

Stepmonster

By Hilary Davidson

Dr. Victore was obsessed with breasts. Not mine of course; I was much too old for his taste, even when we first met fifteen years ago. But I was aware of his predilection from the parade of pneumatic young blondes who paraded through his office. The rest of New York City caught on when Dr. Victore was arrested. “Dr. Frankenboobs!” the tabloids had screeched. “Mammary-obsessed plastic surgeon disfigures socialites with massive implants.”

It was a shame, because Dr. Victore had an unusual talent for smoothing out old faces. That was why I’d first gone to him, when the signs that my husband was cheating on me became too obvious to ignore. An older, already-divorced friend had whispered about the magic hands of Dr. Victore, and with my first visit I’d become a convert. I was forty-two then, and he’d started me off with a regimen of Botox and fillers that froze the clock. When my husband left me, I’d had an eye-lift, which seemed to erase a decade from my face. But after that, Dr. Victore had skipped bail and fled the country. I’d cast about for a replacement for months but other surgeons, I’d found, didn’t have his delicate, precise touch. One doctor actually created three new, vertical grooves on one side of my face with his Botox blast. I was forced to hide inside my apartment for weeks, pretending that I had acquired some tropical fever.

Miraculously, Dr. Victore resurfaced with an oblique e-mail message about his relocated office, and I’d flown to Peru for a reunion. “Elizabeth, what have they done to your exquisite face?” he’d demanded, before injecting me with some magical elixir that tingled under my skin for two hours and smoothed out the creases. I’d gone back to Lima a year later for a full face-lift before my daughter’s college graduation, and my annual holiday in Lima had become a February ritual since then.

I’d come to look forward to the time away, because no one I knew ever came to Lima in February. I always stayed in the oldest part of the city, where the grandeur of the Spanish capital of the New World showed its best face. My hotel, the Gran Hotel Bolivar, was famous for its old-fashioned charm and the fact that Hemingway had stayed there. It wasn’t much in demand anymore; Lima had grown so much, and any socialite I knew would eschew downtown Lima for the opulent Miraflores neighborhood, which sat by the waters of the Pacific. In retrospect, of course, it was foolish of me to think that no one I knew would ever hunt me down in Lima. But I should have been suspicious when she turned up in Dr. Victore’s office.

I’d flown to Lima for my annual tune-up, and Cecelia, Dr. Victore’s devoted receptionist, greeted me as usual. “Mrs. Barclay, so good to see you again,” she said, squashing me against her mountainous implants. “Notice anything different?”

“Did you have another augmentation?” I asked her.

“Yes!” she squealed. “What do you think?”

It felt rude to examine them, but given her leopard-patterned spandex top, it was impossible not to. Each breast was a globe larger than her own head. “My goodness. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

Then the door to Dr. Victore’s office opened, and I noticed a slender blonde in a sleek black Prada suit step out. She was wearing big black glasses, opaque like the ones

elderly blind people wear, and affixing a broad-brimmed black hat to her head. She could have been a high-fashion wicked witch, but I recognized the pert nose, the rosebud mouth, and – more than anything else – the Edwardian diamond ring on her left hand.

My first impulse was to grab her throat. I might have been fifty-seven years old, but two decades of yoga and Pilates and a series of handsome personal trainers had gotten me into better shape than I'd been at twenty-seven. Yet I was rooted to the spot. She hobbled by me, slowly and painfully with her head down, and she didn't see me right in front of her. The office door clicked shut behind her.

"Was that Janine Barclay?" I whispered.

"No, her name is Mrs. Smith. You know her?" asked Cecelia.

I marched into Dr. Victore's office with as much dignity as I could muster.

"Elizabeth! So good to see you," he said, hopping out of his chair and coming over to air-kiss me. He was all of five-foot-five, which brought him up to my chin.

"Do you know who was just in your office?" I asked him.

He smirked and shrugged. "She is calling herself Mrs. Smith. How original."

"That is the..." I searched for a word that captured the depth of my loathing, without veering into profanity. "...Creature who destroyed my marriage."

"Her? No! Really?"

"That is Mrs. Jasper Barclay the Second."

"You're much more beautiful," he flattered.

"Oh, stop it. She modeled for the same agency I used to work for," I said. "Of course, I was out of the business for a decade by the time she started. How old is she now?"

"Thirty-eight, she claimed, but she is forty-four or forty-five. One should never lie to one's surgeon."

"I was forty-five when Jasper left me," I mused. "She must be getting frightened."

"You know normally I am the spirit of discretion," Dr. Victore said. "But in this case... well, you are my most loyal client, Elizabeth. Your rival is having a top-to-bottom makeover. You know, like those crazy women on television. Breast-lift, tummy tuck, liposuction..."

"Facelift?"

"She wants a really powerful chemical peel. She even asked if I could slim down her ankles."

"No!" I gasped. "Can you even do that?"

"You wouldn't believe the things we can do here, since I no longer have to follow the rules of the American Medical Association." Dr. Victore's mustache twitched.

It was on the tip of my tongue to demand that he turn the second Mrs. Barclay away. But knowing the agony she was setting herself up for, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to interrupt the process. "What are the odds of success?"

"I told her that she would put her health in great jeopardy by doing so many procedures at one time. She thought they could all be done in a week! Can you imagine?" Dr. Victore shook his head. The shortest possible schedule I could give her for all of the work she wants was three weeks. Do you know what she said? 'That's too long!'"

“I wonder if Jasper is throwing her over for a younger model.” My former husband was a real-estate titan with the morals of a ferret. He was obese, overbearing, and obnoxious. Our divorce, humiliating as it was, was a relief. To never again have to sit across a dinner table from Jasper — and watch masticated food spew from his mouth as he spoke — was a blessing. Still, we’d had two wonderful children together, and Jasper’s limitless wealth and over-the-top largesse had given us a social prestige together that I could never hope to achieve alone.

“She said it was a present for her husband. For their anniversary.”

How could I have forgotten? They had tied the knot on Valentine’s Day, precisely a week after Jasper’s divorce from me had come through. For a moment I literally saw red. Dr. Victore’s elaborate wooden furniture and pale green walls and even his impish face seemed to swell into one deep crimson sea. When I came to, I was lying on a couch, with my legs elevated and my sensible Chanel pumps cast aside somewhere. Dr. Victore was holding my wrist and patting my neck. Cecelia was behind him, fanning me. “Elizabeth, are you alright? You seemed to faint away for a moment.”

“Did I?” I asked weakly.

As Dr. Victore chattered on about my blood pressure and the inadvisability of Botox if I was already suffering from headaches, all I could think about was how I could ensure that Janine Barclay wouldn’t have a face to show to the world by the time she left Lima.

“All I really want to know, Viola, is if you gave that bitch the name of my doctor.” When I was speaking with my daughter, the white gloves came off. She was my confidante, and I told her things that I’d never have breathed to anyone else, not to her brother nor my friends, nor even to my therapist.

“Of course not, Mummy! You know I wouldn’t give Stepmonster air to breathe if I could help it.” Viola had spent a college year studying in Edinburgh, and had adopted a posh London accent that she had since refused to retire.

“So you have no idea how she found out about Dr. Victore?” I was lying on my bed at the hotel with the curtains pulled and a bag of ice wrapped in a towel against my head.

“No idea. I’m sure Zach doesn’t know the name. She couldn’t have gotten it from him,” Viola insisted. My son, Zach, had dropped out of college to start an Internet company a few years ago. I understood very little about it, except that he seemed to be making money hand over fist. Like father, like son, I supposed.

“I wish I could figure it out,” I said, rubbing my temple.

“Maybe Daddy mentioned it.”

“And how exactly would Daddy know the name?” I ventured.

“Oh, he was joking about it at Christmas. Not about you, Mummy!” she exclaimed, before I could object. “He was asking me what the name was of that horrible doctor who gave women those monstrous chests.”

I sighed. “Did you happen to remind him that that was Mummy’s doctor?” I adored Viola, but even I had to admit that my daughter was shorted a few I.Q. points.

“No, Mummy, definitely not. You always tell me not to mention anything about what you’re up to, and I never do,” she said loyally.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” I relented. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re up to?”

She went on about some parties and clubs she’d been to, and the fact she was thinking about going away to ski for a week. “But I was thinking maybe I should go down there to take care of you, Mummy. You always go there alone. I think it’s very dangerous.”

“You wouldn’t want to walk around at night by yourself,” I agreed. “But it’s very old and grand and beautiful.”

“Hmm,” said Viola. “What’s the weather like?”

“Mild, but grey and rainy.”

“Oh, that’s not good. And I don’t like lima beans so I probably wouldn’t like the food, either.”

It wasn’t bad enough that the second Mrs. Jasper Barclay had poached my plastic surgeon. The next day I came back from a walk and was shocked to see her getting out of a limousine in front of my hotel. The Edwardian diamond sparkled on her left hand. What sort of fool wore jewelry like that to a poor country?

I followed her into the lobby. The Gran Hotel Bolivar was roughly on par with a Tampa Holiday Inn in terms of its rates, but dollars went further in Peru. The lobby was an imposing space with round walls and a stained-glass ceiling. Janine ignored the staff and marched over to the elevator, tapping her foot impatiently while she waited, and finally disappeared. One of my favorite bellmen, Rafael, was on duty at the reception desk. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Black,” he said, with a small bow.

“Buenos tardes,” I returned. In Peru, I was Mrs. Black to everyone but Dr. Victore and his staff. The days when I’d been a runway model and cover girl were long gone, and I doubted that any gossip columnist gave a damn where I went to repair my hide. But there were enough of them that had made sport of me when Jasper divorced me and I didn’t want to give some anonymous twit who blogged in their pajamas easy material. “Could you tell me who the blonde woman who just walked through here is? I believe I know her.”

“Oh, Mrs. Smith. She arrive last week.” Rafael shook his head furtively. “She never, never in good mood.”

“Really? Why?”

“She not like room, so we show her another. She not like that, so show another. She not like that! She yell, she scream. She make phone call, say she will not stay here. She say this is slum!”

That was just like Janine, I thought. I’d met her face-to-face a handful of times in the decade she’d been married to Jasper, and only at large events where I could avoid her. But I had heard from others how shrewlike and vicious she was. “But she ended up staying here? What room is she in?”

Rafael gave me the number. It was on the third floor, like mine, just doors away. What were the odds, I pondered, as I went up the rickety elevator. I unlocked the door of my suite and stepped inside. My room overlooked the Plaza San Martin and the maid

had left the tall glass doors to the tiny balcony open, so that a fresh breeze streamed in. The view was perfect; the Peruvian idea of a third floor was really the fourth, and with the building's towering ceilings I felt like I was even higher up. I stood outside and counted the windows to my right. The rooms were massive at the Gran Hotel Bolivar, but I located hers three doors down, to a window with another wrought-iron balcony like mine. I stared at it, willing her to appear, and she did after a minute. One bony hand reached out to shut the doors, and I saw the Edwardian diamond glimmering like a mirage.

That had been my engagement ring. It had belonged to Jasper's grandmother, and he'd had a waiter set it into a parfait cup with ice cream and berries one night when I was twenty-five and he was thirty-two. I'd been overjoyed. Twenty-five in modeling years meant that I was ready to be put out to pasture. I'd been on the covers of all the great magazines, but I had little to show for it. My manager had embezzled most of my savings and my agent was a delirious cokehead who hadn't noticed a problem. When Jasper had put the ring on my finger, I felt like I was escaping a life of penury. How could I have imagined that, twenty years later, he would sue me in court to get the ring back?

Watching it glitter on Janine's hand, I wanted to rip it off and stuff it down her throat. What I couldn't understand was why she was trying to follow so closely in my footsteps. She'd shown up in Lima, at my surgeon's office and at my hotel. It was as if she were baiting me. But what did she want? In the seven annual February trips I'd made to Peru, I'd never once encountered a familiar face. There were plenty of Americans who came to South America for cosmetic surgery – even the richest New Yorker couldn't gain access to certain unapproved treatments on U.S. soil – but those women gravitated to Buenos Aires and cities across Brazil. I knew the list, and Peru was behind even Bolivia on it.

I stood at the window, watching the light fade over the plaza. There was a statue of a man on a horse, General San Martin, I'd been told, and neat rows of colorful flowers. I had no idea why Janine was suddenly stalking me, but by placing herself in a foreign setting, I knew I would finally have my revenge on her.

I barely slept that night. In the morning, I looked like a haggard old witch. I examined my skin in the mirror. It was as good as could be expected, but Janine was more than a decade younger. She had loved to tan, and I still remembered a photograph of her, sunbathing topless, on Jasper's yacht on the French Riviera. How I loathed her.

I hadn't been able to decide what work I wanted done this year. I'd planned on a chemical peel, which would burn away the flesh of my face and allow fresher skin to grow underneath. But I'd done that before and knew it took a long time to recover. Essentially you were disfiguring yourself with acid, and it took two weeks just to look at the light of day again. Now I was afraid to weaken myself. Once I went through the peel, the only person I'd be fit to see was the bellman who delivered the room service trays. Was that what Janine was waiting for?

I decided to distract myself by playing the tourist. I'd seen Lima's greatest sights on prior visits, but I never got tired of the grand cathedral overlooking the Plaza de

Armas or the St. Francis Church with its sinister crypts filled with human bones and skulls. That was how I wanted to see Janine, I realized. A whitewashed skeleton, stripped of flesh. I wondered if there was an acid strong enough to do it quickly.

In the afternoon, I called my daughter again. “Darling, you must think hard,” I told her, aware that thinking wasn’t an activity Viola was well-acquainted with. “You must have mentioned something about Lima to Janine.”

“Mummy, I already told you, I never tell Stepmonster anything!”

“She’s staying at my hotel.”

“She is?” This obviously startled Viola. “But Mummy, I don’t even remember the name of your hotel. All I know is that it’s ancient, and Ernest Hemingway stayed there.”

My ears pricked up. Janine was crafty; the Hemingway detail would be enough to identify the Gran Hotel Bolivar. “Who have you mentioned that to?”

“Well-l-l,” said Viola, drawling out the word. “Sally was asking me if I’d ever been to Peru, and I told her no, but I knew someone who had been several times.”

“Who’s Sally?” I asked, confused.

“Stepmonster’s assistant,” Viola said. “Really, Mummy, I told you all about her.”

“You did?”

“She speaks a whole bunch of languages that they use funny alphabets for. She’s ever so smart.”

I pondered that silently. “When did Janine hire her?”

“Last spring, right after she fired that kook, you know, the one who’s supposed to be writing a book about her.”

“Why was Sally asking you about Peru?”

“She wants to go to that city, you know, the famous one.”

“Machu Picchu.”

“Yes, exactly,” Viola said excitedly.

“Did it not occur to you that Janine *sent* her assistant to ask you questions?”

“No, Mummy. Sally wouldn’t do that. Stepmonster fired her just after Christmas.”

“Why?” I was intrigued, in spite of myself.

“You know Stepmonster is terribly jealous,” said Viola. “And Sally is very beautiful.”

“Darling, Janine is up to something,” I said emphatically. “She’s come down to Lima at the same time I’m here. She’s at my hotel. She’s going to my doctor.”

“But how would she know you’d be there?” Viola asked.

I didn’t answer, because I didn’t like to speak ill of her father to her. But Jasper knew something of my routine. One February, Viola had broken her arm while skiing and I hadn’t been able to come home for a week because I was recovering from surgery. I’d admitted to Jasper that I was in Lima then.

“Mummy?” Viola interrupted my thoughts. “You shouldn’t worry. Maybe it’s karma.”

“What?”

“You know, what goes around comes around,” Viola explained, quite seriously. “Stepmonster is evil. No one likes her. She has no friends. Even daddy is avoiding her.”

She's mean to everybody. Like firing Sally for no reason. Maybe this is all going to come back to her in the end."

"Maybe," I answered, but I had doubts. Janine had always been a vicious little shrew, and I guessed that if karma bit her, she'd bite back, hard.

I waited in the late afternoon for Janine to come back to the hotel. There was a balcony atop the grand staircase that functioned like a little perch over the lobby. She was haggard when she came in, as if she'd lost a pint of blood. Maybe she had. There was a scarf wrapped around her head; giant sunglasses covered half her face. From the raw redness of her skin, I guessed that Dr. Victore had used a heavy chemical peel on the lower part of her face; the upper must have been waiting for the eye-lift surgery. From the stiff way she walked, I guessed that he'd done something to her legs, maybe vacuuming out those ankle-fat pockets she loathed. But Janine was in trousers and I couldn't see.

After she went to her room I strolled along the hallway and put my ear to her door. The hotel was never busy and there weren't any security cameras in the hallways. Outside the building there were always guards to keep unwanted visitors out, but once you were inside you had carte blanche. I heard the television flipping from station to station every few seconds. Finally it was switched off. There was the sound of a toilet flushing, and a couple of minutes later I heard Janine's voice. "Pick up the phone, you swine," she said, adding a few curses for good measure. "What the fuck is keeping you? You're supposed to be here already."

She slammed the receiver down so hard that I jumped. When I put my ear back to the door, I could almost have sworn that I heard a sob. Janine, crying? A moment later she was on the phone again, yelling at the room-service clerk for scotch neat, pronto. I fled to my room, listening for the elevator doors. A moment later, I heard Janine yelling at the bellman. "This tastes like piss!" she screamed, and there was a sound of glass breaking.

My days took on an obsessive pattern. I watched for Janine to leave in the morning; I knew, from Cecelia, when her appointments were scheduled. I waited for her to come back in the afternoon, watching her become weaker and more forlorn each day. If I hadn't had so many reasons to hate her, I'd have pitied her. Instead, I asked to move rooms so that I would be beside hers. This wasn't as productive as I'd hoped; my new room no longer had a balcony, and the nonstop bleating of honking horns from the plaza below meant that I could hear very little of her conversations through the wall. It was easier to crouch by her door, and since my room was now next door I became bolder about taking up my post outside of hers. At first, I learned very little from her conversations, except that Viola was right about Stepmonster having no friends. She left long, rambling phone messages. "You bastard," she would begin, then spouting a stream of profanities and accusations. Later she would beg for him to come join her, as promised. Who were the messages for? Jasper was a cold, callous bastard, but I found it hard to believe that after ten years of marriage she craved his company. Her messages were occasionally ominous; in one, she threatened to disfigure a certain part of his anatomy if he slept with anyone else.

I told Viola what I heard, and she promised to find out what was going on. Finally, she called me one night, sounding like she had a bad cold. “Mummy?” she said. “Please don’t get mad at me.”

“Why would I get mad at you?” I asked, bewildered.

“Because I found out...what Stepmonster is up to.”

“Viola?”

“It’s terrible, Mummy!” She burst into tears. Then, snuffling, she finally spilled the story. “Daddy doesn’t know anything, of course, but Sally did. That was the reason Stepmonster fired her.”

“Which was?”

Viola gulped loudly. “Stepmonster is having an affair, Mummy.”

“I suspected that.”

“Mummy, it’s with...” she gulped again. “...Zach.”

My legs were suddenly too weak to hold me up. “What did you say?”

“With Zach, Mummy,” Viola whispered.

My hands shook and my vision flushed red, just as it had in Dr. Victore’s office. Zachary was twenty-six, not a child but still vulnerable to a predatory, older woman. Cougars, I knew such women were called. I thought I would vomit. My little boy, I thought, fallen prey to Janine. She had stolen my husband, but that had only injured my pride. Taking my son broke my heart.

“Did you...talk to Zach?” I whispered.

“Yes,” Viola whispered. “First I asked him what he thought of Stepmonster and he said... He said not to call her that, that I was being mean, just like you, Mummy.” She started crying again, while I sat frozen. Zach had told me many times to lay off Janine. *She’s not so bad*, he’d said when he was fifteen. It didn’t faze him that she was a homewrecker. Viola had always hated Janine and had delighted in doing anything that hurt her. My son was the opposite.

“What else did he say?” I croaked.

“I confronted him and he told me I was crazy. Then he hung up on me!”

I took some deep breaths. “Listen, darling, I’m going to call Zach now. I need to talk to him.” But when I hung up it took me an hour to get the nerve to call my son’s number. It rang through to voicemail. I left a desperate message for him, thinking of all the messages Janine had left. Had Zach changed his mind about her? I waited, then called again and again. Finally I dialed a number that I never called. “Jasper, it’s Elizabeth. Call me as soon as you get this. It’s urgent.” I left my number and waited.

He called back a few minutes later. “Elizabeth,” he snarled, by way of greeting. “What do you want?”

“Have you seen Zachary lately?”

“Not since Christmas,” he answered. “Why?”

“Apparently that witch you married has been attempting to seduce him.”

There was a long silence on the other end. Jasper had never been a man of many words. “That little bastard,” he finally said. “I’ll disinherit him.”

“What?” I screamed, losing all composure. “It’s the fault of that homewrecker you married. Don’t you *dare* do anything to Zach.”

“Don’t you tell me what to do, Elizabeth!” he yelled back, and hung up on me.

I sat on the bed, shaking with rage. But my anger melted away as I made a decision. I knocked on Janine's door and, after an eternity, it creaked open. There was Janine, her red, cracked face oozing pus onto loose, mummy-like bandages. Suddenly, her top-to-bottom transformation made sense. If you took a younger lover, you needed to turn the clock back, didn't you?

"Elizabeth?" she blinked. Her eyes were jaundiced from overdosing on Vicodin. How she had to suffer to be beautiful, I thought. She tried to slam the door in my face but I was already inside.

"Get out before I call security, you bitch." She hobbled across the room to the little telephone table next to the balcony. "What the fuck are you doing here, anyway?" she hissed as she picked up the receiver.

"Something I should have done a long time ago," I answered, pulling back the curtain covering the balcony doors, and using it to turn the handle to open them wide.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Janine said just as I hit her chest and pushed her against the balcony. She didn't seem to understand what was happening until a moment too late, and then her jaw dropped and the bandage went taut. Before she could say another word, I shoved her over the railing. As she went down the phone cord slipped out of the wall, trailing after her like a thin black tail.

I slipped out of her room, careful not to touch the handle of her door as I shut it. I took a pill to relax my nerves and called an old friend. The police didn't come to my door for thirty minutes.

Janine Barclay's death was ruled a suicide. None of the hotel guests heard our struggle, and no one on the Plaza San Martin saw her until she was already on the ground. Hotel staff told the police how disturbed and unhappy she was. Apparently this merged with whatever report they got from New York, and her death was quickly forgotten.

I couldn't believe how easily I got away with it, and I wished I'd done it years before. In a more positive frame of mind, I went back to Dr. Victore and had him give my face an acid bath. Two days later, while I was reading a novel and nibbling on chocolate, Viola called me. "Mummy, you're not going to believe this," she said. "Daddy's getting married this weekend."

"He's what?"

"Getting married," Viola repeated. "Isn't that just the most astonishing thing you've ever heard?"

"He certainly arranged that quickly, didn't he?"

"Yes," Viola agreed. "But he said he wasn't happy with Stepmonster for a long time. I mean, obviously. Ugh. Do you think it's all right for me to be maid of honor? Sally said she wouldn't have one if I wouldn't do it. She's very sweet, you know."

I sat there, stunned and numb. "Sally?" I said, my mouth dry.

"Oh, yes, he's marrying Sally," Viola chirped happily. "It's funny, isn't it, Mummy? How sometimes things just work out perfectly on their own."

Hilary Davidson is a New York-based journalist originally from Toronto. This is her third story in Thuglit. Her first, "Anniversary," is included in the anthology A Prisoner of Memory and 24 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories. Her work can also be read in Crimespree, Spinetingler, and The Rose & Thorn. Visit her online at www.hilarydavidson.com.