

*Ginger Eager*

## BY DEFAULT

“You can’t buy that house,” my mother said when she called. “There’s a spring underneath it. I dreamed last night that water was shooting out of the basement wall.”

My mother is a woman of action. When I was a child, a man snatched her purse while she shopped at K-Mart. She ran after him cussing, and when he turned down the condiment aisle, she threw a jar of pickles at his head. He slipped in the pickle juice, landing hard on his side. She yanked her purse from his hands. “All the money I’d saved for y’all’s Christmas was in there,” she said later. “You and Travis wouldn’t have had Santa if I’d let that little SOB get away.”

Now, my mother had been given a dream. In her mind, there was no question but that my husband and I would not buy the house.

“There’s no evidence of a spring, Mom.”

“You said the basement leaks.”

The home inspector had found two things: a cracked beam in the attic, and traces of an old, small leak in a corner of the basement. Neither, he felt, was of any consequence. In fact, he’d said it was one of the best home reports he’d done in our area. I’d shared this with my parents as good news. “Maybe your dream was a good sign, Mom. Water represents the subconscious, right? Maybe Grant and I will get in touch with our deepest selves in this house.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. The basement wall collapsed. That’s what I saw.”

The conversation unsettled me enough to raise the issue of my mother’s dream with my husband. I wanted him to dismiss it since this wasn’t something I could do myself. I remembered times when her dreams had been right. “She was wrong when you were pregnant,” he said.

She’d dreamed that I carried a girl. Grant felt certain I carried a boy—a friend had told us that male sperm swim faster and die sooner, so we’d made calculations. I had a recurring dream that I birthed a tiny, white, intersexed goat. In the dream, I wept over the challenges my child would face. Were goats even allowed to attend school? In my waking life, I researched sex assignment surgery and decided that if my child were born intersexed, I would not assign a

gender. The fact that I didn't just have an ultrasound and let the midwife tell me what she saw reveals something about who I am. It wasn't only that I wanted to be surprised, though this is what I said. It wasn't only that gender is a social construct I wanted to protect my child from, at least while in the womb, though I said this too. It was mostly that tragedy is my default expectation. Surely, whatever the midwife would see on an ultrasound would mean challenge and strife, whether it had to do with my child's species, genitalia, or something I'd not considered. When I birthed a healthy, human child with typical male genitalia, I was stunned.

My maternal grandmother and my maternal aunt were daily presences in my early life. My mother and aunt sought work they could do from home while managing childcare between themselves. They both took in typing; my mother made folk art; my aunt had a courier route. My grandmother, Mama T, lived half an hour from us, and she worked from home too, running my grandfather's one-man appliance repair business. I was always with one of these women and often with all three. My world was matriarchal, and as the only female child I held a special place.

Then, when I was in third grade, my mother dreamed that she and Mama T pulled up to a gas pump. Mama T got out to fill the tank. In my mother's dream, the ground opened up beneath my grandmother. Mama T didn't plummet into the bowels of the earth, but sank slowly, screaming for help. My mother grabbed her mother's hands and tried to pull her free. "Something pulled her away from me on the other side," my mother said. Mama T slipped from her grasp. My mother lay on her belly beside the gas pump, screaming into the void. "Mama T is dying," she told us. "I dreamed it."

Shortly after my mother's dream, my grandmother was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme. "I don't know how she walked into this office," the doctor said. Three-quarters of my grandmother's brain was given over to cancer. "She shouldn't even be able to talk." Yet Mama T had driven herself to the appointment. She was sixty-two.

In a matter of days she fell into a coma. Within six weeks, she was dead.

My father is a fervent believer in my mother's dreams. He is a man who has made a life out of fixing things that go wrong with houses: appliances, air conditioners, hot water heaters, floor joists, wiring, plumbing. He has so often been the guy to fix other people's screw-ups that he holds low opinions of

almost everyone when it comes to their own knowledge of houses. He held a particularly low opinion of our home inspector, a man he'd never met. "That guy doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground," my father said. "Water trouble is the worst trouble there is."

"But there aren't water issues, Daddy," I said.

"Not yet. Black mold can kill you, and most insurance companies won't even pay to treat it. Your mother saw a spring under the house."

My husband is a geologist. Though he'd already dismissed my mother's dream, I went to him again. I wanted indisputable truth: rock types, topographical maps, an explanation grounded in hydrology. "Is it possible there's a spring beneath the house?"

"It's not impossible," he said, in the same maddening tone he uses when I ask if the supervolcano under Yellowstone might blow in our lifetime. Geologic questions Grant answers from a position of geologic time, a scope in which everything is possible and nothing is likely. In geologic time, being alive for something like the explosion of Mt. St. Helens is sort of a miracle.

For the month or so that it took to close on the house, I avoided talking to my parents. It was easier to soothe their fears in texts. "How are the water issues?" they texted. "There aren't any," I texted back.

Meanwhile, I dreamed that my husband, son, and I moved into our new house, and it collapsed while we slept. My husband and I were killed. My son survived, the landscape of his life forever altered because I'd wanted something a little bigger than what we had, a little quieter. Because I was exhausted by our long house search and wanted to settle already. Because I refused to listen to his occasionally prophetic grandmother. I have never been good at determining when my fear response is justified and when it is absurd. Is the man calling me to his unmarked panel van really in need of directions? It seemed as likely to me that an underground spring would cause my new house to collapse as it did that the building inspector's assessment would prove sound.

A small woman to begin with, my mother quickly dropped to ninety pounds after my grandmother's death. She begged God to send Mama T back to her in a dream. To my knowledge, this is the only time my mother ever made a dream request of God. "I didn't get to say good-bye," she said, and this was true. The

doctors had advised against telling Mama T of her diagnosis, and then she so quickly fell into a coma. What little time my mother had was lost.

While my mother waited for God to answer her prayers, Mama T haunted my grandfather.

Pop called our house in the mornings, furious and exhausted. "I can't sleep," he screamed at my mother. "She's vacuuming the goddamn hallway all night long!" Vacuuming was something he had insisted she do each day before he got home. He expected to see lines in the carpet as proof of her day's efforts. The work she put into running his business he hadn't counted as labor.

Once Mama T was gone, Pop developed a different understanding of her role. Cell phones didn't exist yet, and when customers called to schedule a repair, they wanted to reach a person and to be given a repair date and arrival time. If they got an answering machine, they hung up and went to the next number in the phone book. Pop's business was suffering. He asked my mother and my aunt to take over for my grandmother.

My mother must have known what it would mean to work for her father. He'd raised her after all. But always we needed money. Sometimes when I woke for school, I found my mother pounding out insurance claims at her massive typewriter, still awake from the day before. Other mornings I found her painting the crafts she sold at local fairs. When we needed cash for a vacation or a birthday, for back-to-school clothes, for a medical or dental bill, she made it. And then she made breakfast.

My mother and my aunt agreed to split Pop's workweek between them.

On the mornings my mother worked for Pop, he often called before dawn to cuss her awake. She was on his dime, so he expected her to be up if he was. Even startled from sleep, she gave what she got. Usually they hung up after a little yelling, but sometimes their fights escalated until Pop threatened to drive to our house and "shoot her dead."

This was my father's cue to join the fight. He'd grab a handgun and stomp around our house, talking about who would get shot first, who should've already gotten shot. My mother would beg my father to spare Pop's life—"That's my daddy you're talking about! My daddy!"—while she slapped Eggo waffles onto plates for my brother and me, or yanked a brush through my horsey hair.

There were mornings that my father left and I did not know—and I think my mother did not know—if he left for work or if he left to hunt down Pop. I still don't fully understand to what degree Pop was a threat. I grew up with a father who had guns hidden all over the house. Once my mother started

working for her father, those weapons took on a new meaning. It wasn't only strangers we were armed against, but family. Was I supposed to use one of these guns to protect my mother if Pop appeared? Was she supposed to grab a gun and protect me?

I know now that my mother had always intervened between her parents, but while my grandmother was alive this drama didn't reach me. My grandmother had been a barrier. Once she was gone, our family's shaky foundation was evident. My role as the only girl child was much different than I'd imagined. We weren't a matriarchy. Women were there to hold back the water, to keep the wall from collapsing.

My mother has said she stuck with it for the money. The cash she retrieved after downing her mugger with a jar of pickles she'd earned running Pop's company. My brother and I never had a Christmas without Santa.

A few months after my husband, son, and I moved into our new house, my husband shouted my name from the basement. I ran downstairs. Just as my mother had dreamt, water was shooting from the wall. The amount was similar to that from a bathroom faucet set to low, but with a lot of force. Grant was trying to plug it with his hand, like the boy in the fairytale. "Get me a bucket!" he said.

I did as he asked, but I also knew what caused the problem. I knew because I'd spoken to the home inspector about that tiny, resolved basement leak. I knew because, as a child, I'd sat through so many conversations about home repair. I gave Grant a bucket and ran back upstairs and out the front door. It was raining heavily. There is a drainage system that diverts water from the roof around the perimeter of our house. This was clogged. I pushed away the dirt and leaves, the pine straw. By the time I went back inside, Grant was already upstairs. "You made it stop," he said. "What did you do?"

God never sent my grandmother to visit my mother in a dream. As a result, my family quit attending church, though my parents had been raised in church and we'd always attended. My parents still haven't returned, thirty-six years later. My brother's an atheist; I'm a Buddhist. It's too early to say what my son, the next generation, might finally believe. In 2001, my grandfather made good on his lifelong promise to kill someone when he shot himself in the head. Thus far, my father hasn't killed anyone.

"I don't believe in ghosts," my mother said recently. "If ghosts were real, my

mother would come back to see me.”

“She haunted Pop,” I said. “She vacuumed the hallway so he couldn’t sleep.”

“That wasn’t my mother. Daddy was hearing things. He was crazy.”

I still haven’t told my mother about the moment when water shot from our basement wall, though I think it would mean something to her to know her dream came true. I’d like to laugh with her about how serious she thought the problem was—an underground spring! a collapsed wall!—when in fact it was just a clogged drain. But I suspect this isn’t how our conversation would go. If I tell her about the water shooting from the wall, she might say aloud my unvoiced fears: there is a slow seep in my home’s drainage system; the downstairs wall is being compromised with each storm; it is only a matter of time before the foundation collapses.