The only way to be really safe is to make sure I am never in that circumstance again. I can never be in that car with Frank. And since I can't begin to tell him why, I can't see him again. He won't understand, but I have to do this for him as well as for me. We both would have been killed in that accident.

I sleep well that night, better than I have since I got out of the group-home. Crisp morning sunshine filters through the mini-blinds. The bitter taste of yesterday's vision has passed, and my heart swells with gratitude. How tremendous to be alive! I have the music box to thank for that. I set it gingerly on my dresser. A treasure like this should be handled with care.

At work, my mind returns again and again to the box. I wonder what else I will be able to see in its miracle glass. My mind dances with the possibilities: stock tips or Kentucky Derby winners, the face of my future husband, the destinies of my future children and grandchildren. Best of all, I think, I will be able to see the consequences of my decisions before I have to make them. My life can be like one of those Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, where I can read ahead to see what will happen, and then flip back if I don't like the ending. A flash of hot resentment passes over me for just a moment when I realize what my life could have been if my mother had only had the good sense to use the mirror well. But I can't help her stupidity, and I

suppose I should be grateful that she preserved the music box even in her madness, when so much else was destroyed.

After work, I wind the box again. I see the familiar fog begin to form, and I see myself in the fog. I sing along quietly with the simplified notes of the melody: "Oh, my love, my darling, I've hungered for your touch a long lonely time. And time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much. Are you still mine?" I scan the mirror for signs of lottery numbers. But it's just me, standing in a long, narrow room that looks something like my kitchen. Not much happening in the mirror tonight. But then an unexpected blur of motion at the edge of the picture draws my eye. The smoke figure has grabbed her wispy hand and is clutching it to her chest, a dark stain spreading from the hand down her shirt. I close the box before the image disappears.

Okay, this is ridiculous. Is the box fabricating disasters? I will not be cowed into a state of fear without some sort of proof.

Proof.

I'll make dinner, and see what happens. If nothing happens, then I'll know that the images are rubbish just like the woman to whom the box originally belonged. I stride to the kitchen and flick the light switch; the fluorescent bulb sputters to life, looking yellower than usual. From the refrigerator I pull the chicken that I had set aside for dinner tonight. Fried chicken is one of my favorite foods, though peanut butter and jelly suddenly sounds a lot safer. Doesn't matter. This is like science; I need proof. At the sink, I run cold water over the inside and outside of the bird. I cut carefully along both sides of the backbone with kitchen shears, bracing myself against the sounds of the bones as they snap, and then toss the backbone into the trash. I turn the chicken over and place it on the cutting board. My hands shake a little as I reach into the drawer to take out the boning knife. I take a deep breath to steady myself, draw out the knife, and set it gently on the countertop. Careful, careful, like a surgeon. I will my hand to the

handle, pick up the knife, and begin to slowly, carefully, remove the wings and the legs. I start to separate the legs into thighs and drumsticks, but the procedure requires a delicate sawing motion that I find unsettling under the circumstances, so I leave them whole. Finally, I begin dividing the breasts, an easier cut than the ones I've managed so far.

Then, yes, the knife slips in my wet hand.

I pull my thumb away quickly and, had I not been paying such fierce attention, I would have lost the whole thumb; as it is, the angry-looking cut beads with fat, red droplets. I leave the chicken on the counter; clean, disinfect and dress the cut; and return to my music box.

Time passes and I see more, I know more. A trip on the stair. My body buckling unnaturally, falling to a twisted heap on the pavement below. A pool of black blood collecting beneath my smoke head, and a smoke cat sniffing, then lapping at the stain. No, outside is too risky. Stairs, falling pianos, crashes, downed power lines, foaming-mouthed dogs. I see them all. They see me, too. They can't see me here.

I disconnect the phone. The wires, the screws, the weight of the thing. And the ringing, always ringing. I saw something about it in the mirror, I think. I think I tripped on the cord and broke my neck in the hallway and lay there for four days until the rats found me. I could feel my vertebrae snap and crunch and I asked God to kill me but it took a long time and I was in tremendous pain. Besides, I hate the goddamn phone. So I take it off the wall, and the ringing finally stops (usually). I seal the phone in a plastic bag, but I can still see it and it still sees me. So I put that bag into a Hefty bag and I knot the top three times. Three is a safe number. Opening the window to throw it into the alley almost kills me; I have to hold my breath or I'll inhale the carbon monoxide curling outside, and it takes five tries for me to hold my breath long enough. I have to open and slam the window, open and slam, open and slam, open and slam. Finally, though, it's gone, out to the rats and the cats and the people in their masks.

Days pass, but I'm okay in here. Most of the food isn't safe, though. If I have to chew it, it will choke me. I will gasp and sputter for breath, and my face will turn blue and my eyes will bulge and I'll shit myself; that would be the worst thing of all. I can eat small things, though. Dry oatmeal, a few pieces at a time. Powdered jello. Flour is safe. Bleached sugar. Water from the tap gives me cancer – something in it, some bacteria, anthrax, microbes. But the brine from the cans of corn in my cupboard is clean. I haven't seen brine in the mirror.

More cancer. The light from outside is giving me cancer. In the mirror there are lesions on my skin like red wine stains. And rapists are there, too, looking at me all the time. I draw the curtains but light still comes through, so I know the rapists can still see my shape, and they can see where I move and they can plan their attacks. So I hang blankets inside, but then the mirror shows me the radio waves coming through the windows passing through my brain and changing my brain cells so I use duct tape and tin foil to block the signals. I hang the tin foil over most of the windows, but then I run out on the last window and have to use glossy pictures from magazines. The mirror hasn't shown the radio waves in a while, but I still watch that last window carefully because I know they sneak in when I'm not paying attention.

Must be May by now, maybe even June. I find that I can stay up a long time, watching the mirror, making sure that I'm okay. I feel better looking in my mirror. Confusing things happen when I sleep. *They* come in when I sleep and move my things around, and then I see myself tripping over them in the mirror. So I push those things onto the landing, holding my breath, avoiding the stairs, slamming the door quickly after each one. All I need is the mirror. I look at it all the time.

The fog in the mirror is fainter than it was when I first watched it, but I'm better at seeing the images inside it now. Sometimes I can even see the images without the mirror. I'm safe now. I'm safe from hurricanes and arsonists and pancreatic cancer. I'm safe from bites and

bruises and cuts. I'm safe from flood and rape and embarrassment and nuclear war and radon and spies and psychos who tamper with aspirin. I am safe here from my many enemies. I won't even be abandoned by my mother anymore, because I will know before it happens and I can stop it from happening. I have the power of the future. I'm forewarned and forearmed.

The fog fades from the face of the mirror and, for the first time, I notice my own reflection. My sunken eyes, my cheeks hollowed by hunger, my colorless, bloodless lips stretched back over greying teeth. Dull brown strands hang limply over the peak of my head, barely covering bald patches where clumps of hair have fallen out. My God.

There. Right there. In the mirror. See her?

I know her, I've always known her, that gaunt woman I knew when I was a baby. She's in my mirror. In the mirror-mirror.

I see her.

Mother.

I look just like mother.

