

## Why Shouldn't I Be Difficult?

Not long ago, Bonnie and I were day hiking in the Sierras with some longtime friends, a married couple. During one flat stretch we ended up alternately paired off, and the subject of movies came up. I gave *The Station Agent* a glowing recommendation but mentioned I had heard about a movie called *The Mother* and looked forward to seeing it. A slight hesitation. I saw it. Did you like it? A short pause. Well, I don't know what I was expecting. Let's talk about it after you have seen it. We changed the subject.

Months after this conversation and after many fruitless trips to the rental store, I found *The Mother* and brought it home. Fascinating. I saw half of it again the next day with Bonnie. Poignant and searing, a movie best understood by senior adults, I think.

A modern-day British middle-class woman, 65 years old, the mother of two adult children with children of their own, has been a caretaker for her aging husband who is in failing health. Mercifully, after a stroke, he dies soon thereafter in the hospital with her at his side. In an instant, after 38 years of marriage, the wife is liberated. For the first time in her adult life, she is free.

I remember the aftermath for my mother when my father passed away at age 56, an early and untimely death. After 37 years of marriage – and quite likely for the first time in her life – she, too, was set free. A long period of adolescent-like and frenzied daily activity soon ensued: working, dating, dancing, bar time, general silliness, and feverish socializing. It finally ended with her remarriage.

After the funeral ceremonies, the widow returns home accompanied by her son, but becomes increasingly agitated; she doesn't want to stay home. She does not want to be here, she wants to live someplace else. This is her life now, and she needs and wants to cut the ties with her married past. The son seeks to smooth over her agitation, asking her several times to sit down in her comfortable living room chair. She refuses. I don't want to sit down, I don't want to be here. She walks to the hallway mirror and looks at her image.

Now don't be difficult, Mother. She looks into the mirror. Why shouldn't I be difficult? As if she might not have heard him, he repeats his gentle

admonition. She turns her head, stares him full in the face, and challenges, Why shouldn't I be difficult?

Indeed, this recently loosed wife proves herself to be more than difficult. At the age of 65, she initiates a sexual relationship with her daughter's lover, a good looking, sensitive, likable loser, but a married man 20 years her junior, who is completing a room addition on her daughter's residence. In effect, she has interjected herself as a sexual rival to her unmarried daughter. The affair is brought to light thanks to the discovery of a series of erotic sketches made by the mother depicting herself engaged in sexual relations with her daughter's lover. (The daughter's instant reaction when she sees the sketches, "She has had him," compares with the son's denial, "She would never do anything like that.") The inevitable confrontation between mother and daughter ensues, the mother is chastened and offers amends, but the daughter cannot dismiss this betrayal; a price must be paid. With primal retaliation, the daughter (symbolically) kills her mother and banishes her from the lives of her adult children and grandchildren. The daughter's sexual rival has not only been vanquished, but having recently been freed from a lifetime of marriage, she has now been freed from her status as mother and grandmother. Seemingly, her only practical option is to return home, play the acceptable role of widow, and let time heal over her transgression.

Yes, she does return home, but only long enough to pack a carry-on bag, pick up her passport and the airline ticket to Tahiti that she had recently purchased for herself and – she had hoped – for her erstwhile lover. The last view we are given of the mother is her resolute walk away from her married home to an uncertain future.

*The Mother* is a remarkable, well-made, and unhurried movie, filled with edgy commentary about modern-day dysfunctional and confusing family relationships. But its primary focus is the newfound expectation and self-image that senior adults, especially women, I think, have about themselves during their post-married years. And because this expectation is vastly different from that put upon them by social convention, I doubt this movie will be well received by or even resonate with their adult children. In fact, I would expect to hear such comments as bizarre, gross, unseemly, or worse still, it certainly doesn't apply to my mother, that's for sure.

During the run-up to the point where the mother invites her daughter's lover to sexual intimacy, she says half-aloud to herself, I am not ready for old age. This movie attempts to give meaning to her words and portray her resistance.