That demon love

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Affection is the most instinctive, in that sense the most animal, of the loves; its jealousy is proportionately fierce. It snarls and bares its teeth like a dog whose food has been snatched away." Thus writes C. S. Lewis in that modern classic, *The Four Loves*.

Such sentiments are rarely articulated when we speak of love. We usually extol love's nobility, or ponder the way it makes people capable of great devotion. But just because of its nobility and the capacity for fierce devotion that love provokes, love may be terrible if and when it is unchecked by any higher loyalty or devotion. "Love," Lewis says, "having become a god, becomes a demon."

When Harriet Vane tries to detect the perpetrator of some increasingly sinister pranks in Dorothy L. Sayers's mystery novel *Gaudy Night*, her reasoning is led astray because she does not consider how deeply distorted and distorting inordinate love—both erotic and maternal—can become. And Lord Peter Wimsey, who, as it happens, is not so deceived about the identity of the perpetrator but who is intent on permitting Harriet to solve the mystery on her own, says to her: "When you have come to a conclusion about all this, will you remember that it was I who asked you to take a dispassionate view and I who told you that of all devils let loose in the world there was no devil like devoted love." Notice: it is devoted love—true, tender, suffering love—that is, simultaneously, devilish.

So it is in this story of a mother, daughter and granddaughter, whom we may call Mary, Jennifer and Megan respectively. Mary is a devout, believing Christian of the culturally conservative sort given to reading James Dobson, Cal Thomas and Bill Bennett. She is concerned, as well she might be, about the state of the family in our society, about children who grow up without actually being reared, about the failure of churches to inculcate and transmit a Christian shape for living. She does not condone—and, indeed, can scarcely comprehend—the easy access to abortion in our society. She has taken with full seriousness in her own life the marriage vow with its commitment to lifelong fidelity.

But now her daughter Jennifer, after 20 years of marriage, has divorced her husband. Why? Because she does not love him—and, indeed, says she has not loved him for many years. That her marriage is dead and cannot be revived is a conclusion Jennifer has reached entirely on her own. She sought no counsel or direction from her pastor, nor, when her husband wanted to preserve the marriage, was she willing to go with him to any kind of counselor at all.

Clearly, this is a tragedy and a crisis for Mary. (Also for her husband, to be sure, but mother-love is enough to worry about for now.) At some point, of course, there was little that Mary could do to forestall the inevitable. Jennifer was set on divorce and could not be dissuaded. How does one still “support” such a daughter? How does one love unconditionally and devotedly as a mother is supposed to love?

Jennifer knows what kind of support she wants. Her ex-husband is, by her lights, a villain and a jerk. All who love and support her must share that view. Although he remains, of course, the father of Jennifer’s daughter, Megan, he must become as close to a nonperson as possible. He was never really loving. He was mean and hateful. Now, postdivorce, he seeks only to cause trouble. He is unreasonable about money and, though he makes his court-stipulated child-support payments regularly, does not really give Megan the money she needs. That is Jennifer’s view—and, hence, the view that must be shared by any who would love and support her.

Poor Mary. She has come around now. She has adopted Jennifer’s view. Not slowly, gradually and reluctantly—but swiftly, with certitude and, one may even say, with a vengeance. Jennifer has been treated badly. The rest of the family must climb aboard that train. It is not sufficient simply to try to help Jennifer, not enough to continue to treat her with affection and concern. Megan’s father must be ostracized as an evil man. That is what support of Jennifer now means. It requires that her ex-husband be characterized as evil. Indeed, although he did not seek the divorce and acquiesced unwillingly, Mary can now scarcely regard him as Megan’s father. Of course, he is that in a technical sense—but no more than technical. That is what all who “support” Jennifer must now also believe. And, alas, although Mary insists that she encourages Megan to spend time with her father, Mary’s words and demeanor tell a different story and—together with Jennifer’s—drive the wedge between Megan and her father deeper.

Does Mary ever wonder whether something has gone wrong here? Perhaps so, but, after all, she tells herself and others, in a pinch you have to support your children.

To do anything less, to fail to adopt Jennifer's view of the situation, would be to risk losing a daughter. And what mother could do that? How could one love one's daughter and risk that?

Jennifer has come increasingly to rely on her mother, finding in her the kind of unquestioning loyalty she wants. But then the story takes a new twist, as Jennifer delivers some bad news to Mary: 15-year-old Megan is pregnant. Perhaps it is no surprise. Mary has, after all, spent the last decade reading articles about the devastating effects of divorce on children. Megan's identity has been ruptured, and she has sought solace elsewhere—in a child she can love devotedly and unconditionally. But she is too young and too confused, with too much of her life ahead of her. Jennifer is going to take her for an abortion.

This is news that Mary would rather not have heard. Why not keep and raise the child? she asks. But Jennifer has enough trouble holding down a job and trying to look after Megan. Why not adoption then? But how could mother Megan, grandmother Jennifer and great-grandmother Mary go through life wondering what had become of "their" child? To say no to Jennifer at this point would be once again to risk losing a daughter, failing to support Jennifer when it is most needed. What mother could fail her daughter at such a moment? Is not mother-love supposed to be unconditional? Mary may not approve of what Jennifer intends, but she must, she is sure, support Jennifer herself. She will not place conditions on her devotion, and so, almost physically nauseated, Mary embraces Jennifer and offers her support.

In *The Four Loves* Lewis notes that "William Morris wrote a poem called 'Love Is Enough' and someone is said to have reviewed it briefly in the words 'It isn't.'" Let no one deny Mary's devotion or the depth of her love. Hers is, in some respects, human love at its highest and most devoted—just the sort of love, alas, that has within itself, as Lewis noted, the capacity to become a demon. Precisely in its devotion and self-sacrifice, mother-love can be a terrible thing. We need the Augustinian category: it is "splendid vice." "If," Lewis writes, "we try to live by Affection alone, Affection will 'go bad on us.'"

We do maternal love no dishonor when we say that, taken alone and isolated from love for God and commitment to goodness itself, it must go bad. That recognition simply acknowledges that a mother's love for her daughter, however glorious, is not the highest or most important love. Lewis again: "Oliver Elton, speaking of Carlyle and Mill, said that they differed about justice, and that such a difference was

naturally fatal ‘to any friendship worthy of the name.’ If ‘All’—quite seriously all—‘for love’ is implicit in the Beloved’s attitude, his or her love is not worth having. It is not related in the right way to Love Himself.”

How, then, shall Mary still “support” and “love” Jennifer while refusing to vilify those whom Jennifer hates or to approve what is evil? How can she love her daughter “without condition” if that love is subordinated to her love for Goodness and Truth? Will she not “lose a daughter” if she fails to provide the kind of support that Jennifer desires and even demands?

But how can she—really—have a daughter except in relation to the One who opens the womb and gives child to mother? We can “have” nothing at all as ours abstracted from relation to the God who gives every good gift. So the question must be turned around: Must not Mary inevitably lose her daughter if she tries to make of her everything? For Jennifer is not everything even to her mother, and to love her as if she were is to live a lie—a lie that must ultimately fail and disappoint. There is no devil like devoted love.

This does not mean that Mary should place conditions on her love, but it does require that she risk loss—as God himself risks loss in loving us. The sword must pierce her own heart—or at least that must be risked—if she is to love rightly. To let the loves that come naturally to human beings—even the most glorious of them, as the love of a mother for her child—find their goal and direction in God cannot be done by clinging to those loves above all else. If we make of them everything, we ask more than they can deliver. So Mary must be willing to risk the rupture of this relationship. The necessary pattern, as Lewis saw, is death and resurrection, and the truth is a very old one: Only the mother willing to lose her daughter for righteousness’ sake can hope to “have” her.

Lewis yet once more: “Only those [loves] into which Love Himself has entered will ascend to Love Himself. And these can be raised with Him only if they have, in some degree and fashion, shared His death.” Why, after all, should the highest of our loves risk less than God’s own love?