

OUR MOTHER, THE GHOST

J. A. TYLER

The drive from the shore is quiet. Barely perceptible sunlight trading places with the moon, a dim bulb behind clouds and drizzle. In this township, where it is always grey.

At home, we run upstairs to our room while Our Mother settles down at her sewing machine. She flicks on the tiny lamp and takes hold of new swaths of fabric. The whir of the machine fills the living room, making another dress she'll never wear.

Our Mother is a seamstress unlike all others. She can create a dress out of nothing. She can repair any clothes we tear or split. She can make a queen's wardrobe from scraps. Watching her behind the sewing machine, hands sliding through and under, the machine vibrating, it's like watching a baby being born.

Our Mother, creator.

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In our room we turn music up beyond the point of listening. We scream the lyrics like rock stars. We pretend guitars and drums. We smash and hail about our small space as if it is an arena filled with fans. We pull our faces in all directions, trying

to erase any trace of pirate or fisherman. We attempt to hide our sadness, putting it away behind our eyes, stacked in rubies, guarded by an ocean of boys being boys.

We try, but soon enough our guitars have become cutlasses, our drums the echoing fire of single-shot pistols. We are making one another walk the plank from the upper bunk, landing hard on the floor in a sea of dirty clothes. We are turning paper into telescopes, then unrolling them to make maps with treasure X's and palms. We fight other pirates already waiting there on the beach, stab our swords through their stomachs, dagger their throats, hold loaded pistols to their heads until the ones left row off in their jolly boats, back to their bigger buccaneer ship, to sail away from what is now rightfully ours.

We take off our shirts and draw skulls and crossbones on our biceps, other treasures on our backs and chests. We ink our bodies. We flex our muscles and show one another our teeth, coloring some in as if they are lost or silver. We marker beards on our faces. We draw wounds that would heal into livid scars. We forget to hide our piracy.

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Our Mother hears the music first, then our thudding and thumping. She'd believe we were only boys if she didn't know better. But soon enough the sounds are of slashing and stabbing, and pirate curses we don't even realize we are making. Our Mother, sewing the saddest garment: a blood red dress perfectly fit for a widow's frame.

She waits until the music has died out, until pirate sounds are all she hears, until quiet returns.

Our Mother takes the stairs slowly, afraid as always for what she'll see behind the door. With Our Father, Our Mother always seems to know what is coming, what is next. She brings new washcloths when the old ones have lost their cold. She refills his glass for exactly what he'll drink, fighting to keep

down even water when his land-sickness sets in. And she knows when he has taken all he can, when it is time to re-dress his body in pirate clothes, in the luminous and rugged fancy of a buccaneer setting sail. She knows where he wants his cutlass to ride, the pistol's sash, a dagger tucked away. And Our Mother, though she hopes as always, she knows a pirate is all Our Father will ever be.

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Our Father once tried to be a fisherman. We were on the way, boiling big in Our Mother's womb, and she was desperate to have a father for her sons. Our Father said he only wanted money to bring his sons up right, but Our Mother knew there was more than that in his heart.

They were on the shore, sitting in folding chairs they'd brought to where the gravel meets the water. They were holding hands, looking out to sea. Gulls were sounding above them.

Our Mother, if you ask her about that day, the day only a few weeks before we arrived, she'll explain that Our Father was trying his best, was doing as best he could, but behind all of his words about fish and nets and lines and bait, she would swear she saw rubies glittering. She could hear the clang of swords, the definite sound of pistol shots, the thudding explosion of cannon fire.

Our Mother, if you talk to her about what Our Father did, how he tried to be a fisherman instead of a pirate, she'll say this:

Our Father was a man of the cutlass. Our Father had piracy in his blood. Our Father's Father was a pirate. Our Father's Father's Father was a pirate. There was no way to escape such lineage. But Our Father, because he was a man trying to please Our Mother, trying to make a seamstress smile, he set sail, only weeks before his sons were born, to fish

out there in the sea, to become what he never dreamed he could.

Our Mother, if you ask her about it, this is all she knows: Our Father left the shore in a small boat, lined with nets and poles and hooks, but he returned with a leathern sack full of rubies, and the glimmer of other shores in his eyes, and not a single fish.

Our Father, if you ask him about it, those days when he left to fish but came back with treasure, he'll tell you an entirely different story.

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Upstairs, when she opens the door to our bedroom, she sees us there, pretending to be pirates. She sees our cardboard swords and construction paper maps, the tattoos we've drawn on each other. She sees the beards we've colored on our faces and, before our smiles fade at her face in the doorway, at being caught again doing what we shouldn't, she sees the blackened teeth we've made in each other's mouths.

The water she draws for our bath is scalding, but the greater burn comes from the fact that she doesn't say a word. We climb over the lip of the tub, having to strain to see it as only a bath and not a burning island's hot springs, but Our Mother's scrubbing helps. Washcloth in hand she shows us how strong she is, grinding at the black on our skin, our faces, the enamel of our teeth where the marker is hardest to remove.

Our skin is raw when she is done, red and abused, but none of our pirate ink remains. She still doesn't say a word though, only towels us off, one then the other, and hugs each together to her wet dress, which clings to her body as each of us boys do, admitting the sadness she knew was there all along. If she is crying for Our Father out to sea again, or us boys longing to be the very thing that is killing her, we

wouldn't be able to tell for all the steam and bath water running down her face and body. And if we were crying too, for Our Father gone or the great disappointment of Our Mother, that truth too would be hidden by this indoor rain.

We hug and cradle in Our Mother's arms as if there was a way to get back to her womb, to the warm wrap of what felt to us like the sea, but was safer than any piracy we have coming.

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In bed, Our Mother sings the song we love. It is a song she's been singing since we were born. It is about the sea and the bats at dusk, about the moon that clings to the backside of this township's clouds as the rain floats down. It is a song that puts us to dreaming.

Our Mother, she knows it is foolish to sing a song about the sea to boys who are longing for piracy, who are so sad for the constant and regurgitated loss of their father, but she has no choice. This is a song Our Mother's Mother sang to her, and Our Mother's Mother's Mother to her. Her lineage is as trapped as Our Father's.

She sings us this song then tucks the blankets around us, each one in a bunk stacked beneath another. She turns off the light and we hear evening rain on the roof. She leaves the door open a crack, enough space to let the hall light rain in on us too.

And Our Mother returns then to making her dress, the tiny light of her sewing machine burning long into the night, and us, above her, dreaming of becoming pirates, of finally setting sail from this township where it is always gray, where Our Father can't stand, where Our Mother is slowly becoming a ghost.