

Our Mother: A Prequel

We are there in spirit already the day you meet on a beach in Marblehead. As soon as he puts his towel down next to yours, we awaken. We are potential, possibility, stacked up and ready to campaign for life. We glint in reflections off your sunglasses, have worked our way into the sheen of the suntan oil you share, burrow under your beach reads; *Life* magazine for him, an Agatha Christie novel for you. We attach ourselves in the form of invisible threads that pull you toward each other. We are in the grains of sand stuck to the bottom of your rubber flip flops. You track us around with you the entire summer.

Admittedly, Mom, we missed a lot. We missed the majority of your college years where you majored in Phys Ed and played field hockey and basketball. We missed the summer you spent in Montana, making good on a vow to get out of Ohio every college summer and have an adventure. We missed the trip you took with your friend to Mardi Gras in your new red Studebaker. We missed the letter from the restaurant in Marblehead saying this Ohio girl could come east. She'd have a job and a spot in the rooming house. We missed the map buying and route planning and suitcase packing. We missed the nights you twisted in your sheets, unable to sleep imagining hot wind on your neck while Chardon, Ohio, melted into a highway mirage behind you. The wonder of your friends. *You're going where?* Friends who came home every summer break, friends with office jobs and babies and desires that did not include showing up somewhere they've never been before and making a life there.

You have never been east. You have never seen an ocean, have no idea the thunder it carries. You did not yet know the marshy fish stink of tidal pools, of ribbons of seaweed weaving around your ankles, water so cold it numbs your feet, the ache a rocky coastline can summon.

The man isn't great looking. He isn't ugly either. A bit on the scrawny side, a large dark birthmark over his right eyebrow. But he's funny, charming even, the way he plops down next to you as if you are waiting specifically for him. "Hi, Kaye," he says, having extracted your name from one of your friends. "I'm Eddie." He has the Boston accent, a sound your ear is just getting used to; the absence of the letter R, the softening of words that run together in a stream. A river of words pours out of him, jokes, stories. You are laughing. Your head spins in the dizzying July sun.

He is finishing college, Harvard. He wants to go to law school. You like his friends Chickee, and Carolyn. They drive a convertible. You spend the season waitressing and bussing tables in the village restaurants. *Surely you can give him a chance*, we whisper in your ear. *Harvard, for heaven's sake.*

This sun browns your skin. You spend your days getting an ocean tan, which is different than a lake tan, or a backyard-on-a-lawn-chair tan. Your beach tan is deep and golden; it makes you feel pretty. You carry the pretty all through your shift at the restaurant where you stack full plates of hot seafood all the way up your arm, and back to your room where you change to meet Eddie and his friends. *Wear the white blouse*, we urge. *It shows off your tan. No, not the brown skirt! How about the swirly polka dot?*

He teaches you to drink Manhattans. He is a great dancer. When you Jitterbug, people stop dancing and watch him toss you over his hip, slide you through his legs. When it's time to get into your car and head back to Ohio, we permit you to clap us off the bottom of your shoes. Our jobs are done. You are in love.

Love can flatten a girl from Ohio with a sporty red car and a dream to escape, cloud her thinking, render her blind. But we, the potentials, would not have stepped in even if we could.

Love presses him to visit your family over Christmas. Love urges you visit his in the summer, puts a ring on your finger before he leaves for Germany, his army Korean War assignment. It lingers while you graduate and take that job in the country school where the boys spit tobacco and the girls never get to college. The girls who will never know what it's like to toss a suitcase in the trunk of a car and drive off to unknown cities.

You set about learning to be a proper wife. You sit with your mother, on the sun porch on Saturday mornings drinking sweet tea and penciling a week's worth of menus. There are guidelines. There must be a meat, a vegetable, a starch of some kind. You can always add rolls or salad. Butter is your friend. You learn to roll out a pie crust, to choose the right cuts of meat at the market, to slice summer corn off the cob and simmer it in salted cream. To shake flour and cold water in a jelly jar until it's smooth enough to whisk into the gravy. You fry chicken, bake blueberry muffins. After, you and your mother critique the meals over a sink full of soapy dishwater. You copy your successes onto recipe cards to take with you when you leave.

He comes home from war and enrolls in law school. He's Catholic so the wedding will be in his church. You will settle in Winchester, his home town. There is never any question about this, so why complicate things with a wedding in Ohio? It will be so much easier this way. In your mind you have already left Ohio, with its cornfields and silos and suffocating states on every side. Massachusetts is your home now.

Before the wedding, you must agree to raise your future children Catholic. You are a regular Midwestern Presbyterian. You never had any Catholic friends, but Massachusetts seems to be teeming with them. All of Eddie's friends and their wives and girlfriends are Catholic. You sign on, considering it another adventure in your exciting life, a life about to become more thrilling. You imagine weekends at the shore, recreating the intoxication of the summer you first met, fingers entwined, kicking along the frothy surf. You expect he'll want to take you to his old Cambridge haunts, supper clubs and dancing. You never consider that love can be slippery, temporary, rescinded.

The wedding is a blur, not only because it goes by so quickly, but because Eddie has asked you not to wear your glasses. Friends and family who come to wish you well are soft outlines of familiar shapes.

You become pregnant right away. You don't work, instead stay home and try your recipes and wait for the baby. You are bored, with Eddie at the office all day. On Saturdays he plays golf with his friends. They stay late and have drinks at the 19th hole while you slide a hot iron over his boxer shorts,

arrange the magazines on the coffee table into a perfect fan. If your mother calls, you are bright, just fine, everything is super, but when you rest the phone back in its cradle you find it hard to swallow.

It turns out Eddie doesn't love the beach after all. His ideas of travel are golf trips and a damp, spidery cabin on a lake in New Hampshire. A lake like all of the lakes of your childhood, scented with boat fuel and fish decay, black and deep, with a bottom of slick grass. Mostly though, he loves his little hometown which you realize is much like Chardon only without the corn.

We come quickly, four girls in four years, sensing the urgency, feeling portions of the love expel from you one baby at a time. Our father has lost sight of you. He only notices you when you are pretty, dressed to go out on the town, your hair curled, and lipstick on. Then he takes your arm and waves goodbye to the babysitter who will play her Beatles records too loud. He doesn't feel the thickness in the air that surrounds you, the effort it takes to swing your feet to the floor when a baby cries in the night. Has no idea how many times you step into the coat closet each day to cry into a woolen sleeve.

Your mother is stern with you. She comes after each birth, understands what is going on. *You will have a baby every year*, she warns. After the third she tells your father she won't come for another. *You need to stop this nonsense*, she tells him. When Baby Nancy is born she stays in Ohio.

It is 1961. You ride the train into Boston. You can't remember the last time you went anywhere alone, without a baby on your hip, small arms reaching for you. You have to travel to Boston see a doctor who is not Catholic, and to visit a pharmacy that is not named O'Neil's or McCormack's.

You hold your purse tightly on your lap. The conductor smiles at you as he punches your ticket. There is a place on the way from Winchester to North Station where the train slows and sways because the tracks are bad. The rocking lulls you. You rest your head against the leather seat back and close your eyes. You count your mistakes.

At home, my sisters and I crawl all over the babysitter. We touch our flesh in relief, wiggle our toes, grasp each other's fine hair. Dion on the record player sings, "Runaround Sue." In her bassinet, Baby Nancy puts a tiny fist into her mouth.