

MOTHERTHLY LOVE

She comes into the kitchen while I'm scrubbing the pan from tonight's dinner. She's wearing high heels that boost her to my level and that dress. I've tried several times to misplace that dress after the laundry, but she always finds it. She bought the dress while taking Sophie shopping at Forever 21, an age-inappropriate store for both. I don't expect her to wear black, but that dress is a lurid red with a low-cut front showcasing her assets which, sadly, I did not inherit. If Steve ever says "I just saw your mom's boobs" I will finally rip that dress to shreds.

"Why are you dressed up?" I ask.

"I'm going out."

"Now? It's so late."

"It's not even 9 PM," she laughs. "I seem to recall you once started your evening at this hour."

Sure, over 20 years ago. These days being in bed by 9 PM is all I need to celebrate. Tonight, I'll once again try to read the latest book club pick – a 500-page clunker set in 16th century Istanbul. But it won't be long before my eyes start drooping shut. There was a lengthy morning staff meeting, two-hour conference call and the completion of several briefs. Then, since every Tuesday afternoon I take care of the kids, I rushed to pick up Sophie from karate class and Isabel from a play date and bought groceries to make lasagna. With a little luck, I will be asleep before 10. Fortunately, Steve and I had sex last night, so that will probably be it for the week.

"You didn't mention that you were going out," I say.

She laughs. "I didn't know I was until now."

"Who are you meeting?"

I hope she will say Barbara and/or Miriam, two friends she met a few years ago. The Golden Girls, as they've dubbed themselves, were once so rowdy they were thrown out of happy hour at Uncle Julio's Restaurant. Mom posted on Facebook a photo of a young, blond hostess, her face contorted in anger, escorting out the door three giggly older women holding oversized Margaritas. Mom had written the words "Party Pooper" under the caption.

"No one you know."

There is a long pause. She's dying for me to ask: How old is he? Is he divorced or widowed? How did he complete the online question; "When we meet remember me to tell you the story of how I..." or "My idea of a perfect date is..."

But I concentrate on scouring the pan, wondering why I feel the need to produce a dish as elaborate as lasagna when I came out just fine eating Hamburger Helper. Then Sophie, dressed in her princess nightgown, comes bounding into the kitchen, grabs me by the waist and squeezes. I can smell the floral tones of her freshly washed hair.

“Hello, my love,” she says in an overly dramatic voice that is a remnant of the fourth-grade holiday show.

“Hello, my darling,” I reply in an equally dramatic voice.

“Grandma why are you wearing your 21 dress?”

I turn around and shoot my mother the look. I’ve told her several times not to talk about any of this in front of the girls. It’s not appropriate for them to know about her dating life, even if she spins the details into a children’s story. As a retired children’s librarian, my mother is actually very good at that. She told them about Simon, the retired landscape architect, who supposedly had seven cats named after the dwarfs. And Leon, the still-practicing orthodontist, who claimed to have straightened the overbite of a very well-known Hollywood teeny bopper star whose name he could not reveal. The girls loved the stories, but they just made me wonder the details she doesn’t reveal.

“I’m going out with a friend,” my mother tells Sophie.

“Yuri?” Sophie asks.

My mother’s lips form into a tight smile, the kind she assumed whenever my paternal grandmother came to visit. Yuri, the Russian-born art collector, owned a genuine Faberge egg, decorated with rose-shaped diamonds, pink enamel roses and emerald green leaves that was worth a small fortune. Mom spun out a narrative of the egg’s royal history as a gift from Tsar Nicholas II to his wife. Sophie was so rivetted by the so-called “Yuri and the Egg” story that she looked up details online about Faberge eggs which prompted several questions about Tsarist Russia. Steve marveled that my mother’s dating life devolved into a history lesson. I secretly obsessed as to whether Mom had personally seen the safe’s location, said to be under Yuri’s antique sleigh bed.

“No sweetie, not Yuri, someone else.”

Only yesterday, Steve mentioned that it had been awhile since my mother had mentioned Yuri. I had responded, “Thank God.”

“What’s your new friend’s name?” Sophie asks. She is using a kitchen chair to swing back and forth, her small legs pumping vigorously under the nightgown and her face becoming sweaty with the exertion.

“Thaddeus.”

Sophie wrinkles her nose, “What kind of name is that.”

“Sophs, did you finish that book report?” I ask.

“It’s an old American name, he had a relative on the Mayflower,” my mother offers.

“What’s the Mayflower?” Sophie asked.

“You don’t know what the Mayflower is? Goodness gracious, what are they teaching you in that pricy school?” My mother shrieked.

“Sophs,” I say, “The book report.”

“Done, done, done!” Sophie jumps down and runs to the freezer to rummage through the contents. Sometimes ADHD is a real asset. She extracts a chocolate ice cream pop and slams the freezer shut.

“Why don’t you go upstairs to finish that?” I suggest.

“You’re letting me take this upstairs?” Sophie asks, knowing that’s against my usual rules.

“For tonight and I’ll come up soon.”

Sophie kisses her grandmother goodnight.

“Are you going to a movie?” She asks.

Mom hands her a napkin.

“Not on a first date, darling,” says Mom.

“Sophs,” I spin around. “Finish that ice cream upstairs and make sure your schoolbag is ready for tomorrow.”

“Have fun tonight, grandma,” Sophie yells as she pounds upstairs.

Mom takes out her small gold compact and powders her nose. When I was 16, she told me a shiny nose was very unattractive. In the dramatic style which characterized my teens, I threw her proffered compact so hard on the floor that it broke and ran crying to my father who assured me that I was always beautiful – shiny nose or not. Now I didn’t go anywhere without a powder compact.

I rinse off the last of the grease. The pan still looks scorched in spots, probably permanent so that I just spent the last ten minutes wasting my time.

“Where are you going with this Thaddeus?” I ask.

“To his home. He says he has a wine collection and that he’ll open something special.” She giggles, a matching accessory to the dress. “I am really quite shocked that Sophie has never heard of the Mayflower. In my day, even kids younger than fourth grade knew about that.”

“How many times have you gone out with him?” I demand.

“Technically this is our first date, but we’ve been texting quite a bit over the past two days.”

That solves the mystery of the obsessive perusal of her phone during dinner in defiance of our gadget ban during meals. She refused to put away her phone, saying she was consoling Miriam who had received some bad medical news. Now I’ve caught her in another lie.

“You’re going to the home of a man you’ve never met?”

This was a woman who forbade me as a child from jumping off diving boards because she had a friend who became paralyzed after the board hit him in the head. This was a woman who called the tour leader every few days – in the pre-cell phone period– when I was on a youth trip to France to make sure I was okay.

“I’m taking my own car. If there’s anything I don’t feel uncomfortable with I’ll just leave.” Then she adds quietly, “I’ve done that before.”

That time was, I believe, her first date after 35 years of marriage. The sound of the front door rattling awoke me that night, around midnight on a Friday. Steve slept through it, naturally, but I ran toward the noise and straight into my mother.

Her eye make-up was smudged, and her face looked shockingly old, shorn of the usual skillful attempts she made to hide the lines and blemishes. She was shaking. I pleaded with her to tell me what had happened. But she said it was nothing and told me to go to sleep. I could hear her calling Miriam as she disappeared downstairs to her bedroom.

I thought that would be the end of the dating. But within a few days her phone was buzzing, she was stepping onto the porch even when it was pouring rain, talking about getting a face lift and giggling filled our house again.

“Don’t the dating sites suggest that on the first date you meet somewhere public?” I ask.

“Last time I met someone in Starbuck’s and it was horrible. They don’t even clean the tables there. Besides, I’ve never met anyone with a wine collection.”

“That’s a terrible excuse and you know it.”

“It will be fine. Just look at his pictures and you’ll see that you have nothing to worry about.!”

I really, really don't enjoy looking at these photos of these old men who I know Steve will one day resemble. But she shoves them in my face. This one is of a short man with puffs of white hair, resembling a used Brillo pad. The photo roll shows him playing tennis and posing alongside a baby and a very attractive young blond we assume/hope is his daughter. It makes me wonder if my father had been the one left widowed whether he would be posting a photo of the two of us.

"These photos do nothing to allay my concerns," I say.

"What is it you think could happen, Carrie?"

"Let's see... he could be a rapist, a sadist, a crook." I'm still not sure which one of these described *Harry, 69, accountant from Rockville*.

"If it's money he's after I'll have the last laugh there," she says.

In our household, we abide by a rule common among dictatorships; certain subjects are strictly off-limits. One of them is that my mother is broke. It wasn't supposed to be that way. My father owned a window glass business and I had never felt financially deprived as a child. My parents put me through private college and graduate school. My mother retired at age 64 and my father, a few years older, was planning to work until age 70 before turning the glass company over to my cousin since it was clear I had no interest running it.

Those plans were all shattered when my father was killed in a car accident. Among the aftershocks of this tragedy was the discovery that the business was in arrears, there was a second mortgage on the house and massive credit card debt. My mother, who like a lot of women had left all financial details to her husband, was as surprised as any of us. She was going to have to sell her house and go back to work.

Within the same week, Agnieszka, our Polish *au pair*, abruptly announced that she was breaking her contract to move in with her new American boyfriend. Steve and I were overworked professionals who needed help with our two young children. As we looked through photos of blond Eastern European girls desperate to come to America, Steve, an economist, said it first:

"It's time we took that mother in law suite literally."

At first, I thought he meant my mother-in-law, Amanda, who was thrice divorced but had plenty of money and spent most of her time taking cruises around the world. Then I understood that he meant my mother.

"She'll never go for it," I insisted.

“She will,” Steve insisted. “The question is, will you?”

I was 18 when I left home for college halfway across the country and then settled in New York. Determined to claim my independence, I spoke to my mother intermittently. Several years ago, when my work brought me back to my home state, I was a different woman: a young, working mother. My mother proved to be a devoted grandmother in sharp contrast to Amanda who was barely around. It didn't make sense to employ another Eastern European blond when we had a worthy cause close to home.

My mother agreed immediately to the plan, perhaps because she didn't have much of a choice. Steve even insisted she receive the modest stipend we paid the au pairs, but she joked that she would take it off our inheritance. We sealed it all in a contract written by a lawyer and an economist.

My mother moved in on a Saturday morning. The move went quickly because she dispensed with most of the furniture that had formed the backdrop of my childhood. Part of me wanted her to fight to keep the oak dining room table where we had eaten family dinners and the orange couch in our television room on which I had thrown up after drinking too much Tequila at an 11th grade party with Matt, my first boyfriend. But I also had no room for any of that furniture in my house.

After all her moving boxes were delivered to her basement bedroom, my mother urged me and Steve to take the rest of the day off.

“That's why I'm here,” she said.

Steve went off to the gym with plans to have lunch with an old college friend. I went to the office to catch up on some work and expected to return home around 6 PM. My mother would chauffeur the kids to their respective play dates. That day I worked on my billable hours report and read over the appeal of a bankruptcy case. It was one of those rare days when everything in the universe felt in order. My kids were out with friends, my husband who worked a long work week was getting a day off and my widowed mother was financially secure and spending time with her beloved grandchildren. To prolong the good feeling, I booked a yoga class and headed home to change my clothes.

My mother's car was parked outside. The house was quiet and clean. Mom had washed the breakfast dishes, something Agnieszka had never done even though it was part of her job description.

I descended downstairs to pick up my gym clothes which I had put that morning in the dryer. From the stairs I could see that those clothes, and the rest of the load, were folded neatly, clearly by my mother, on top of the closed dryer. But there was another sound, one of moaning and whizzing that became louder as I approached. My mother's bedroom door was half ajar, just

enough so I could see her spread-eagle on the bed, my great-aunt's crocheted blanket draped partway over the bottom half of her body. I could see her hand. The hand, which I took in mine to cross streets, which combed through the lice I caught in second grade and which always smelled of Jergens lotion. It was attached to an electric device that was fastened onto her crotch.

The sound of my feet retreating upstairs in a hurry may have alerted her to my presence. Or not. I'll never know. I quickly changed into shorts and a t-shirt and sprinted out the door toward the park. The mood and lack of clothes appropriate for yoga had morphed into the urgency for taking a run. It was an unusual hot day, but I've never run so far. And although passing that vibrating washing machine always reminds me of it, I've tried to put that incident out of my mind and never told anyone, even Steve, about it.

The book club novel was so soporific that I fell asleep before Steve had even come to bed. After a few hours, I awoke to his snoring and following some tossing and turning determined that I wasn't going back to sleep. I headed downstairs toward the kitchen for a glass of water. The porch light illuminated the foyer, proof that Mom wasn't home since she was always reminding everyone else to turn it off. A quick look in the basement confirmed her absence. I called her phone, but it was turned off. I had an early meeting tomorrow which required me to get a good night's sleep. But there was no chance of sleeping now.

Every Friday and Saturday night during my last two years of high school, I promised my mother I would be home by midnight. But I always stayed out much later, especially after Matt and I started dating. I came home to find my father, an insomniac, waiting up for me, glass of whiskey in hand and watching a documentary. Having had few friends as a child, he was pleased by my sociability. He always promised to tell my sleeping mother that I had come home on time. I had loved then that he was willing to lie for me, although I'd certainly kill Steve if ever did that with one of our girls.

My father told me several times that I was the smart one in the family and encouraged me to do better than he had. No one was prouder than him when I graduated from law school.

Many years later, I was at work that morning when my mother called and told me there had been an accident and to come over immediately. I didn't think it was anything to be worried about both because of her calm tone and the fact that it was daytime. I believed then that bad things only happened at night. But it had happened in daylight. My mother told my father had driven out to buy some toilet paper when a car ran a red light and hit him. He was killed instantly.

My fury mobilized into action. I going to get the other driver. We would sue him or her and make sure they were looked away forever. My mother, who was remarkably calm, let me go on for a while and then spoke:

“The other driver was a woman, Carrie. A 90-year-old woman.”

Her name was Edna and she lived alone. Both her kids were out in California. I reached her daughter, Maureen, by phone, intending to inform her that I would be taking them to court for civil damages. She told me that she had begged her mother to go into a nursing home or get a full-time nurse.

“She refused and because she was healthy we didn’t have any legal rights to force her,” said Maureen. “But she promised me she would stop driving.”

Edna had driven out that day to visit a sick friend. She herself died a few months later from a stroke, likely brought on by stress caused by the accident. I blamed my mother for not stocking enough toilet paper or not going out herself to buy it until Steve pointed out the obvious: that if she had gone out she likely would have been the one hit.

I must have dozed off when I heard the door slam. I was up immediately to block her path.

“Oh my gosh, Carrie, you scared me,” she said.

“I scared you? I’ve been up worried about you. Why didn’t you turn on your phone?”

“The battery died.”

“I couldn’t sleep because I was so worried about you.”

“I’m here and it’s late. We should both go to bed.”

I needed to sleep. I knew that. But I wouldn’t let her. Not yet. As if sensing that she sat down on the stripped wing-backed chair, the only piece of furniture in the room that had originally been hers. The chair was too big for the living room, but I wanted it here. She had sat in that chair reading books, so she could make recommendations in the library. I had sat in that chair and played with Barbie, studied my vocabulary words for the verbal SAT and planned the seating arrangement for my wedding.

She kicked off her high heels, which must have been a struggle to wear. She rubbed her feet and the dress crumpled around her, exposing her lacy scaly blue veins and a sagging paunch.

“It must have been a great date,” I said.

She shrugged. “It was okay.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He’s a nice enough man, but he’s not for me.”

“Really, but you were gone hours.”

She didn’t say anything.

“He’s not for me,” she repeated.

She blew her nose, an undignified honk. When she took away the tissue, I saw that her eyeliner and mascara were running.

“If it’s no big deal, why are you so upset?” I asked.

“I miss him,” she said softly.

It had been awhile since I heard her speak about Dad. I had preferred him to her in my youth, but he was a difficult man, even I knew that: stubborn, self-absorbed and strict with his employees. But with me, he was always attentive, affectionate and encouraging.

“I miss him, too,” I said.

“I mean Yuri. I miss Yuri.”

“Yuri?”

The foreignness of his name and the meaningless role he played in our family struck me in contrast to my father. Who cared about Yuri and his ridiculous Faberge egg?

“I fell for him,” she said.

“Why?”

I had never met him, just seen the photos of a heavyset and tall man with the polished bald head which resembled the egg that was his prize possession. I couldn’t imagine any woman falling for someone like that.

“Oh Carrie, you’re a woman, you know. Sometimes there’s no good reason. You just do.”

I knew, of course. Matt had worn his hair long and shaggy and always smelled of perspiration. He wrote song lyrics which I thought were beautiful, but later realized were unintelligible. But his biggest attraction, I later realized, was his refusal to see me more than once a week, which made me yearn for him all the time. I would sit by the telephone willing him to call me and cry myself to sleep when he didn’t. Catching me once, my mother told me that no man was worth that, a comment I had then dismissed.

I found everything about my mother’s dating life hard to take. I didn’t want to imagine her flirting or kissing men. I wanted her home with my father. But that wasn’t an option.

“If you want to be with Yuri go be with him,” I said.

“The problem is that he doesn’t want to be with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yes, he was quite explicit about that. He said I looked too old and he didn’t find me attractive enough to sleep with.”

“That motherfucker,” I said.

That made her laugh, which made me laugh. I draw her towards into me, the way she had done with me many times. I knew her pain. It was a pain that would one day become known to Sophie and Isabel. It was a pain that was so often part of love.