

HOME BREW

Rebecca Donner

THE AFTERLIFE BY DONALD ANTRIM

NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX.
208 PAGES. \$20.

Those familiar with Donald Antrim's whimsical, feverishly cerebral novels should brace themselves: There are no postmodern flights of fancy to be found in his memoir. *The Afterlife* is a grounded and, well, sober attempt to make peace with the legacy of his mother's debilitating alcoholism, which had reached "operatically suicidal" proportions by Antrim's thirteenth birthday. When, at sixty-five, his mother was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, her only son found himself utterly devoid of sympathy: "I had had enough of Louanne Antrim and was ready for her to be gone. I wanted her dead." Within a year, his wish would be granted.

Antrim has joined the ranks of writers who have laid bare their own lives as a means of both spiritual purification and self-revelation. *How did I come to be who I am?* is the tacit question underlying these pages, the answer to which is inextricably bound to the nature of his relationship with his mother, whose death he perversely feels responsible for ("I had a keen sense of myself as a matricide"). In boyhood, Antrim was frequently ill, his chief ailment an incapacitating asthma that forged an intimacy

between mother and son. "In sickness, we were joined: she was I and I was she," he observes, recalling the nights Louanne sat at his bedside, holding his hand and laying her palm on his forehead. "I was a boy dying for his mother, angrily, stubbornly doing her work of dying, the work she had begun before I was born." His mother's alcoholic deterioration worsened over the course of a tumultuous marriage—Antrim's parents divorced and subsequently remarried each other—and the boy in turn became a man effectively paralyzed by the emotional stalemate, suffering "rage and shame and fear" while paradoxically feeling "nothing at all."

The novelist's bleak comic wit is not frequently in evidence in *The Afterlife*, except in the book's opening chapter, which manages to entertain with lively anecdotes while drawing taut the thread that binds mother to son, alluding to the Oedipal subtext. Within a week of Louanne's death in 2000, Antrim embarks on an obsessive pilgrimage to buy a new bed that will simultaneously offer him sanctuary, purge his guilt, and sever the maternal bond—in short, a foolhardy mission destined to fail, and miserably so. He decides on a Stearns & Foster queen-size mattress from Bloomingdale's but, on returning home, promptly calls and cancels the purchase. In quick succession he buys and returns multiple mat-

tresses from various stores, upgrading at last to a Dux and plunking down close to seven thousand dollars in the hope that its myriad, carefully calibrated springs can effect a radical transformation in his life. They can't, of course; he finds them to be excessively "reverberant" and "bouncy." Antrim amusingly describes his increasingly febrile communications with salespeople and other true believers in the "Dux community," one of whom suggests he place furniture coasters under the bed's legs to stabilize the springs ("Coasters? It was too late for coasters. The bed had to go back to the warehouse! It had to go back the next morning!"). His final, desperate call is to Bo Gustafsson, the Swedish president of Dux Interiors in North America, who is compassionately perplexed by Antrim's dilemma. The Dux is carted away, and Antrim stands in his empty bedroom, ashamed and bereft.

Much in *The Afterlife* is memorable, but few passages are quite as riveting as those in which Antrim frankly, even ruthlessly, describes his mother and her crippling effect on his emotional well-being: "I was charged never to leave her for another woman—even as this required my having, over the years, a succession of women. I was never to lie to or deceive her; and I lied to and deceived her about everything. When I first began to write and publish novels, it was understood by my mother, and hence unwittingly by me, that I was exhibiting, in whatever could be called my artistic accomplishments, *her* creative agency, her gifts. I was to have a powerful cock and, at the same time, no cock at all." The portrait he renders is of an eccentric, deeply troubled woman who frequently repelled

others, who chewed with her mouth open and sported bizarre clothing fashioned by her own hand. Her signature garment was a kimono emblazoned with an assemblage of exotic animals, feathers, sachets, ribbons, tassels, and detachable shining stars, not to mention enormous butterfly wings and antennae that extended above her head.

Throughout the book, as was apparently her tendency in life, Louanne refuses to share the spotlight with *The Afterlife's* cast of characters. While other family members figure prominently in Antrim's emotional and intellectual heritage, they don't round out this memoir so much as fill out the background. (A salient exception is Eldridge, an affectionately described ne'er-do-well uncle whose eccentricities—in a given month his meals consisted of the same entrée: "scallops in March; spaghetti in April; flounder in May"—rivalled Louanne's, as did his alcoholism.) The closing pages vividly dramatize the night she came closest to drinking herself to death; as Antrim sat at her bedside and massaged her back, he recalled his mother's ministrations during his childhood asthma attacks and the "feeling that she was squeezing the fear right out of me, pushing my distress down my arms and out my fingertips." That mothers are conspicuously absent from Antrim's three novels should not go unnoted, nor should the idea that writing honestly about one's rage toward a loved one is tough. Antrim has dedicated *The Afterlife* to his mother, and this gesture can be understood as a kind of embrace, one fraught with contradiction: His arms are open, his fists clenched. □

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