

## She Danced with the Rothschilds

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*Ellen Hoffs*

**T**hanksgiving, three years ago, was the last time I mixed Mother with my friends. I was taking the candied sweet potatoes out of the oven when I saw her walking toward my husband, Alan, slowly and purposefully like my dog when he stalks a cat. By the time I closed the oven door, she was hovering over him and the twenty-eight pound turkey he was carving.

Her low gravely voice rose as she told him how Kira Matthews said "mind your own business," after she "suggested" that Kira lose weight. Kira was my best friend and a lifelong fat person.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?" she asked in a cutesy innocent way.

"Yes, I think you did," Alan said, without looking up.

"Why did I say that?" she asked coyly.

"I think it's because you wanted to hurt Kira's feelings," he answered.

"Yes I did!" she exclaimed with maniacal triumph, stomping her foot and laughing hysterically.

Now my friend Josephina was on the phone, coaxing me to come to dinner with her mother and mine. Josephina was a therapist, but empathy wasn't her strong point. In her do-gooder heart Josephina truly believed that inviting me and my injured mother to dinner meant helping out a needy friend.

I cupped my hand over the phone and whispered, "Alan, what should I do?" He shrugged and stepped out the door to take the dog for a walk.

"I saw your mother at the drugstore. She was so friendly.

recognized her by her voice--Talullah Bankhead with a German accent. Actually, she was talking about you," Josephina said.

That was a coincidence. Yesterday I'd been paying my bill when the pharmacist walked up to me and asked if I'd like to hear what he called "a little mother anecdote." Sure I wanted to hear it. "Well," he said looking at me sympathetically. "She comes up with the darnedest things. We were chatting about the rain this weekend, and she said, 'My daughter never comes to visit me on Sunday. Did you know that more people commit suicide on Sunday than any other day?'"

Josephina wouldn't give up. "Come on, Alan and Jay will be out at a meeting, and my mother's looking forward to the evening."

I was trapped. Between the horrible accident and my mother's age--she'd turned eighty the week before--I couldn't live with myself if I turned her down.

So I lied. "It was so nice of you to think of us. My mother doesn't eat meat or fish. Just thought you should know."

As I parked my Volvo behind Josephina's Mercedes, I felt a queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach, like before a big cocktail party where I didn't know anyone but the hostess. I struggled to unhook mother's seatbelt, glanced up at her and thought, 'Why can't she look like other parents.'

Here she was, five feet, seven inches and a hundred and seventy big-boned pounds, decked out in scarlet polyester pants and matching sweatshirt. Her crimson beret was held in place by a fierce-looking tiger stickpin that stood straight up. She'd patchworked her face with rouge and painted on a stripe of lipstick. The contrast between the white gauze bandage and her heavy red makeup made her face look even more like a sad clown than before the accident.

I walked to her side of the car and helped her pull herself out. The necessary intimacy must have made her feel close to me, because after I helped her put on her coat, she hooked her arm into mine. I tugged my arm out of her grip, hating myself for rejecting her. She seemed not to notice. With the forward motion of a tank she strode across the street to Josephina's two-story Spanish style house.

"Aren't the petunias pretty?" I said breathlessly, trying to keep up with her.

"Your flowers are nicer," she snapped, as if I needed defending.

I rang the bell. Josephina opened the oversized oak door and said, "Welcome." My mother observed, "The house is beautiful. It looks very big. It must have cost a lot. You must make a lot of money." She pulled up her lips at the corners the way people do when they smile, but the rest of her face stayed the same.

"Thank you," Josephina said. "We bought it a long time ago. Houses weren't so expensive then."

Josephina wore a thin polyester paisley dress with an old lace collar, a modern version of the frilly feminine Lanz clothes that were popular years ago. An antique cameo dangled gracefully from her neck. It seemed as if Josephina never felt cold.

I wore black from my wool jacket to my suede flats. A Mexican-silver caterpillar pinned to my lapel broke the darkness, a bit. The Addams Family visiting the Partridge Family.

"I'll take your coat, but keep that beret on," Josephina said to my mother. "It's really quite perky."

I relaxed a bit. She liked that stupid show-off beret. She probably thought it gave our little party some pizzazz.

Josephina's mother walked in looking like a roly-poly fairy godmother, about five feet tall in a pink silk pantsuit. She'd twisted her white hair into a bun on top of her head. Holding out her hand and smiling intimately, she said to my mother, "I've heard so much about you, dear, I'm Hilda, Josephina's mother."

That competitive and combative "I'm as good as you are" look spread across my mother's face. She puffed up her chest and shook her forefinger. "Don't dear me," she said, "I'm Mrs. Lieber."

"You are outspoken," Hilda answered, in that patronizing way some therapists have. She was 85-years-old and, I guess, she'd heard worse during her years as a therapist.

"But, of course, saying what you think is good for your health, d. . . ." Hilda stopped herself in time. "Why don't we sit in the living room while my beautiful daughter finishes with dinner."

Josephina waited while Hilda led us down white-carpeted steps into the sunken living room. "Very grand," my mother said waving her hand. We sat on two white overstuffed sofas facing each other, mother and I on one, Hilda on the other.

"Before I go back to the kitchen," Josephina asked, "Is everyone comfortable?"

"I'm chilly," I said nicely. "Could you put on some heat?"

At past parties Josephina's husband had refused to turn on the heat even after I took off my shoes and openly slipped on the pair of thick white tennis socks I always carried in my purse. But tonight Jay was out, and Josephina walked to the thermostat with an unquesting graciousness that Miss Manners would have appreciated.

Hilda motioned to the driftwood coffee table between us, dotted with small blue china plates that held hors d'oeuvres. "Help yourself," she said. "My daughter bought something for everyone. Guacamole. Vegetables. Cheese. Even some caviar."

"I hate fish," my mother grunted.

I knew she would make trouble. I knew it. I wished I was closer so I could jab her in the ribs.

"There's lots to choose from, Mother, not only fish." I stared at her wide-eyed, while Hilda reached for a carrot.

She got the hint. "Yes, very nice."

No one said a word about the bandage covering the left side of her wrinkled forehead, eyebrow and eye. Of course, I'd already filled Josephina in on the details.

It's ironic how love can reap so much damage. Our dog Tulip is as important to Alan and me as we are to each other. I call him Tulip, not Sam or Robert, because his mouth feels soft when I feed him. I feel a mysterious joy rubbing my face in his hairy smelly belly. It's the closest thing I've had to a religious experience. Union. Oneness. I feel orgasmic. I want to consume wooly Tulip, chew him up and swallow him, like my mother wants to consume me. But I would never take advantage of a helpless animal.

I bring Tulip almost everywhere. So the morning of the accident my mother wasn't surprised when I called and said I'd come over with him. She's afraid of dogs, but she's gotten used to Tulip.

I knocked. As I waited for her to undo her four locks, she sang, "It Had to be You." She opened the door with a "Tralah," and Tulip and I bounded into her world. The air was heavy with the scent of "4711," the cologne she'd used since she was a girl in Germany. Pictures and sayings covered the walls, and stuffed animals rested on every flat surface.

Hepzibah the elephant stood on the TV set next to Lewis the tiger. On her bed, two enormous Great Danes, named Batman and

Howdy Doody, flanked Samantha the lion, Gregory the toucan, a giraffe she called Bernard, and Cocoa, a brown bear with a blue string around its neck.

She held up Cocoa moving him from side to side to amuse Tulip. "I bought this little friend at the thrift shop for a dime. He sleeps in the bathrub because it's colder there. This is my new scarecrow, Oscar," she said, holding him up by his denim coveralls. "He likes soft food, cream of wheat and mashed banana. I haven't figured out what to feed Carlos, my new dinosaur."

"He might be a vegetarian," I said.

"If Albert was around, I could ask him," she answered, pointing to her Albert Einstein calendar.

Pictures of Einstein, John F. Kennedy, and Adlai Stevenson lined the walls almost to the ceiling. She'd cut most of them from newspapers and magazines. Some she framed. Quotations hung next to the pictures.

She'd copied an Einstein quote in ink on a pebbly sheet of pasteboard. She wrote, "We are all on this earth with the same mission in life. The general welfare of mankind is the trust of white man and black, rich or poor, Christian or Jew, Mohammedan and Hindu."

My mother carried out Einstein's ideas in her own way. At every meal in the dining room downstairs, she filched bananas, apples, nuts, anything she could stuff into her yellow and green plastic bag and sneak to her room. The next day, like Robin Hood, she handed out the bounty to her favorite people: the busboys, dishwashers and maids, who worked at the Royal Garden. If they didn't say thank you, she scolded them.

"Look," she announced proudly, picking up a rag doll, with brown yarn for hair and embroidered brown eyes. "I've named it Erica. Now I can have you here everyday."

I would have laughed if she'd said she was sticking pins in it, like a voodoo doll, but using that rag doll to replace me made me feel really guilty.

"It's cute," is all I said. "Let's get out of here and go for a walk to the park."

We took the elevator down to the lobby, walking quickly past the staring residents, toward the patio and the wrought iron gate that opened onto Santa Monica Blvd. My mother's new boyfriend, Sam, stood watching. Sam's Alzheimer's Disease didn't seem to affect how my mother felt about him.

"Sam called me a Shabbatnik today. I asked a lady who speaks Yiddish what that means. She said, 'Holy Man.' Sam thinks I'm a holy man." Her eyes filled with tears. "I told him I'm not a man, but that doesn't make any difference. He thinks of me as a Tibetan monk or a rabbi."

Did Sam really say that? No one in the hotel, except my mother, had ever heard Sam utter one word. Still, how could she make up something as peculiar as "holy man"?

I couldn't see my mother as holy. But she and Sam were transformed when they sat close holding hands on the red and blue flowered couch in the hotel lobby. The old people rushed over to talk and touch them. My mother didn't play cards or talk politely. Yet the power of love had given her a place of honor in the hotel's society.

At times like today, I appreciated my mother. I wasn't even annoyed by her green beret and matching sweatshirt with the word, "SURFCAT," in five-inch-high iridescent green capital letters. I followed her mood, like a dog follows his master.

"Sam told me he loves me. Your father never said that to me in all the years we were married," she said, bringing up one of the subjects that could change her from an amusing eccentric to a mean old lady.

Hoping it might make her feel better, I answered, "Daddy never told me he loved me, but I knew he did."

My father had died on their 45th anniversary. He was twelve years older and four inches shorter than my mother. He thought she was beautiful, and she thought he was smart. That's about all they liked about each other. He liked opera. She adored jazz. She loved to dance. He liked to read. And scream. Since she buried him, 15 years ago, she'd never visited his grave.

"This morning Sam's nurse told me that he's going to a convalescent home. He keeps running away. The police brought him home last night. Do you think he'll have to leave?"

My mother had told me about his escapes, but I hadn't thought much about it.

She shrieked, "Do you think they'll make him leave, baby buggy?"

She was starting. She knew I hated that name.

"Don't call me that, mother. I'm not a baby anymore."

"Don't get mad. I call you that because I liked you better when you were little."

Same would leave and nothing would replace him. No one had ever made her so happy.

"His nurse says we should get married," she said, getting more agitated as she spoke.

People at the park turned and stared. "The nurse was kidding," I said, lamely trying to quiet her. "Take Tulip's leash. I have to go to the bathroom."

"OK," she said.

It was as simple as that. I didn't want to take Tulip with me into the filthy park bathroom, and my mother said, "OK." She'd never walked a dog, so I was truly surprised.

"Mother, you'll really take the dog? Are you sure?"

She nodded and shouted, "Yes. Go."

I went into the toilet and when I came out, I saw her and Tulip strolling together, almost a block away. She didn't know I'd come out, so I shouted, "Mother, I'm here."

Tulip saw me before she did and darted toward me while my mother pulled helplessly at the leash. I ran to help her, but seeing me run made Tulip speed up, so I stood still and waited for the inevitable. I should have screamed, "Let go." But I didn't. I didn't want Tulip to run away. Tulip stopped when my mother fell and smashed her face against a fire hydrant. If I'd let Tulip run away, I'd have lost a dog. Instead my mother lost her eye.

"Josephina, pass the chicken," Hilda said.

The table looked cheerful. Orange napkins and those colorful Italian plates with pictures of animals and flowers. Pale tulips slouched fashionably in the center of the table. Tulips. I didn't say a word.

My mother sat in the place of honor, in an armchair at the end of the table. Josephina sat me next to her. I felt a familiar shiver of embarrassment as I watched her pick up the napkin next to her fork, unfold it and tie it around her neck. I'd been ashamed of my mother and guilty about the shame, since I can remember.

When I was in grammar school, in the fourth grade, she volunteered to be assistant Brownie leader. She sat in the front of the classroom where we held our troop meetings, with her legs spread apart. I avoided looking up her skirt. She cut her legs shaving and repaired herself with oversize white bandages that stood out like cactus on the sand. My bag lunches were like her, rumpled and different, defiantly so.

She may have sensed my discomfort or disapproval, because every night before I went to bed she read the fairy tale, "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf." The story was about little Inger who was on her way to visit her parents with a fresh loaf of bread her employer had asked her to bring them. The road was muddy, and Inger was proud of her new shoes. So rather than step in the mud and ruin them, she put the bread on the ground and used it as a stepping stone. For her transgression, she sunk into the underworld and stayed there covered with slime and bugs and snakes. I hated my brown oxfords and wondered if I would end up like Inger if someone gave me a pair of shiny black-patent Mary Janes.

My mother was animated. "Sometimes I leave the dining room right after I eat, because I laugh so much they get mad at me. The experts," she said, howling with so much gusto that Hilda, Josephina and I couldn't help but join in. "We have experts there on everything. Experts on food. Einsteins on psychiatry. Doctors of outer space. I'm a professor emeritus. Professor of Common Sense or Dr. Wisenheimer. Take your pick."

Abruptly, my mother stopped laughing.

"I eat alone, because inmates eat with their hands, like pigs." Inmates was her name for the residents of the Royal Garden. "They stuff the food into their mouth. They put their fingers in the serving bowls. There are so many wipers."

"Wipers? What's a wiper?" Hilda asked.

"I think she meant viper," I explained.

Tiny pieces of roast chicken cascaded from my mother's mouth as she turned to me and said matter-of-factly, "Do you think Josephina had a face lift? Dr. Wisenheimer's an expert on face lifts."

"Mother, what difference does it make?" I said, pinching her arm.

She gave me a dirty look and turned to Josephina, "I was just asking my daughter if you'd had a face lift?"

"Yes, I did, about six months ago."

Eyebrows raised, Hilda asked, "Why do you want to know?"

"My mother answered, "Why do you Americans try so hard to hide your age? My face is covered with wrinkles. I don't dye my hair. Who am I trying to impress? My daughter or Sam?"



I exclaimed, "Americans aren't the only ones having face lifts. Besides, everyone should be able to do what they want."

"If I did what I wanted, I'd kill the president," my mother said with satisfaction, getting in the last word.

"Undaunted, Josephina lifted her newly tight little face and said, "You seem very political."

"Yes. I'm a life-long Democrat. And you?"

"I'm a Democrat, but Perot didn't seem so bad."

"No?" my mother said, her face turning pink. "My mother always said, you don't know a man until you sleep with him. Have you ever slept with Mr. Perot?"

"Mother, that's ridiculous. You can't sleep with every politician. Hilda, tell my mother about your work."

With a condescending, "Ach. Work . . ." my mother waved the question aside. "I cooked for forty-five years. I volunteered. I worked. I lived my life. I danced with the Rothchilds."

The Rothchilds? I'd heard so many stories about my family's life in Germany. My uncle was mayor. My grandfather owned the first car in town. The chauffeur was the only person who would work for them after the Nazis came to power. But the Rothchilds? I'd never heard about the Rothchilds.

"Where did you dance with the Rothchilds?" I asked, puzzled.

"A tea dance. I was only sixteen. We danced to records by Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. One of the brothers had a wart, right here," she said, pointing to the tip of her pug nose.

"You must have come from a very important family," Hilda said, obviously impressed.

Suddenly my mother stood up and, holding her arm around an invisible partner, began dancing like one of those Arthur Murray dancers I used to see on TV. Her usual determined forward motion melted away as she moved with airy gracefulness and sang, "It Had To Be You," in her sweetest basso. She gilded across the white carpet, waltzed several times around the table and then two-stepped back and forth from one end of the small dining room to the other.

"That's how I danced with the Rothchilds," she gasped and sat down.

Josephina and Hilda clapped, and I joined in. My mother must have been proud of herself because she invited Hilda to lunch at the Royal Garden and offered to introduce her to Sam. She was slipping

her arm into her coat when she added, "My daughter usually invites family to Thanksgiving. But this year, maybe we'll have some friends."

"I'll see," I said.