

“Mother’s Day is just a Hallmark holiday. It doesn’t mean anything,” she always said.

If I were going to write about my mother, I would say how she smelled, soft and pale pink, baby powder and soap. I would tell you how her skin was so white it was almost translucent, how her hair was always in place, her fingernails always filed—he did that for her. I would tell you about the dresses she wore, pale shapeless things, pastel and delicately flowered that concealed her deflated breasts and showed no sign of her ever-bulging belly. I would tell you what she liked—fresh strawberries from the garden, iced tea with mint and lemon, a quiet house after everyone had gone out, flowers and more flowers, all flowers except carnations and lilies, *too funeral*.

She loved a long hot bath before dinner, babies and very young children but only for a few minutes. She loved soft cheeses, Camembert and Brie, cow’s tongue and caviar, heavy cream on blueberry pie. More than anything my mother love to paint to the music of Johnny Cash—his gravelly voice and his oh-so-sad songs. She loved to read, her legs tucked up under her to hide her missing toe. She loved her children but more from a distance than in person.

And I would have to tell you what she hated: going on airplanes, cocktail parties, small talk, alcohol, other peoples’ pain, her own pain, especially her sadness, her father. I want to say she hated her mother, but I’m quite sure she didn’t. They were tangled together like a cow caught in barbed wire, painful to be together, painful to pull apart.

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If I were going to tell you about my father you would first need to know that I always thought everyone liked him, maybe because he was so loud and sure of himself. He wore plaid pants with checkered short-sleeved shirts in the summer. His cheeks were pink and smooth-shaven. He strode around as if he owned everything. He liked Fritos with a cold beer on summer days, and gin martinis the rest of the time.

Energy swirled around him the way I imagine it would around a tornado. I could always hear him coming because he was a whistler, constant tuneless sounds, never anything recognizable. He always had a Dalmatian following him, mostly they were male and named Chris. He loved the dogs more than his children, or that was the way it seemed. One of the Chris's bit my sister on the cheek and she needed stitches, but he blamed her for sitting on the dog's tail.

He liked driving big machines, tractors and graders. He liked driving trotting horses. He liked money a lot, the power it gave him and the things he could buy. He was generous if it meant he'd get his name on something, a building, a street, a park, the wing of a building, or even a bench. He claimed that the only book he ever read was *Rob Roy* and if he had to read another one, he'd read that again. He went to Yale so he must have read other books. I always believed that whatever he told me was true. He was an athlete, hockey, almost to the Olympics. He was an air force pilot in the Second World War, a Lieutenant Colonel stationed in England. He didn't come home except for leaves until I was three. He missed my third sister's birth because he was at a horse race in Belmont. He told my mother she couldn't have the baby on the Fourth of July, it was his biggest race of the year. Priorities.

He always came first.