

Chapter One

Noun: Mother

Collective noun: Consternation

The word suggests a feeling of anxiety when something unexpected or unpleasant happens. There are likely to be many moments that the experience of being a mother or mothering makes a woman feel consternation herself. This word tells us much about how mothers are perceived by individuals and society at large.

~ Rosalind Howell

I was eighteen when discovered I was pregnant. It was my fault. Turned on by the danger of bareback alfresco sex with a boy my mother would have hated, if I'd liked him enough to take him home. That was the summer I had a great deal of potential and no sound practical judgment at all. Each night I fell asleep tranquillised by absolute conviction of the time my literary talents would be discovered, and there would be potted biogs on the inside cover of all my books. A gymslip baby would not feature in my blurb.

I didn't tell him about the baby. He wouldn't have wanted it either. And he'd already moved on when clear fluid leaked from my breasts, leaving cappuccino coloured stains blooming in the cups of my bra. Two vertical lines on the pregnancy test confirmed the joyful news; I ran the wand under the hot water tap, scrubbing the result window. First with washing up liquid and then with bleach, but two blue fingers remained, saying: **FUCK YOU!**

The abortion clinic was bleak. I mean, as if by being even mildly pleasant it would have encouraged women to try it out -- like a spa day or indoor skydiving. My Ssister Joanna would have regarded it all as an experience to collect, a memoir to be traded with friends. I didn't tell anyone. Not because I

was ashamed, although it wasn't one of my finest moments. But because once people know you've had an abortion you will always be other. Even the doctor's colourful explanation — accompanied by a detailed pamphlet of the impending dilation of my cervix and surgical removal of the contents of my uterus by scraping and scooping — conferred damnation, entitled: "Nasty Procedure for a Nasty Girl".

Fear pheromones seeped out of my skin and mingled with disinfectant; floating invisibly in the air, impregnating my hair and clothes. After, despite showering twice a day for a week, I could still smell it on me, that tang of aberration.

I didn't have any regrets. I refused to have any of the emotions the proliferers outside the clinic demanded of me. It was the right choice.

Until it wasn't.

*

Being trapped, today of all days, with my mother in a simmering hotbox was hell, like some kind of torture in one of those old war movies granddad loved to watch. My damp thighs stuck to the pleather seats of the funeral car and rivulets of sweat stagnated in the crevices behind my knees. I uncrossed and re-crossed my naked legs; their sound reminded me of Velcro on a pair of First Walkers. Mother tutted barefaced disapproval.

'Where are your tights?'

Was it a mistake to go bare-legged? I'd forgotten to buy flesh-coloured ones, and it was far too hot for the one hundred and fifty denier black opaques I had in the drawer.

'What will people think?' Mother had always been a committed Debrettetarian, believing herself to be *the* authority on modern manners. Etiquette proclamations belched out of her like methane from a cow.

A ball of rage, red and spicy, rolled around my mouth. I chased it with my tongue and tried to gulp it down, but it stuck in my throat like a mis-swallowed boiled sweet.

By mis-swallowed, do you mean accidentally swallowed, or swallowed the wrong way?

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 21:09

'I imagine something along the lines of what an awful thing it is to be cremating my son.'

Does the narrator say this line? It's not quite clear if it's her or her husband who says it.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 21:10

Will threaded his clammy fingers through mine. The warp and weft that had created the fabric of our family. He squeezed a little too hard. I winced as my skin puckered and caught between my wedding and eternity ring, the one he'd surprised me with at the hospital the day Elliot was born. Yellow and rose gold divided by platinum; three strands twisted and woven together. I'd loved it at the time - full of milk and hormones - but later, it symbolised a rigid triptych, a cold reminder there would be no further expansion of our family.

'You really should try a little harder with your make-up, darling. You look terrible, like that awful French clown thing you were mad about...' She snapped her fingers, commanding the word to appear, 'Pierrot.' Mother opened her handbag and produced a tissue with a hey presto flourish. She didn't go as far as spitting on it, but I knew she wanted to.

'I was about ten, mother! Another character flaw, liking something mother hated.

'You look tired,' Will said, tilting my face toward his, pinching my chin with his thumb and forefinger.

I looked at myself in the driver's rear-view, catching the eyes of "Professional sSympathy". The foundation I'd applied was two shades lighter than my recent heatwave glow. Freckles emerged from behind the thin skin peeling on my nose, like cress seeds on wetted tissue, and mascara tears had left ashy trails on my cheeks. I tried to dampen the man-size, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, the way it does after a string of nights on thumbs of gin and fingernails of tonic. Mother's ruin. Will hated me drinking. Once last summer, after enjoying a few whiskey sours at Mrs

Carmichael's seventy-fifth birthday barbecue, I woke to find new rules pinned pillow-height to the bed frame: *no drinking in public ever again*.

I couldn't even produce enough saliva to wipe my face. Mother snatched my hand and spat into the balled-up tissue as it bloomed; she'd been watching, waiting for her moment. The moment that grabs your shoulders and drags you back into childhood. Where she waves an embroidered periwinkle handkerchief at the window as Dad slings his dented suitcases into the taxi. And you dangle your legs from a too-big chair, aiming a less than playful kick towards her kneecap.-

I resisted the urge to clip her shin with the toe of my *special-occasion* shoes. As I dabbed, the smell of stale coffee wafted up to filled my pores, and there was something else, something astringent, like staleold mouthwash.

'Are you drinking again?' I asked her.

'Just a little straightener darling.' Mother's sharp corners and edges smoothed from the inside.

'Jesus! It's not even eleven.' Mother's hypocrisy never failed. Lack of leg cover a major issue yet her, beyond reproach while flooring her bridge cronies with a Smirnoff Red Label mwah on each cheek, ~~beyond reproach.~~

'Don't get too close to the altar candles, or Elliot won't be the only one in flames,' I said.

'It's a crematorium, darling. There's only a lectern,' she said, indicating we would say no more on the matter by the rapid zipping of her handbag.

"Professional_Sympathy" pulled the car up behind the hearse ~~carrying Elliot's coffin,~~ Elliot's coffin visible through the window. It seemed like only twenty seconds since Elliot was lying in his wicker Moses basket smelling of baby wipes and talc. Yet twenty years later I was sitting in a fusty funeral director's office flicking through a casket brochure (as if calling it a brochure makes it a more pleasurable experience) and choosing a teak effect box with brass effect handles, and satin effect polyester lining.

What will he wear?

I hadn't chosen his clothes since he was a pre-schooler - do I put him in something comfortable - a pair of joggers, a t-shirt? Something smart - suit, tie? Is that too formal? Will said it was pointless stressing about it because it would go up in smoke anyway (he didn't say it that way exactly, but that's what he meant). I agonised over it, settling on a striped navy and white long-sleeved top, beige chinos, and a battered pair of black and white chequered Vans.

That was only the beginning. I was hit with so many questions, I felt like a paper civilian target being torn apart by bullets at the end of a firing range.

Almost as soon as Elliot took his last breath we became sucked into a violent squall of decision-making: ~~to~~ embalm or not to embalm? ~~(#Not)~~ flowers or donations? ~~(#Family flowers only, donations to Leukaemia Care)~~ social media memorial page? ~~(no one does newspaper announcements for under fifty's any more, apparently), order of service~~ ~~(No one does newspaper announcements for under fifties any more, apparently); order of service?~~ ~~(Yes -- prom photo -- before he was sick)~~ prayers, hymns? ~~(We're not a religious family but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't prayed)~~ and music ~~(what do twenty-year-olds like? What did my twenty-year-old like? And would he want it blasting out at his funeral?)~~.

Stepping out of the car "Professional Sympathy" opened my door with slow, over-practised movements. In another life I might have been placing a tanned waxed leg onto the red carpet for the premiere of my screen adapted novel.

In another life, perhaps, but not this one. In this one, I'd given up any writing ambition I had when I met Will. He'd encouraged me to find a proper job paying a regular wage. And after having a word with one of his contacts in the court finance department, it sealed my fate. It was perfect, he said, I could steer enforcement work his way; *we'll be minted!* I didn't know it then, but he had more ambitious plans. Plans that would trap me like a fly in the centre of a web of deception and fraud that was impossible to escape.

Not sure this works here. It really breaks up the flow of the story. Maybe use it somewhere else? Maybe simplify to something like "The questions hit me like bullets"
Unknown Author
01/10/2020 20:32

I hadn't been to work for almost five weeks. As long as I stayed away, Elliot's death seemed unofficial somehow, but once I returned it would be a public fact. Colleagues giving me mournful looks across the open plan. Everything I did for the rest of my life—... would only separate us more and more.

Hannah from the office came around to the house armed with an incongruous pairing of sympathy card and tub of Celebrations (left over from Christmas, no doubt). I told myself, it's the thought that counts; but she hadn't thought about it at all. Removing their multi-coloured wrappers, undressing each chocolate with a delicacy they didn't deserve, I fed them to the dog. I wasn't thinking either. He puked. An enormous brown pile like a smiling emoji turd on the living room carpet. He cocked his poorly little head as if to say, *why did you make me suffer, Mummy?*

As the fringed brocade curtains juddered shut, I caught "Professional Sympathy" heaving the costly double-ended Calla lily and white orchid coffin spray Will said I couldn't have off the lid. I told him mother paid, but the truth was, I'd been siphoning off my lunch money allowance for months and putting it into an online account he knew nothing about.— Not to buy the flowers you understand, but a glossy magazine now and again or a French manicure. Classy and simple, nothing obvious and *tarty* as Will would say. Red nails always meant one thing.

Towards the garden of remembrance, a lengthy line of jobbing pallbearers conveyed assorted flower arrangements pass-the-parcel style onto a square of four cracked moss-covered slabs - generously termed the wreath terrace.

Towards the garden of remembrance, a long line of pallbearers "passed the parcel" with assorted flower arrangements, conveying them to the generously named "Wreath Terrace" - which was in fact, just four slabs, cracked and covered with moss.

Find this a little complicated as a sentence. A possible alternative is provided.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 20:40

People had strayed from our request of *family flowers only*. Such a waste. And as everyone filtered out of the chapel of rest towards the terrace, now overflowing with multi-coloured chrysanthus and carnations, smoke billowed out of the blackened chimney. Was it Elliot being released into the atmosphere, or the **LOVING MUM** whose spelled-out letter tribute hugged his space?

Fingers wriggled their way into my palm. It was Old Flaky, Elliot's history teacher, attempting to shake my hand. Cupping with one and covering the other; wedging it in a contact dermatitis sandwich.

He cupped it underneath, and covered it above, so it became the smooth meat in a shedding (or peeling, or crumbly/crumbling) dermatitis sandwich.

'What a lovely service, such a magnificent turnout,' he said. 'Elliot was always such a diligent pupil.' Funny, he didn't say that when he accused Elliot of cheating in his mock GCSE.

'Such a shame,' he continued.

I wanted to slap the yellow off his teeth. Instead, I brushed my palms together, sloughing off the remnants of skin he'd left behind. The Tissue butterflies floated around the ~~throng of~~ mourners, ~~landing on~~ settling on shoulders like dandruff. 'Well,' he said, squeezing my arm.-

I tried not to flinch. Then, a woman, right-angled as a wall bracket, blood running through one eye like a twist in a marble, shuffled herself in front of me before I could get to him.-

Who the hell was this?

'Time heals dear,' she said. 'You'll be ~~ok~~OK.'

I gritted my teeth, snagging the inside of my cheek. My tongue, a fat sleek seal, flopped around- ivory rocks, probing the damage. All that existed was a slight wound, a ragged piece of skin flapping back and forth as I breathed.

My son has gone, and I am *not* ~~ok~~OK.

I'm afraid I don't follow this. "Hugged his space" needs clarifying I think.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 20:52

I found this hard to understand until you mention the skin flakes later on. May be better to clarify a little. I have made suggestions in red.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 20:50

I'm not sure all this description is needed, as it takes from the action. I would probably just say, "my tongue probed for the damage"

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 21:02