

My Mother Said I Never Should

Charlotte Keatley

Act 1, scene 6. A council flat in Mosside, Manchester, early December 1971.

Jackie (19) is doing a degree course at art school in Manchester. She became pregnant and had a baby, Rosie. The father of the baby is married with children. He and Jackie agreed to lead separate lives. Margaret (40) is Jackie's mother. When Rosie is three months old Jackie finds it all just too much and phones her mother in despair and begs her to take Rosie away. Margaret agrees on the condition that she is allowed to raise Rosie as if she were her own daughter. In her desperation Jackie agrees to this condition. As the scene opens, Jackie is packing baby clothes into a holdall.

RADIO (Manchester Df). . . . Today's highest temperature is expected to be a cold 3°, so wrap up warm. Most roads in the city have been cleared now, but there's still ice and snow on the Pennines, and the forecast is more snow tonight. Police are asking motorists leaving Manchester on Northbound routes to drive slowly because of black ice. Meanwhile, here's something to remind you of summer days . . . (*Honky Tonk Woman?*)

JACKIE (packing hurriedly). I wanted it to look nice and now it won't all go in!
(**ROSIE yells.**)
JACKIE (hits transistor, which goes off). Ssh, Rosie, please -
(**ROSIE yells.**)
JACKIE. Shut up!
(**ROSIE stops crying abruptly.**)

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JACKIE (gently). Ssh, ssh, there now . . . Where do you get the energy from, yelling all night? (*Bends over Moses basket, sings haphazard tune.*) My little rabbit, in your little basket . . .

(**ROSIE coos.**)

JACKIE. Sleep, beautiful . . . ssh . . .

(**ROSIE makes a little cry as JACKIE moves away to pack again.**)

JACKIE (bends over ROSIE again). Please don't be crying when Mummy and Daddy arrive! - Where's your red sock? (*Picks it up and dangles it over ROSIE, who quieters during.*) Look, it fell out! Give me a smile - yes! There. I even washed your red sock. Washed everything, don't want Mummy to think - (*Holding back tears.*) I've got to clear up, Rosie. - All these ashtrays, Sandra and Hugh last night, they never think about you, do they? (*Picks up ashtray.*)

MARGARET (from off). Hello?

JACKIE. Oh shit, the mess - Come in!

MARGARET (entering). Hello Jackie.

JACKIE (immediately casual). Hi Mummy.

MARGARET. It's not locked!

JACKIE. I knew it would be you.

MARGARET. You've been smoking.

JACKIE. Journey from London OK?

MARGARET. Not how I remembered, Mosside. All these tower blocks . . .

JACKIE. Is Daddy - he's not -

MARGARET. Waiting in the car.

JACKIE. He didn't mind? - I'm sorry, I couldn't face -

MARGARET. He understands.

(*Pause.*)

JACKIE. This is Rosie, Mummy.

MARGARET. I - came up the stairs. (*Pause.*) Lift is out of order. (*Pause.*) Lot of stairs.

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JACKIE. . . . Please.

MARGARET (*long pause*). Three months.

JACKIE. Say hello.

MARGARET (*goes to the Moses basket. Pause*). Pretty.

JACKIE (*goes also*). You think so?

MARGARET. You had curly eyelashes like that.

JACKIE (*pleased*). Did I?

MARGARET. Hello Rosie . . . (*Kisses her.*)

JACKIE. Don't wake her!

MARGARET. Of course not!

JACKIE. I'm sorry, it's just —

MARGARET. You think I don't know?

(*ROSIE coos quietly.*)

MARGARET (*very tenderly*). Ssh, there now.

(*ROSIE murmurs.*)

JACKIE (*turns away*). I've packed her things . . . here. (*Gives MARGARET the holdall.*) And her bottles are in this carrier. There's a bit of powdered milk left —

MARGARET. Oh you really don't need —

JACKIE. Well what would I do with it?

(*Awkward pause. MARGARET looks through the clothes in the holdall.*)

MARGARET. I've been to Mothercare. Got some of those new disposable nappies, like you said. Quite different from when you were a baby. (*Sees another carrier, goes to pick it up.*) What about this bag — what a sweet — won't she want this dress with the rabbit on?

JACKIE. Leave those! — Things she's grown out of.

MARGARET. Why did you have to try! All by yourself? Didn't you believe me?

JACKIE. I wanted to see if our theories worked . . . (*Pause.*) But when I came back from hospital everyone had cleared out. You'd think I had VD, not a new baby.

MARGARET. He should be here with you, your — (*Stuck for word.*) — Rosie's father. — You in these flats . . .

JACKIE (*calm*). Mummy, I told you. He visits; and sends money. It was my decision.

MARGARET. Yes but you had no idea! I told you, I told you! Nothing, for nearly three months, nothing, since the day she was born, then a phone call, out of the blue, the potatoes boiled dry!

JACKIE. You knew I'd phone, one day. (*Slight pause.*)

MARGARET. Look at you now, a year ago you had everything, you were so excited about the art school, new friends, doing so well —

JACKIE (*angry*). I'll go back! Yes I will, finish the degree, I won't fail both things! Only think about her at night, her cheek against mine, soft and furry, like an apricot . . .

(*ROSIE makes a snuffling noise in her sleep.*)

JACKIE. . . . She'll be happy, won't she? . . .

MARGARET. After you phoned . . . after you asked us . . . Daddy went upstairs and got your old high chair down from the attic. (*Pause.*) Like sisters, he said. A new little sister . . . (*Bends down to ROSIE.*) Aren't you, precious?

JACKIE (*panics*). Mummy — she's got to know — I can't come and visit, with her not knowing. I can't!

MARGARET. Jackie, darling, we can't go over this again — you know as well as I do it would be impossible —

JACKIE. I don't believe you!

MARGARET. When she's grown up, you can tell her; when she's sixteen.

JACKIE. It'll be too late!

(*Silence.*)

Give me back the bags.

MARGARET (*genitly*). You've got such opportunities.

JACKIE. Expectations.

MARGARET. Yes!

JACKIE. Yours.

MARGARET. You've got to —

JACKIE. Why? (*Pulls away holdall.*) Why not just Rosie?
MARGARET. You've got to go further than me – and Rosie too. (*Quietly.*) Otherwise . . . what's it been worth?
JACKIE (*pause*). Here, take them. (*Gives MARGARET the bags.*) You haven't told Granny and Granddad?
MARGARET. Not yet. I'll talk to them. (*Tentative.*) – Perhaps you could stay with them, just till Christmas, while you find a new flat? . . . (*Bends to ROSIE.*) My little lamb . . . What's this?
JACKIE. She has to have a red sock to go to sleep.
MARGARET. You keep one.
JACKIE (*purs one sock in her pocket*). Love her for me . . . (*MARGARET picks up the Moses basket.*)
JACKIE. I'll help you to the car.
MARGARET. It's all right, Daddy will be there.
MARGARET (*picks up the bags. As she goes to the door.*)
JACKIE. I'll come for Christmas. And visit, lots. (*Pause.*) Whenever I can afford the fare to London.

(**MARGARET** exits.)

JACKIE (*calls after them*). Sing to her at bathtime, especially the rabbit song . . . (*Silence. Pause. She picks up the bag she told MARGARET to leave. As she pulls out the clothes, she is suddenly hysterically happy. She holds up the rabbit dress.*) – Wore this the day you first smiled, you wouldn't let go of my hair, – do you remember?! (*Holds up another.*) – And your first bonnet . . . (*Gentle.*) And the shawl . . . wrapped you up, like a parcel, the day we left hospital; all the way back in a taxi, bringing you home . . . (*Pause.*) Our secrets, Rosie. I'll take care of them. (*Pause.*) You'll never call me 'Mummy'. (*Silence. Screams.*) Rosie! Come back! – Mummy, Mummy!
(*Blackout. For a moment in the darkness, the sound of a baby crying. In a dim light we see MARGARET rocking a bundle. She comforts the baby with the following words, until the baby quietsens and coos.*)

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MARGARET. There now, there now hush! Did you have a nasty dream? My precious. Mummy's here now. Mummy's here, Rosie. There now . . . Did you have a bad dream, Jackie? It's all right. Ssh . . . ssh . . .
(*As the lights come up bright for the next scene, MARGARET turns and billows out the sheet which was forming the bundle.*)

COMMENTARY: This play confronts the potent dilemma of how to juggle the demands of a career with those of raising a child. Notice that this scene takes place in Jackie's flat; this is her territory and yet her mother has never been here before. How does this affect the way both women behave and react to one another? Margaret still treats Jackie like a child, do you think this is justified? Jackie is at a crucial point in her life where she is forced to make a radical and irrevocable choice. She opts to pursue her career – do you think she made the right choice? The two women are overwhelmed with mixed emotions and awkward tension; neither is sure that this is really the best solution, but given the options it seems the only way out. On one thing at least they are both in agreement, that Jackie should pursue her opportunities and career to the full. To Margaret, Jackie is still her daughter, her baby, and she treats her in a slightly condescending way. Notice that Margaret's very first words to Jackie are critical and nagging in tone; in everything she says there is an implicit reproach. How does this affect Jackie who so desperately wants her mother's approval? It is their relationship that dominates their conversation; it takes them both quite a time to focus on Rosie. Jackie is in a susceptible impasse: she both wants to be mothered and to be independent.

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