One of the hardest things we can ever admit to ourselves is that the source of our fears of death originates in our parents’ behavior towards us as children. We depend on them so much for love and security that we often resist, even in adulthood, acknowledging the effect that either their own hostility towards us, or their failure to defend us against the hostile wishes of others, had upon us. Though Del Jordan in Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator of Jean Cocteau’s *Les Enfants Terribles*, and Andrea Ashworth in her *Once in a House on Fire*, all associate death with parental violence or betrayal, they each vary in their ability to acknowledge parental sadism and thus the degree to which they conceal it in their narratives.

As there is nothing we more want to deny than our parents’ hostile impulses towards us (Rheingold 19), it is astonishing and exceedingly rare for Del not only to recognize but to demand we attend to them. After recounting her mother saying that you have to “face things sometime” (52), Del faces up to the fact that many parents want “you” to suffer. When she relates her insight to us she does so fully aware that this is an insight many of us suspect is true but wish to deny. “Yes,” she tells us, after beginning by dispensing her insight carefully, referring to the hostility in “people” rather than isolating it in our parents, this “greed for your hurt” is “in parents too; in parents particularly” (52). But what Del does not so overtly relate to us is the effect this sadism had upon her. Given that she sandwiches this insight between her recollection of how she tried to “desecrate” (49) a dead cow and her desperate but successful struggle to resist seeing her Uncle Craig’s corpse, we intuit that it made her think not only of death, but of the horrifying potential to find oneself powerless in presence of death.

It is when she reflects on her father’s attitude when he decided to shoot their dog Major that the pairing of parents with powerlessness, betrayal, and death insinuates within her own family circle sufficiently for it to become personally relevant enough to startle her. Just as she was able to acknowledge that parents want their children to suffer, she emphasizes that they “want” (126; emphasis in original) others to die. But with this powerful insight, rather than keeping us tightly focused on the source of her inspiration, she lets the fact that it was her father’s “reasonable, blasphemous face” (126) that enabled her insight to lose its distinct importance. While her mother’s hostility was loosely concealed within the general category of parents, her father’s
desire for death comes close to merging completely with that shared by “adults, managers and executioners” (126).

Del’s relative evasiveness here is likely the product of a fear that, put in a position where others want her to suffer a stern punishment, her father might not be relied upon to defend her. Her Aunt Agnes had told her previously that she was a “mad dog” (61) who ought to be punished. Del felt that biting Mary Agnes—the cause of her Aunt’s anger—would draw upon her all the hatred of everyone at the funeral, and though she hoped that biting her would put her “where no punishment would ever” (61) reach her, she depended upon her parents to defend her against the sum of hostility directed at her. Her mother immediately did defend her reluctance to participate in a “barbarie” (62) ritual, but given that Del had previously discussed her mother’s betrayal—her mother’s own desire “for her hurt”—she needed to know that her father could be depended upon for support and defence. She therefore understandably understands her father’s intention to shoot Major for his mad-dog behavior as evidence that he may not be the pillar of support she would prefer and well needs him to be. Her dreams of her “kind, […] calm, […] reasonable” father “cutting off [her] […] head” (125), her fears that he may not be counted on, inspire her to temporarily look elsewhere—to God—for support.

However, Del’s father’s reaction to Major’s behavior is unusual enough for Del to think it “blasphemous” (126). And Del’s mother, while she is simultaneously continuing her own private war against Death we see such strong signs of elsewhere in the text (e.g., in her explanation of what Death is [42]), is strong in her daughter’s moment of need. If Del hadn’t had parents upon whom she could, for the most part, rely upon for protection—or who were the sort of people she most needed protection from—she would likely have written a novel that betrays the same need to deny one’s vulnerability to death we encounter in Les Enfants Terribles. Del demonstrates strength, not weakness, when she tells us of her desire to desecrate a dead cow in an attempt to master death. She is able to acknowledge how greatly aware and affected by death she was as a child. Weakness, instead, lies in trying to persuade yourself—as the narrator of Les Enfants Terribles does—that children are simply “unable to imagine death” (18). What this narrator shows us is that, while adulthood might normally bring a broader understanding of death, with children who have experienced extreme parental abuse, “adulthood” mainly means a “maturing” of such early-learned survival skills like self-deception.

While the narrator claims he tells us the story of two children, it is more likely,
given the way in which he describes Elisabeth and the way she relates to Paul, that he
tells the story of an extremely immature mother’s (probably his own) possessive
relationship over her son. Very immature mothers, mothers who were so unloved
and unattended to in life they require their children to supply their unmet needs,
interpret their children’s individuation as their rejecting them (DeMause 151). Their
mothers’ anger over this perceived spurning often leads children to fear that, unless
they somehow stop growing, they will suffer catastrophe, even death, as punishment
(Rheingold 137). They fear, in short, that they would suffer what Paul suffers at
the hands of Elisabeth, when she understands not only that “her nursling was a child no
longer” (62), but that he wants to grow up.

While the narrator repeatedly describes Elisabeth as mother-like (we are told, for
instance, that she speaks “in the manner of a maternal” [52]; we are even told that her
own mother “still lived on within her” [69]), it is when she is described as an old
woman that we should begin to suspect that Elisabeth is a representation of the
narrator’s own mother. The horrifying characterization of Elisabeth as “a madwoman
[who] hunches over a dead child” (67), captures, with its characterization of her as
mad, and with its link to a child’s death, exactly the experience of a child who fears
s/he will be destroyed by his/her angry mother.

So, too, does pretty much the entirety of part two, as it chronicles Elisabeth’s
relationship to Paul when, as a consequence of his trying to individuate, Elisabeth
“fear[s] that Paul had turned against her and was deliberately avoiding her” (107).
While true that she is described as tenderly mothering him (she, for example, “dries
his tears, kisses him, [and] tucks him up” [119]), and as directing her “killer
instincts” (119) onto others, she ultimately plans to use her “two weapons—death
and oblivion” (148)—to destroy them both. Death is means for her to possess Paul
forever, while life, growth, continuously opposes her plans. And while it is Dargelos’s
poison which eventually slays him, given the number of times Elisabeth is referred to
as a poisonous spider in part two, we may have trouble not somehow believing that
mad-“mother” Elisabeth is really the one responsible for the death of her “child,”
Paul.

But if those who experience extreme parental sadism tend to displace its origin
onto others, then what explains Andrea’s Ashworth’s capacity to so frankly portray
her step-father’s own killer instincts? Assuming that the narrator of Les Enfants
Terribles was once in Paul’s position, and assuming that Elisabeth represents Paul’s
mother, one accounting for her strength may lie in Andrea’s differing from Paul in
having had another parent upon whom she could count on for support. However, the marked binary that Andrea sets up, with her mother as hero and her stepfather as villain, may reflect the same need to displace hostility away from a parent that the narrator of *Les Enfants Terrible* demonstrates.

Early in her account, Andrea’s mother and stepfather are polar opposites: Peter is brutal, a villain, while her mother is kind, a helpful guardian. Peter pounds upon his family with “his hairy fist[s]” (18), brutally beating up both Andrea and her mother. He is a savage bully, an “ogre,” whose close resemblance would be found amongst the villainry in the book of fairy-tales he rips up. And Andrea’s mother is described as the sort of person who trips-up ogres’ intentions to mash up their prey. Just as Del was expected to look at her uncle’s corpse, Andrea is told by a guide to look at a “nasty ogre” (27), hidden in the cave’s shadows. And while Del’s mother was agitated and combative, Andrea’s mother soothes her child by tenderly squeezing her hand, and asking her, “Well, who wants to see an ogre?” (27). Andrea knows her mother would help defend her against ogres, and she does, telling Peter, ‘Not in front of the girls!,” while her “head whipped back like a doll’s” (49) from being hit by him; and also later when she directs the knife-wielding Peter’s attention onto herself, telling him, “[t]his isn’t about the girls” (66).

But while Andrea’s mother defiantly declares that Peter would “not lay a finger on them [her children]” (11), given that her stepfather had beaten her up the night before, Andrea also knows that her mother had not been able to prevent Peter from doing so. Knowing how much this truth would overwhelm her mother, Andrea protects her by not telling her about the abuse. She may, however, with her reluctance to explore why her mother frequently allows back into the home partners who beat up her children, also here be protecting herself from seriously engaging the likelihood that her mother not only at some level knows about the abuse but actually encourages it. She certainly shows us instances where her mother—shown to behave so differently than she did previously with Peter—aligns herself with Terry and betrays her children’s need for support. She tells us her sisters believed her mother had “betrayed” (228) them, but Andrea, speaking with more textual authority than her younger sisters are permitted, establishes them as simply in error about this.

But while Andrea likely displaces and rationalizes her mother’s hostility, there are signs in her text that show she suspects her mother is indeed “greedy for her hurt.” For instance, the importance of Andrea’s schooling as her means of escaping an oppressive, dangerous—potentially even deadly—home life, is made dear in the text.
And Andrea chooses to place her mother’s decision to move to Manchester—where there are no grammar schools—just one page after she informs us of her admittance to Lancashire Grammar (99-100). The dangers that await one in poor neighborhoods are overtly presented in the text too, and, just one page after describing an incident where a man tried to stab her, Andrea tells us of her mother’s decision to move where a “poor lass got dragged down […] and raped” (153). However, there is always enough wiggle-room provided in her text that if we (and/or she) would prefer to understand her mother’s motives as essentially benign, we are able to do so without too much difficulty.

Andrea’s mother is, by the end of Andrea’s account, a more ambiguous figure than she was at the beginning, but she is no ogre. If Andrea’s mother retains some of the heroic status at the end of the account she had at the beginning, doubtless this is because, despite her periods of withdrawal during Andrea’s adolescence, she often was, or at least dearly wanted to be, available to help her. However, it is also likely that Andrea needed to have someone who could defend her against all the perils associated with living in a “house on fire,” and to some extent created this person in her narrative. The narrator of Les Enfants Terribles may do the same thing when, despite the frequent comparisons made between Elisabeth and monstrous things, he also likens her to “a captain on a bridge” (69), and to “a merciful judge” (114)—that is, to an enfranchised individual who might help rather than destroy him. If we allow ourselves to imagine, to remember how terrifying our own parents’ sadism was to us as children, indeed, how it made us feel as if they wanted us dead, we can better appreciate just how brave their attempts to explore it, to face it, are. As for Del, who looks to God but can stare Death right in the face, she is the sort of hero we all might want to look to for support.

Works Cited