



LAURA NOEL

# The Whiskey On Her Breath

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**M**y mother left our home in an ambulance on a sunny spring morning while my sister, my brother, and I were at school. I was in the fourth grade. Before I'd left that day, I'd come downstairs and seen my mother sleeping on the couch. The early-morning sunlight, shining through the wooden blinds and flowered drapes, rippled over her blond hair and pale orange nightgown. Although she

appeared to be asleep, she had actually fallen into a diabetic coma. As I leaned over to kiss her goodbye, I smelled the thick, sweet scent of apricots.

I remember once as a girl being in a liquor store and seeing my mother, in a green silk suit, mink stole, and sunglasses, reach for a bottle of George Dickel sour-mash whiskey. The liquor — copious amounts of it, in combination with the insulin she injected from small glass syringes — eventually poisoned her, and she became frozen in time, a woman of the 1950s who'd once looked like a movie star but was now clad in flowered cotton dresses and white ankle socks and living in a building with bars on the windows.

After she'd gone away, the house seemed oddly quiet. My father, who knew nothing about cooking, took us out to dinner every night at the Ham 'N Eggs, where the waitresses were kind to us, and my siblings and I became fascinated by a machine that could flip a piece of toast in the air and deposit it onto a waiting plate. Just down the street from the restaurant was the hospital where my mother lay in a coma. Children were not permitted in hospitals then, so we drove right past her in our blue Buick convertible, but I always turned and looked back at the six-story tan brick building. What kind of dream were we living in? How had so much changed so quickly?

**I** wish I knew more about my mother as a young woman: the secretary who eloped with a handsome man twelve years older than she was; the housewife who filled her home with antiques and tended flowers in the backyard and one day picked up a glass of whiskey. Had she been happy once? Why had she started drinking?

I spent hours in her walk-in closet, sitting beneath her dresses and evening gowns, shadowed by racks of shoes and hats stored in round boxes. I pressed her furs against my cheek — foxes, lambs, and minks whose small, scared faces had once dangled from her shoulder. I sifted through her dresser drawers, filled with lace handkerchiefs, elbow-length gloves, nylon slippers, feather-trimmed bed jackets, and silk nightgowns smelling faintly of lavender. I'd stand in front of her full-length mirror wearing one of her taffeta gowns, a string of her beads cool against my neck. I loved opening drawers and breathing in the sweet, musty, powdery scent of her.

After three weeks, my mother awakened from the coma, her brain damaged, and was moved to a nursing home an hour from our house. Letters from her began to arrive each day, addressed to my father in fluttery script on onion-skin envelopes. I sometimes snuck one upstairs to read it. The letters always said the same thing:

Dear Jim,  
Pick me up on Sunday. Bring a suitcase. Don't be late.  
Get here by one o'clock!

Love, Val

Some days the postman pushed three or four of her letters through the brass slot in the green front door, but I never saw my father open them.

**O**n her days off from her job as a switchboard operator at the Hotel New Yorker, my mother's mother, Nan, arrived to help out. Grandmothers were supposed to wear aprons, bake pies, and read stories to children, but Nan had been in the navy, lived in a hotel, and liked to jump in the Hudson River every winter with the Polar Bear Club. She would come to our house with jars of wheat germ and cod-liver oil and vitamins, and she'd cook for us what she called "Nan's specials." (She later told me she had no idea how to cook.)

Nan lived in a hotel on 29<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway in Manhattan and loved to take us to Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes, or to the automat, where we could put coins in a slot, open a small door, and slide out a piece of pie. She would not admit my mother was an alcoholic and was always saying, "Of course she could come home! The man down the hall from me has diabetes, and *he's* not in the hospital."

I did not tell my fourth-grade friends what had happened to my mother. When I brought my classmate Carol home with me after school, I called out, "Mom? Are you home?" After waiting for a reply, I said, "She's still at work."

"Your mother works?" Carol asked. "What does she do?"

I hesitated, wondering whether liars burned in hell or just went to purgatory. "She's in the navy," I said.

After a while Carol stopped asking questions, but her mother once pulled me aside and said, "Carol never sees your mother. What happened to her? Where is she?"

I could have told her that I had no idea what had happened to my mother; it would have been the truth. But instead I just stood there and said nothing.

**M**y father worked in New York City as the head of his own company and had little vacation time, so the first summer after my mother went away — the year I turned ten — he sent us to New Bedford, Massachusetts, to stay with our aunt and uncle. Their yellow house, shaded by a sprawling maple tree, was neat and orderly, and no one there ever drank cocktails. Dinner was served at five o'clock every day. We were fifteen minutes early for Mass on Sundays, and at noon Aunt Helen served a feast on a lace tablecloth in the dining room: pot roast, mashed potatoes, creamed spinach, deviled eggs, watermelon, and homemade strawberry-rhubarb pie with vanilla ice cream. My older cousin Mary Beth advised me to "offer it up" whenever something irritated me, and Aunt Helen and Uncle Jim seemed to enjoy teasing me out of my shyness.

I rode my bike around New Bedford all day, and when I got home, I'd find Aunt Helen in the living room drinking tea from a china cup and reading poetry, her white hair pulled back in tortoiseshell combs and a medal of the Virgin Mary around her neck. She was always there: rolling out pie crust, making cream puffs, squeezing fresh orange juice, planting zinnias in the backyard, talking with me and laughing. I'd hear her whispering her rosary in the next room as I lay in bed at night, a breeze off Buzzards Bay blowing in through the screen, a gold crucifix shining on the wall, my crisp, flowered sheets smelling of the sea air.

When my siblings and I returned from New Bedford, my

mother called to say that she was coming home the next Sunday. I ran to tell the neighborhood kids — who, unlike my friends at school, knew about my mother’s hospitalization — and we planned a spectacular welcome-home parade, with kites and balloons, our dogs and cats ready to march with bows around their necks, our bicycles festooned with crepe paper. But Sunday arrived, and my mother did not. The next time she called, she said, “Guess what, Valerie Anne. I’m coming home on Sunday!” Soon after that, the calls stopped.

**M**y father did his best to keep my sister and brother and me amused. Sometimes he’d bark like a dog or crow like a rooster at the dinner table, and we’d nearly fall off our chairs laughing. He once offered five dollars to the child who grew the best garden, and I won the prize with my red gladioluses. He worked at the dining-room table every weekend with his slide rule and magnifying glass, designing fabrics: dark stripes and plaids woven with strands of silver or gold. He was intelligent and jovial, with blue eyes and thick white hair slicked back with Vitalis. Even for his Saturday-afternoon trips to the barbershop and supermarket, he put on a white shirt, sport coat, tie, and gray felt hat. In the summers he wore a bowtie and a straw hat with a striped grosgrain ribbon, and sometimes he’d barbecue on Saturday nights wearing his chef’s hat, knee socks, and Bermuda shorts.

Playing Simon Says or Red Light, Green Light with the kids outside, I’d look up every so often at the window of our red brick house to see if my father was still there, working at the dining-room table or sitting in the window seat, reading the *Herald Tribune*, a coil of smoke from his cigarette drifting through the screen. I never heard him complain. Perhaps he modeled his behavior after his own father, whose wife had died of pneumonia at age forty, leaving him to raise five children alone.

Once, someone invited us over for dinner, and one of our hosts said, “Poor children,” in a way that told me my mother would not be coming home. When my father talked about the future, however, he always said, “*When Mommy comes home . . .*” He never used the word *if*.

He visited my mother on Sunday afternoons and was patient with my frequent inquiries about what had happened to her. “Her brain was damaged from the coma,” he said. “She can’t come home right now. I wish she could, but without a short-term memory, who knows what she could do? She might turn on the stove and forget, or light a cigarette and leave it burning somewhere.”

“Why can’t we go see her?” I asked.

“Because children aren’t allowed in nursing homes.”

“Do you think she’ll get better?” I asked.

“I hope so.”

My father hired a Czechoslovak woman to iron our clothes in the basement and Maria from the Virgin Islands to clean our house. Maria took two buses and a train from East Harlem to Manhasset every week and earned fifteen dollars a day. I liked to follow her around as she dusted, vacuumed, and scrubbed the oven, chattering to me in her Creole accent. I noticed that

she never made a comment about the future, including whether or not she would see me the next week, without adding, “God willing.”

Our family, being considerably less devout than Maria, was always twenty minutes late for church. Our real interest seemed to be breakfast at the diner afterward. I wished my father would join the Holy Name Society. I wanted him to put a Saint Christopher statue in our car or invite a priest home for dinner. But he never did. Some Sunday mornings we slept past noon. When I woke up and ran in to tell my father we had missed Mass again, he’d say, “Well, let’s say a few prayers at home today, dear.” I wondered if things might have been better for us if we’d had a faith as strong as Maria’s.

I recited rosaries and novenas and spent hours thinking about my mother. In most of my memories she was screaming at someone: yelling at another driver on the road, or accusing the maid of having thrown out her engagement ring (which she had left in a tissue on the windowsill), or claiming my father had tried to blind her by putting poison in her eye cup. I tried to figure out what she was really like from the artifacts she’d left behind: two huge candy-cane Christmas decorations made out of stovepipes; a wheelbarrow filled with geraniums on the front lawn; her collection of antiques and demitasse cups; a small blue box filled with glass syringes, stored in the drawer of her night table. I pictured her walking into the house like a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I continued to recite rosaries and novenas and waited for my prayers to be answered.

Sitting at her vanity, coating my lips with her cherry red lipstick and painting my eyelids blue, I thought, *So what if she’s a diabetic: I could learn to give her injections. So what if she’s forgetful: I wouldn’t let her near the stove. So what if she smokes and is careless with her cigarettes: I’d hide her matches.*

*(end of excerpt)*