

Cambridge, Massachusetts  
1993

I bought the house of my sleepless nights in January. Barely a house really. Four rooms and a yard in a Portuguese neighborhood where plastic chicks sprouted on aqua-paved lawns, and laundry kites lined the skies in between buildings. The room where I tossed every night in darkness, trying in vain to wring sleep out of the bedclothes, had been the original attic. Streetlamps threw dim trapezoids of light on the sloping ceiling. Even lying still in those early morning hours I felt in motion; something always just out of the corner of my eye.

The house had strong bones, but its flesh dated from 1873; the quaint exterior belied years of interior decay. Over the ensuing months I found remnants of the original kitchen in the basement, including a wood stove that held a dozen jelly jars filled with screws. I often felt like an anthropologist, throwing out scraps of 40-year-old linoleum, finding newspapers from the 1950's, wondering why a mirror was embedded in the basement wall at waist-height. Sorting through someone else's years of dust, loss, and isolation.

I knew nothing about the part of Cambridge I had moved into from the other side of Harvard University, from a rent-controlled apartment building full of thirty-ish working folks like me. My immediate abutters spoke Portuguese, and though I tried to communicate, waving a snow shovel the morning after a storm, I didn't get much back except head bobbing and crusty wry-toothed smiles. Although I was pleasantly shocked to discover that by moving, I had moved back in time (I harbored romantic illusions about the past back then). The women around me stayed in their shawls and cooked and laundered all day, the men cleared snow in winter, tended to their grape vines in spring and summer. They didn't know what to think of me: a single woman who had moved into the gray-sided cottage in the midst of their towering three-deckers. It used to belong to one of their own.

The previous owner had fled to Florida and left years of secret grime behind: beer cans in the basement, graying peanut shells all over the yard and cellar, a gay men's skin magazine hidden in the drop ceiling in the living room. Unpaid bills. Untended grape vines mapping the brick foundation walls. Every few months in the spring a different collection agent knocked on my door to ask if I knew of the former owner's whereabouts. I wondered how much his own neighbors had known about his alcohol consumption, his debts, his ambiguous sexuality.

That May the grass in my backyard reached Guinness Book of World Record heights for domesticated sedge plants. It came up to my waist in spots. Some of it had even flowered. Even though I grew up in the country, outside of Troy, New York, I hadn't realized grass flowered, as if left to its own devices it wanted to make itself look pretty. Only it didn't: it was yellow, sickly, and uneven. I didn't know anyone with a mower, so one afternoon I borrowed my friend J.P.'s weed-wacker. Looking back, I don't know why I thought a weed-wacker would work, but my impatient and impulsive sides frequently ganged up on my common sense.

Standing in my backyard holding the weed-wacker with both arms outstretched, expecting a miracle, I turned it on. The whip-like plastic string quickly gutted with mouthfuls of grass and died at my feet. I felt a familiar mocking despair. My ability to hope had always exceeded reality.

“Shit!”

Before I could continue with my usual obscenity string, I looked up.

Clinging to the chain link fence that separated my yard from their blacktop were three young girls, their pudgy fingers twined around the metal spokes. Their eyes were dark and wide, their hair crow-colored. They belonged to the vast multi-generational Portuguese clan whose neat three story home rose like a fortress out of an island of tar next to my weedy lot. They were cousins, that I knew, but I did not know their names. A moment passed. They kept staring. They were beautiful in their prim little dresses; I stank. I became aware of the sickly sweet odor of paint and sweat, the hardened strands of white in my hair from painting my kitchen the day before. I started to feel like an animal in a zoo, a strange, smelly, 32-year-old divorced creature they couldn't take their eyes off of. Then I realized that to them, I looked like an exotic creature, with my jeans and tee shirt, my hair like straw sticking every which way from the top of my head. To them, adult women were married, wore long, baggy black dresses and did laundry all day, or sat under the grape arbor cleaning peas.

They continued to annoy me with their staring. Suddenly, I felt something akin to a motherly instinct. It occurred to me that perhaps I could be a role model to them. I could widen their pre-school horizons. A young woman could buy a house and live there, all by herself. They could, too. Just when I began to feel a neighborly opening of my normally tight heart, one of them plaintively asked, in perfect English:

“Where's your mom?”

From where I stand now her comment was hilarious; my petite size and singlehood marking me for a girl in their eyes. But back then I was in no mood to laugh. I stood, one hand on the weed-wacker, one hand in mid-air, staring back at them. For a long moment I couldn't move. I looked down at my feet, pondering an answer. Suddenly all the frustrations of my life—juggling bills on my non-profit salary, my inability to afford a lawn mower, my paint-splattered hair, my old clothes, the cloudy dampness of the day, the week, that fact that I didn't have anyone to help me—came rushing at me like a wave, dark and foul. A sharp anger built in me, unexpectedly, seemingly out of nowhere. The wind had turned off the harbor; I smelled the sudden tangy odor of ocean, a mingling of seaweed and fish.

The vastness of her question overwhelmed me, and my sharp-tongued self thought of an answer then, an answer that would send them scurrying inside to the safety of their own moms, those plump and comforting black-clothed bastions of old-world domesticity. And I almost said it, almost opened my mouth and said "my mother's dead!" just to shock them. I turned the words over and over in my mind, imagined their horrified reaction, their dark eyes widening further. Instead, my body went slack. I couldn't lie even for sarcastic effect. And something in me then recognized I wanted to punish them for their innocence, for their insouciant manner, for crimes they didn't commit.

Yanking at the string at my feet, I freed it from the long straggling grass. I dragged the weed-wacker to the side of my house, out of sight, and finished swearing. Later, I sat on my wooden front steps in the pale afternoon, the girl's words nagging at

me, causing something in me to unfurl, like the stirrings of a cicada, deep underground. The steps where I sat needed a fresh coat of blue stain. I saw chickweeds that needed to be pulled, a front walk that needed sweeping, and someone had stuck a beer bottle in my front hedge; the longer I sat the more I picked at my surroundings, my dissatisfaction running deeper than the physical, the things around me I could see with my eyes that required cleaning and repair. The girl rose again before my eyes: her pale dress, her dark hair. What did she know about life? At the time I hated her, hated her staring. At the time I thought: I didn't need a mother.

I thought about how many times I'd heard the question in its various forms: Usually if people asked me where my parents lived, I answered singularly. "My dad lives in New York," and left my mother out altogether. People usually didn't ask much beyond that, and I left them to their assumptions: she was deceased. The only people who ventured beyond my simple curt answer were health-care providers, doctors or nurses who needed records. Facts. Answers. As if a box on a form could contain the answer. Sometimes, when asked to give my mother's maiden name by a bank or credit card company, annoyed at having to provide something that I thought had nothing to do with my life now, I said I didn't know it; but I did.

The girl had said something I remained entirely unaware of at the time: that without a mother we are sometimes rudderless, without direction, making futile gestures, grabbing at weeds with our bare hands.

I used to stand in the doorway of her bedroom, watching my mother apply her lipstick. The tubes the lipstick swirled out of, like gay-colored missiles: thick gold canisters that filled up the palm of my hand, decorated with smooth ridges or etched in lacy flowers. The makeup itself smelled of rich candy, with an aftertaste of wax. Her curvaceous frame leaned towards the mirror, and with a steady a hand as she could muster, she camouflaged her lips in four precise strokes, then pulled a tissue out of its box and blotted her mouth with it, leaving an imprint behind like the hoof print of a fawn: two delicate ellipses of red. The tissue was evidence that rare creature had passed; I was the anthropologist left behind to figure out to whom it had belonged.

I remember her things: bright white girdles nestled neatly in drawers, smelling of eau de toilette and cedar. And bras, pointy cones nestled inside one another, and ironed panties and slippers, smoothed and ready to be slipped into like a velvety disguise. Everything was starched, bleached, ironed, whether the outside world would see it or not, and lay in rows. When she was off in another part of the house cleaning, I'd pull open the handles of her bureau, inhaling the heady scent of mother, a perfumed secret from a tomb in Egypt. In the top drawer lay her jewelry: strings of heavy beads, a strawberry pin made of red rhinestones that I'd wear when I grew older, and strands of real pearls. White cotton gloves laid out in pairs, as if waiting for her hands to slip inside. She had a Depression-era mentality of reuse; when the white gloves faded, she gave them to me to wear at night over swaths of Jurgen's lotion. In winter my hands cracked like old maps, and she tried to make them well. When she went to the grocery store, she donned her white cotton gloves, placed a large blue hat on her head, carefully slid herself into the passenger seat of my father's tan station wagon, adjusted the pin on her lapel several

more times, and off they'd go. With a sigh and a whiff, my mother often let on that she had been destined for greater things, she who had descended from the original Mayflower settlers, she who was related to Florence Nightingale. After all, French royalty was in our blood.

I believed then in my mother's words, her perfection, her impeccable beauty: she carried herself upright; her lipstick never feathered, her eye shadow never smudged, her white leather sandals never carried a stray mark. Dinner arrived precisely on the table at 6 PM. All the bills in her wallet faced the same way. She bought me heaps of art books, and I received a science project in the mail, ordered by her, once a month. She laughed at *All in the Family*, enjoyed a good joke. Her outward appearance of precision and order, also imposed upon my possessions and my behavior, negated the flip side of my mother. Her rabid fear of people, her strangling rules of behavior and decorum, her grandiose disavowal of reality, her habit of sleeping until noon. Her play-acting at suicide.

My mother wasn't foolish enough to suffer the grand gestures of dressing outlandishly, wearing a colander as a hat, rouging her cheeks like a circus performer, or actually taking a knife to her throat, or a razor to her beautiful delicate wrists, which are now ropy with veins. She didn't burn down our house, spray paint swastikas on our car, or threaten complete strangers with strangulation. My own imagination lived deep in cliché: mentally ill people frothed at the mouth, wore strange clothing, had twisted bodies to reflect their twisted psyches, and lived chained to beds in rows inside dim, high-ceilinged wards.

The first time anyone mentioned "mental illness" to describe her, the words—from the court psychiatrist's analysis of my mother (an analysis she was forced to submit to because of the custody hearing, and the only psychiatric evaluation she ever submitted to)—didn't cohere for me. Her illness, though as vivid as a scarlet tanager's plumage, resembled a palimpsest in my mind compared to what the words "mental illness" conjured up. They offered no diagnosis upon which to hang my mother. No one took me aside and explained what she had, and neither my father nor I were allowed to read the report. All I had were those words: mentally ill. And strangely, I couldn't fit the two together: the words, her image. It was the image I had of her from childhood that stayed with me over the years: the perfectly dressed, albeit stiff, mother. It overwhelmed me with its bright and rigid appropriateness. How could she look perfect and be crazy?

I wouldn't figure out until I was well over 40 that she had Borderline Personality Disorder, or BPD, a disabling and strange affliction marked by, among other things, unstable and wildly swinging moods, suicidal tendencies, and, most frightening, severe spells of rage. More common than schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder, Borderlines account for 20 percent of all psychiatric hospitalizations, and 18 million Americans—6% of the population—have been diagnosed with it. People like my mother remain absent from that statistic. She never wanted help.

So all my life I've held in memory those two pictures of my mother, formed in my youth: madwoman and perfect housewife. That her real self lay somewhere between these two poles, that she was, as Mary Gordon says about her father, my "origin and my source... my shame and my delight" did not matter to me, nor did I think it would ever matter. But our younger selves have a way of rubbing up against our adult lives, creating

a frisson that, when it grows hot enough, becomes impossible to ignore. Although, unlike for Gordon, delight is too strong a word. It has taken me longer to uncover the gifts I've received from her illness: an often embarrassing excess of empathy, a hackneyed impulsivity to save the world, mad bright bits of insight; love for decayed beauty, for birds, for animals. I came to a point where, like Gordon, I had to ask "what is the thing behind the semblance of the thing?" That summer, over fifteen years ago in Cambridge, was just the beginning.

My mother still lives outside of Troy. When I began writing this book, I hadn't spoken to her or seen her in several decades. The last time I had seen her was a torrid late summer day, the summer I turned 18. A hot wind blew across the Hudson River, brought stinging grit into open car windows, into eyes and ears and throats. I was driving from my summer job to my foster home in Wynantskill; to do so I had to cross over the river and drive through Troy. Nudging my '69 Dodge Dart up Morrison Avenue, a steep hill that curved away from the water, when I reached the top, suddenly there she stood on a street corner. Waiting to cross at the light, she held her color-coordinated hat on in the breeze while her other arm gripped her white wicker purse. She looked like a mannequin in a store window: perfectly coiffed, dressed, accessorized and posed in a petite sized designer suit. Pale summer colors like a wren. Except for her lips, swathed in red lipstick: they moved, uttering a constant chorus under her breath the way they did when I lived with her.

My stomach tightened, my hands froze to the steering wheel, my shoulders hunched, and I sped past, thankful that the light was green, as if she might catch me and hold me there, an unruly specimen in the bell jar of her gaze. But she didn't see me. Behind her dark sunglasses she looked off across the street, her head held stiffly against the wind. I shook when I saw her and didn't stop shaking until I drove up the long gravel driveway where I lived. A few weeks later I left the area for college.

Over the years, every so often she would ferret my address out of some well-meaning individual, and mail me a letter. I would draw a line through my address, scrawl "return to sender," on it, and give it back to my mailman. She didn't want to acknowledge or didn't know that I was the one doing the crossing out, and called up the well-meaning individual to let them know their address for me was incorrect.

The late writer Lucy Grealy once told me that writing was a moral act, and perhaps my writing about my mother encompassed such a wish. If it did, it began unconsciously. For a long time, I resisted writing about her. Part of me felt I had no right, that her life didn't belong to me so how dare I commit her to permanent memory. But from the start, she hovered at the edges of my pages, and I struggled to keep her there, away from my view. Away from anyone's sight. I imagined her voice, sounding as it did on her answering machine message, high and insistent, saying: "How dare you write about me!" I imagined someone showing her a journal containing an essay with my byline, and her reading furiously, with shaking hands, her face turning the brilliant red of the frigate-bird's throat-pouch, her body tight like a hummingbird's.

Then there was the fear. It took me many years before I could—or wanted to—face my mother. As I struggled to write this book, my writer friends said I had to go back

and see her; for many years I resisted their advice. Writing was difficult enough. The idea of an actual visit pressed against those ingrained forces that still resided in me. If I conjured up those early years, my body tensed, my stomach cramped. Swallowed by fear, I could not even imagine it. As far away as I was from her, her voice still resounded in my head, shaming me into silence: I was bad, I was wrong. Standing over me, smelling of ammonia and juicy fruit gum, her jaw clicking up and down, a gaze cold and accusatory, a stance like armor. "That's not the way it was," I imagined her saying over my shoulder as I wrote, her voice shrill as my pen lines crawled across the page. Sometimes my body froze too, inured by the task of my mind: my right shoulder, right side of my back, my right arm all went numb. At times I couldn't hold a pen for the buzzing in my forearm. My voice grew aphoric, my vocal cords like sere blades of grass.

I didn't know that once I finally saw her, my fear would fall away of its own weight, and my past would rearrange itself suddenly, like when one turns a kaleidoscope and a pattern appears, burning and clear.

I go back in memory again to that day in Cambridge, after my encounter with the girls next door: I didn't know then, sitting on my steps in the late afternoon when the wind had turned and I could no longer smell the ocean, that I would ever feel anything other than an intense disdain and hatred towards her whenever a whiff of lipstick conjured up her oval visage, frozen smiled, or whenever I caught myself, preoccupied, biting the inside of my lower lip just the way she did. I didn't know then that perhaps my keeping my eyes open in the dark was a way to keep that darkness from overtaking me. Leaning against the house that day, my legs lolling across the steps, I only heard the crackle of the old man's radio—the patriarch who presided over the brood next-door—from around the other side of my yard. I didn't need a mother, I thought.

At 48, I bear her physical outlines: the ghost of her thigh, the thin beat of her collarbone across my chest, the specter of her eyelids, the shadow of tiny lines above my upper lip. Sometimes I long to erase her shadow in me, and on those days, when I recognize her likeness in the curve of my hip, or the tilt of my breasts, I take my fingertips and flatten them against my body, imagining my body a thin line of its own origin. At times I welcome her body in mine, the gift of her faultless and youthful skin on my face, her elegant echoes in the way I hold my wrists, in the way I gesture with the fine bones of my fingers.

I ended up writing about my mother because I couldn't not write about her, and once my mother got her foot on the page she ran roughshod all over it, dodging this way and that, leading me down the cobbled side streets of Troy—making me recall that as a child I called cobblestones “bark barks”—and onto Second Avenue and up Hoosick Street to Troy High School. She led me to my aunt's house in the Midwest, an aunt I hadn't seen in 32 years. She led me to the nether regions of myself and sometimes I feel I will never forgive her and sometimes I feel I will never stop wanting her, or some form of her, the person she could have been.