

## Mother in Drag

Not only was Sonny married, but the years were stacked against us. He was 42; I was 23. He'd been married to Lindy for two decades; The longest I'd even known a guy was five months. Sonny's oldest daughter, Suzanne, was four years my junior, and Holly, the youngest, nine. Children of my own? I'd never considered it. Many nights I woke in a panic thinking if Sonny and I ever married, and Suzanne had a baby, I could be a step-grandmother by the age of 30.

Gossip wasn't the way Sonny wanted his wife to find out about us, so when a buddy at Mid-Atlantic Brokers saw his white Buick Regal in my Bethany Beach neighborhood one too many times, the guy sidled up to Sonny in the break room, said, "You got a girlfriend on Hickman Avenue?" Sonny profusely denied it, then refused to come to my apartment again. He was too cheap for a hotel, so, we hid. Every morning at the Dewey Beach marsh-side ramp he drove the Regal into a grove of white oaks, and we had coffee and sex in the backseat. At the time, I didn't see that as an act of cowardice. I thought Sonny was daring and youthful and fearless.

One Tuesday night, Sonny appeared unannounced at my apartment with a suitcase. He was tightlipped, wincing with pain whenever I asked what happened. He took to the sofa as if he'd been physically injured. I brought a warm compress for his forehead, kissed his hands. I kindly, carefully, asked him things such as, "How did she find out? Or, "You were so brave! You finally told her about us." Eventually, I took on the attitude of, why press him? I got what I wanted—he's here. On my couch! And, does it truly matter what happened between the two of them that night?

Sonny and I moved out of my apartment, rented a cedar-shake summer home in Slaughter Beach on the Delaware Bay, twenty-one miles from Lewes. Because the house is an off-season rental, the clock was ticking. In two weeks -- the Saturday before Memorial Day -- the Bay Bridge clogs with Washington, D.C., traffic, and our lease expires. Sonny wants to rent a dusty two-bedroom in a worn purple and blue gingerbread Victorian, five and a half blocks from Lindy. Holly can walk over for dinner, he says. Since we've been at Slaughter Beach, I've savored the miles between Sonny's old life and our new one. I don't know how I'll live any other way.

The last time Suzanne phoned, and I answered, she yelled, "Slut" into the receiver. Both Suzanne and Holly are furious at their father. They believe I want to replace their mother. When Sonny moved in with me, I thought our future would involve large amounts of time in bed. No wonder Sonny and I have begun to bicker.

Last night at dinner I tried to convince Sonny to stay here at Slaughter Beach. I'd grilled burgers, didn't burn them for a change, and we sat on the deck watching the Delaware Bay as the ferry inched toward Cape May, N.J.

"Come on, hon. We can make the money work." I said. "This place, the view? It's dreamy."

He picked up his plate. "I've told you. We can't afford it. And, I need to be near my daughter."

Beyond the sliding glass door, his beer bottle and knife dinked the tile countertop. Rents hike dramatically in the summer. The season runs like clockwork from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day. After Sonny and I move to Lewes, our bay house will rent for seven days what we

paid in two off-season months. I can't believe people are willing to fork over that kind of cash for a week at the shore, especially when the locals hate them. They're intentionally rude in gift shops and restaurants and the day after Labor Day when those weekenders drive across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, locals celebrate their departure with bonfires on the beach and T-shirts that say, "Don't let the Bridge Kick You in the Ass on the Way Home." I grew up west of here in Berlin, Maryland, heart of the Delmarva Peninsula's poultry country; we don't have tourists there. This unfriendliness, these unappreciative attitudes are foreign to me.

Sonny stood in the doorway, a fresh Rolling Rock in his hand.

"We might could find something out here," I said.

"Abbie? Think."

With my minimum wage job working the register at Jamesway in Rehoboth, and Sonny's hefty monthly payments to Lindy, and Suzanne's college tuition, we're in no position to pay summer rent or buy a house. "I just want this to last forever," I said, kissing his cheek for emphasis.

"You knew this was temporary. Plus," he said, taking an exaggerated whiff of the air. "Summer here stinks."

He meant the horseshoe crabs. Down the steps, past the dunes, they have arrived. Their black shells echo World War II helmets, and they drag wicked tails, sharp menacing rudders to plow through sand and muck and right their awkward selves when tipped over accidentally. "A living fossil" is how my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Dawes, had described them. Actually arachnids, not crabs, they resemble prehistoric creatures and have been called king crab or horse foot. Beneath their armor are their mouths, surrounded by a dozen claw-like legs.

On the days before and after the first moon in May they are beckoned by furious tidal forces from the floor of the Delaware Bay. With hooked claws, the males attach themselves to the females who each lay up to 80,000 salty green eggs. On the beach right now, there are no more than fifty horseshoe crabs. But tonight the moon is at its fullest, its most powerful, strong enough to tow hundreds more. Tomorrow the beach will glisten like glossy black cobblestones. I'd been looking forward to this experience for months.

“Oh, Sonny, it's going to be magical.”

“If you like the smell of death.”

Other than magic, how else could the journey of these creatures signaled from the bay by some primeval force be explained? And the birds? Soon the red knots, a tiny sandpiper en route to the Arctic from South America, will arrive en masse. After the male horseshoe crabs fertilize the eggs, and cover them with sand they'll attempt to return to the floor of the bay against the tidal pull, against the waning moon, throwing their awkward helmets at breaking waves. They'll try to roll back into the swells, but those odd bodies will betray them. They'll become prisoners on their backs, unable to flip over, eventually rotting in the sun. The red knots will gorge on the slippery eggs, but they're picky, shoving aside stale eggs for the plump and moist. Surplus eggs, like the trapped horseshoe crabs, will also decompose in the heat. *That* is the smell Sonny is talking about.

“It's not death at all,” I said. But I can't quite describe it. Not seeing eye to eye with Sonny rattles me. I miss how we finished each other's sentences and stayed up all night to talk.

“What the hell is it then?”

To bulk up for their 9,000 mile journey to the Arctic each of the tiny red knots must consume 100,000 to 200,000 horseshoe crab eggs. I imagine the insatiable desire a bird must

have to voyage halfway around the world. Is it an intense physical yearning? Is it a voice of direction? Or, is it a kick in the butt like the Chesapeake Bay Bridge at Labor Day? This is not just about coincidence and timing. I am sure of it. This is about an unquenchable appetite.

“Hunger,” I said, positive that I’d nailed it. “It’s definitely the smell of hunger.”

Sonny got up for another beer. He didn’t look at me, didn’t bask with me in my newfound explanation. In fact, his attitude was uncharacteristically cold. “Wait a couple more days, and that magic’ll wear off. Then see if that’s what you think. The stink’ll get so bad, you’d wish the eelers would come out here like they used to and take ‘em off our hands, chop ‘em to bits for bait.”

The next morning, driving into town, I couldn’t think. At Oyster Rocks Road, I turned off Route One to Hopkins Bar. Settling my Plymouth Horizon into the back curve of the parking lot with a sweet view of the dawning green sorghum fields felt like old times. There’s a pay phone by the front door of the bar. We’d meet here on Saturday mornings, buy duck hunter’s brandy. The cheaper the better, leave my car, drive to the Broadkill River, get drunk and make love in a duck blind.

Sonny was working up in Dover for the day and had asked me to pick up Holly at the high school. It was her night to stay with us, and I’d have to go up to the school, sign her out of soccer practice. For this event, I’d dressed in a new shirt I found on the bargain rack in the ladies’ section of Jamesway. It was polished and sateen. Too sophisticated for me. I’d put on leather loafers instead of sneakers, khaki slacks. I’d pulled back my hair with a silky pink elastic.

Even with this costume, I didn't look like a mother. I looked like someone trying to look like a mother, like a mother in drag.

I rolled down the window appreciating the silence. I didn't want to move to town. What I wanted to do was bring Sonny out here tomorrow morning. We could take a walk up the Broadkill to our old duck blind, spike our coffee with brandy, call in sick to work. Then, I'd try with more leverage to convince Sonny this is where we need to stay. But, damn. What do we do about Holly?

On a bench out front, two regulars wearing wool jackets and caps packed tobacco into pipes. They sucked smoke, released it into grateful, gray vapors that floated away toward the marsh. What if I simply asked Abbie if she'd rather go to her mom's instead of with me? I'd score a point or two in her favor, get some extra time alone with Sonny. I sat there for ten minutes deciding until one of the old men nodded my way. I'm certain he was the hunter who came up on us one morning, naked and drunk. I gave him a nod back.

Holly slinked down into the seat so her shoulders are inside of the shell of her black jacket. This is what she did when she was with me—perfected her silent treatment. She had a sweet face, cheekbones like her dad, the narrow nose of her mother. She wore a pink baseball cap that matched her Chuck Taylors. The idea of a night with her dad softened me toward her. “I've got a deal for you. You need time with your mom?”

She straightened up. “Please, Abbie? My dad doesn't care if I'm home or not,” she says. “All he wants is to spend time with *you*.”

“That's not true, Holly.” I hated the sound of my own voice when I spoke to her. I was so unnatural. Who did I think I am?

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.” I say, but I wish I was.

When we first met at the Jamesway, the one and only day I ever worked Express Checkout, I was Sonny’s priority. In the middle of the night, he’d get out of bed and drive to Bethany Beach where I lived with Sadie. Once he used the excuse that he needed gas in the car. As if he had woken at two a.m., and said, “Oh no! I need a full tank of gas! I can’t sleep until I get one.” Now, it’s as if he wants to win Sussex County Father of the Year and could care less about spending time with me.

. “This damn road,” I say, suddenly aware of an aching animosity to the very landscape I adored not a half hour before. “Cuts right through the entire state. From down here in the sticks of Sussex County all the way to Wilmington. Drive the whole state in less than three hours. What kind of a state has only three counties? God. Whoever heard of that?”

Holly smiles. “I know,” she says. “I want out of here when I grow up.”

“Me, too.”

Holly smiles. “You *are* grown up.”

“That’s what you think,” I said, and she grinned. We pass the road to Milton. There’s a new shopping center going up. I turn the radio to WRNR in Baltimore. This time I don’t mind the silence. It’s comfortable.

“How old are you, Abbie?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Come on.

“Twenty-four.”

Holly made a face. “Ick. That’s nine years older than me.” She went on, counting on her fingers. Five years older--”

“I know. I know.”

She smiled, twisted in her seat to fiddle with the radio. “When my mom and dad split up, my dad said to think of it like I had three parents. But it’s more like you’re a sister. This is weird, but I always did want another big sister. Suzie is such a bitch.”

Score Fleetwood Mac comes on the radio. I get a vision of Sonny in that white shirt and green tie I bought him at Peebles. I hope we can recapture a bit of the desire we had before things went sour. I sing along, “Go your own way.”

Holly says, “You like Stevie Nicks?”

“I remember the day my mom bought this album. We played it all day.”

“Your mom bought it for you?” she said. “My mom never buys me any music.”

Score, I thought smugly. Maybe I did earn a few points with Holly.

We talked about music, her losing soccer team as we turned off on Kings Highway toward Lewes. There’s was an old farmhouse on the right. A tractor paced the wide field of hay. The road forked. Kings Highway continued into the town of Lewes, and to the right the road followed a bridge to the cape where the lower Delaware Bay and the Atlantic Ocean converge.

Nearly a year ago, when I first met Sonny, he took me on a drive, and we went over this very bridge. As we crested the top, he slowed and with a dramatic sweep of his arm, waved over the valley saying, “This too can be yours.”

The bridge was out of our way. We didn’t need to go that route, but I went regardless because I want to remind myself of what Sonny had to offer.

“So, Abbie. Tell me the truth.”



“Truth about what?”

“Are you going to marry my dad?”

“Get married? Nobody’s getting married till there’s a divorce.”

“But would you?”

We are at the very top of the bridge, and I looked down and saw everything that could be mine -- the budding yellow poplars, the ripening chartreuse fields. Sonny’s grin.

“You could have kids,” Holly says. “Suzanne wants to have five one day.”

“A *baby*?” I said.

“Right now all I want is,” I began, but didn’t finish my sentence. Could I admit that all I wanted was her father? The car was on the downside of the bridge and coasting, but I felt like we were plunging into a ravine. I braked too soon; Holly gripped the dash.

“Where’d *you* learn to drive?” she said.

I turned left, drove over the Rehoboth-Lewes Canal to Third Street, made a right on Mulberry to Market Street. When I parked in front of the house, Holly got out of the car and was gone, just like that. She’d left her backpack, her soccer cleats, her purse. “Holly?” I called, then grabbed her gear, waited by the car until I realized I’ll have to walk them to the house myself.

At the door, I dropped Holly’s things, turned to leave, but I smelled cookies. Oatmeal and chocolate, raisins and coconut. I stopped just for a moment to glance through the screen door, feeling envious of something I can’t quite pin down. I heard mother and daughter talking. I think of my own mother. She might have bought record albums, but she never made cookies. I wonder how her latest boyfriend’s treating her. I should call. I calculate: Mom’s 58 years old, 16 years older than Sonny. She’s closer by three years to him than me. Suddenly, there is Lindy staring at me through the screen door.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

Lindy is beautiful. You can look at her children and see it. High cheekbones, searing blue eyes. “Holly really wanted to be with you this weekend; I told her it was okay.” This was the first time I’d spoken to her. It’s hard to speak to someone with such a perfect profile. I stuttered a little which is unlike me.

“Is that so?” she said. The smirk on her face made me go cold.

“I thought it was the right thing to do.” I hoped Holly wasn’t listening to us but in case she was I added, “I like spending time with Holly.”

“I want to tell you something, Abbie. You are in this for the long haul. If you want to take care of my children, you have to take care of them. You can’t just bring Holly back when you feel like it.”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said looked through the screen for Holly. All I saw was a meshed version of what is really inside. Afternoon light comes through the open windows splaying across tables and straight back chairs and bookshelves and a polished wood floor the color of honey. How could I ever recreate something like this?

Lindy opened the door, put a hand on my shoulder. “Down the stairs.”

We crossed the wide yard and I thought of something Sonny said about the place we’re renting. He complained about it being small, though this house – the one he shared with Lindy and the kids -- isn’t as big as the Victorians and saltboxes common to Sussex County. This is a two-bedroom Dutch whaler’s cottage. It’s the yard that’s spacious. It’s deep and green with tidy beds of yellow pansies and variegated periwinkles. Our place faces the Delaware Bay but on the back side has a plot of grass so small Sonny says it takes longer to piss on it than it does to mow it.

Lindy is taller than me, and she got in my face. When I took a step down into the street, she stayed on the curb. I looked up into her eyes; I couldn't help it. She was that pretty. Light blue with the tiniest flecks of navy, thick dark hair with a curl to it. I felt defeated and pathetic.

"Let me remind you," she said. "Life is more than fucking in cars."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play the prude. Tell me. Is it? Is it as much fun?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." God, I hoped Holly didn't hear, and as I turned to get to my car, Lindy grabbed my arm.

"Is all this," Lindy says, talking to me as if I'm a three-year-old, "As much fun as you thought it would be? Stay right here," Lindy says. "I'll refresh your memory." She walked up to the house, and stopped. Her finger jabbed the air. "Don't you even think about leaving."

I ran. I fought my pockets for the car keys, and finally got the right one into the ignition. My hands shook. I couldn't get the car started fast enough. She was already running back down the steps toward me. I attempted to start the car, then flooded it. The passenger door opened, and she flung a wad of pastel fabric at me.

At first, I couldn't sort out what it was, and even picked it up to examine it. "Shit," I said, and dropped the familiar lavender and pink polka dot design. My underwear.

"You did this," she shouted. "You did this to me."

Behind us, across the tidy lawn and raised beds of pansies and periwinkles, the screen door opened. Holly said, "Mom?" She starts down the steps. "Mom? What's wrong?"

Lindy was crying, shamelessly wiping tears with the back of her hand. "Holly," she said, her voice all choked, "I'm okay. Go back inside."

Holly studied the scene -- the profile of her weeping mother, the pastel panties in my hand, and for the longest, most uncomfortable time, my guilty face. Her fourteen-year-old self came to a conclusion that caused her to age before my eyes. While Lindy blew her nose, and composed herself, Holly mouthed to me, "I hate you, bitch."

My bottom lip quivered; I bit it to stop the tears. Lindy assured Holly she's was fine, told her to please go inside, and when the door slammed, I knew it was the last I'd ever see of that girl.

"You," Lindy says, her pretty blue eyes red and moist now. "You did this on purpose. Didn't you?"

I studied the shiny fabric in my hand. "Yes."

"I knew it," she yelled. "I told Sonny you were nothing but a conniving little whore. I told him you orchestrated everything."

I'm not the type to cry in front of others, but I had a hard time holding back. I couldn't believe this. "Sonny told *me* that he told *you* he was leaving you for good," and soon as it came out of my mouth, I heard the teenager in my voice.

"Oh? Is that what he said?" Lindy's smile made me go cold. "I think you need to talk to your little Sonny about all of this."

"What do you mean?"

"You heard me. Ask him. Go," she said.

"But wait," I said, getting out of the car, calling to her as she headed to the house. She'd stopped crying, and had her hands on her hips. She was more confident now, haughty. "Tell me what happened. Don't just leave me like this."

She shouted, and I'm sure Holly and the neighbors and anyone else within range heard. "You don't even know what it is to be a woman."

In Rehoboth Beach I bought a six pack of Rolling Rock at Spence's Liquors. At Grotto's Pizza, I stood at the counter to order spinach and sausage calzones, then told the man, "Nevermind." I didn't know what would happen, but I knew tonight Sonny wouldn't want his favorite take-out dinner.

Outside Browseabout Books, I sat with my six-pack on a bench, reached into my purse for the underwear. I heard the Atlantic break away in patient waves. Dolle's taffy house was closed for the day, but the air smelled candy sweet and sticky.

There's something I've never told anyone. When I met Sonny, the love-making in cars was effortless, but so was the sneaking around. It wasn't until six months of undressing in the back of that car that I realized Sonny didn't mind waiting. I began to worry that he might not ever leave Lindy. Time, he kept telling me, I need time.

The idea to just give this a little bit of a nudge came as I shopped at the Jamesway one Saturday afternoon after my shift. I discovered the mix and match sale -- five bikinis for five dollars and with my employee discount, that's quite a save. I imagined my own suffering finally over. From that moment on, I kept five pairs of underwear in my purse in anticipation of the perfect moment.

I decided to take matters into my own hands. I ran through the short list of possibilities which included leaving mysterious notes informing Lindy of her husband's indiscretions as well as simply walking up to their door and confessing to Lindy about the affair, then sitting back and

taking my chances on the fallout. But I couldn't do those things. I truly didn't want to make Sonny angry at me.

By nature, I am forgetful. Top that with a little passion and I can't remember my middle name. Sonny and Lindy switched the Buick and the minivan quite often, so Sonny's greatest fear was that I might leave something behind in the Buick Regal before Lindy drove it to work or in the kids' carpool. Before we said goodbye, he began patting me down like a cop. He'd rub his palms along my back to locate the bra strap, reach beneath my Jamesway uniform black cotton skirt for confirmation I was officially covered. He thought he was being helpful, protecting us both from Lindy. He never dreamed that my forgetfulness was intentional. He simply thought that our backseat sessions left me in such a deep animal stupor that I was unaware I was leaving without the undergarments I'd started the day with.

One morning, as Sonny and I sat half-dressed in the backseat of the Regal, Sonny buttoned his shirt, then went through a ritual of checking and double checking that I was fully redressed – all bras, earrings, socks, buttons, hair clasps -- clearly accounted for. He was also easily distracted, so when I maneuvered myself behind him, wrapping my legs around his waist - I also shut my eyes, made a wish, lobbed the wadded up underwear toward the floor of the driver's side, just out of sight.

In Rehoboth, the streets were still fairly empty, except for a young couple window shopping. Soon, the town would be so crowded, and I'd have to take a ticket to get a seat on that bench. I took the underwear out of my purse. The fine polyester was smooth in my palm. Sitting there, I thought of Lindy's face, the damage I'd done. What was it that Lindy meant? I had always assumed Sonny wanted to be with me. I tightened my fist, then lobbed the underwear at the trash can. They parachuted to the sidewalk, two feet shy of the can, but right at the feet of the

young couple. They stopped, gasped; the woman giggled. Embarrassed, I said, “Excuse me,” then picked them up, dashed to my car. Halfway home, I rolled down the window and released them on Route One.

As soon as I pulled open the door, Sonny said, his back to me, “How could you?”

He sat at the kitchen table, the sliding glass door open to the bay. He’d loosened his tie, the one with the Mid-Atlantic Brokers logo – the letters “M” and “A” in red beneath a black bear, spine hunched, ready to attack. I set down the beer, opened two. Outside, the setting sun was positioned directly over the Cape May ferry like a purple and red bomb. The Adirondack chairs pointed toward the bay, waiting.

“I wanted to be alone with you is what I wanted. Lindy told me to ask you something.”

He glanced at the beer, then pulled car keys from his pocket. From his look, I could tell Lindy had called, but I had no idea what she’d told him.

“I’m going to go get Holly.”

His tone had a bite to it I’ve never heard. “What happened that night you came to my apartment?”

“This isn’t going to work.”

“You didn’t want to leave, did you?”

He took the beer, went outside to the deck, collapsed in the waiting chair.

I sat down next to him wishing I had something stronger, a shot of that duck-hunter’s brandy. “What happened that night. There’s something you’re not telling me.”

She went out to the car to go to buy ice cream for Holly. She had a tooth removed. She found the underwear then.”

I finished off my beer. When I set the empty on the arm of the chair, he said, “It nearly killed her.”

The porch deepened in shadows. “When you left that morning, you had all your clothes on,” he said. “Your underwear, too. I told Lindy that.”

“You *told* her that?”

I said, ‘Would I be so careless to let her leave them on the floorboard?’ Lindy said she knows women like you, that you had to have done it intentionally. I couldn’t believe that.”

“I made things happen a little quicker is all. If I hadn’t, you’d still be sneaking out to see me. We’d still be screwing around in that damn car.”

After a while, as if he was dreaming, he said, “Those were such good times. I don’t understand why you sabotaged what we had together.”

“In the backseat of a Buick? Forever and ever? You planned to string me along as far as I could take it, didn’t you?”

When he didn’t answer, I sat down on the ground in front of him. “Didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, Abbie

My head was spinning. If I had let things run their course, I wondered, what would have happened? When he turned to me, his eyes all guilty and sad, he said, “Lindy won’t take me back. After all these years,” he said.

I imagined Sonny on his knees begging. I looked away. I’d almost forgotten this was the night of magic, the night the moon hauled hundreds of crabs off the floor of the bay. But how could I possibly believe in magic now?

“How many times did you ask?” I said.



Sonny rubbed his hand through his hair. “Just the once?” The eagerness in his voice made me sick.

“Well, then,” I said. “Ask again.”

When he left, I opened another beer, estimated the contents of my bank account, my miserable job at Jamesway. It took nearly an hour to rehash everything that had happened, and then I started over again. I had no idea where I’d go. I’d call my mother, see if she had room for me. And, then a crazy thought occurred. What if Lindy *didn’t* take Sonny back? I surely wouldn’t be his consolation prize again.

I dozed for a while in my chair until the full moon was a shimmering milky white, and I was awakened by a sensation so subtle I almost missed it. It wasn’t the whispering I imagined. In fact, it wasn’t a sound at all, but an irresistible pricking of skin, like needle pulling thread. I followed it down the steps to the shore. I waded into the frigid, silver water, drifted through pearly breakers. Horseshoe crabs scuttled past, bottoms up, mouths tasting salt and oil. They nipped my fingers. I wanted to be intoxicated by the moon, not guided by my heart. I can’t believe I wished it, but I did. Please Lindy, take him back.

I assumed she’d found the underwear, but of course, I couldn’t come right out and ask Sonny. Instead,

His wife of twenty-one years made sure it didn't. Lindy's lawyer in Dover drew up a temporary arrangement (mind you, no divorce papers have been filed). And, Sonny – or Sonny and I – have fourteen-year-old Holly on the weekends and every Wednesday.

Holly resents this setup. She misses her friends, says we live in the boonies. She and her mother live in Lewes, and because Sonny and I wanted to get as far away from Lindy as possible