

How to Talk to Your Mother: Notes

A S T O R Y

by *Lorrie Moore*



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1982. Without her, for years now, murmur at the defrosting refrigerator, “What?” “Huh?” “Shush now,” as it creaks, aches, groans until the final ice block drops from the ceiling of the freezer like something vanquished.

Dream, and in your dreams babies with the personalities of dachshunds, fat as Macy balloons, float by the treetops.

The first permanent polyurethane heart is surgically implanted.

Someone upstairs is playing “You’ll Never Walk Alone” on the recorder. Now it’s “Oklahoma.” They must have a Rodgers and Hammerstein book.

1981. On public transportation, mothers with soft, soapy, corduroyed seraphs glance at you, their faces dominoes of compassion. Their seraphs are small and quiet or else restlessly counting bus seat colors outloud: “Blue-blue-blue, red-red-red, lullow-lullow-lullow.” The mothers see you eyeing their children. They smile sympathetically. They believe you envy them. They believe you are childless. They believe they know why. Look quickly away, out the smudge of the window.

1980. The hum, rush, clack of things in the kitchen. These are the sounds that organize your life. The clink of the silverware inside the drawer, piled like bones in a mass grave. Your similes grow grim, grow tired.

Reagan is elected president, though you distributed doughnuts and brochures for Carter.

Date an Italian. He rubs your stomach and says, "These are marks of stretch, no? Marks of stretch?" and in your dizzy mind you think: Marks of Harpo, Ideas of Marx, Ides of March, Beware. He plants kisses on the sloping ramp of your neck, and you fall asleep against him, your underpants peeled and rolled around one thigh like a bride's garter.

1979. Once in a while take evening trips past the old unsold house you grew up in, that haunted rural crossroads two hours from where you now live. It is like Halloween: the raked, moonlit lawn; the mammoth, tumid trees, arms and fingers raised into the starless wipe of sky like burns, cracks, map rivers. Their black shadows rock against the side of the east porch. There are dream shadows, other lives here. Turn the corner slowly but continue to stare from the car window. This house is embedded in you deep, something still here you know, you think you know, a voice at the top of those stairs, perhaps, a figure on the porch, an odd apron caught high in the twigs, in the warm-for-a-fall-night breeze, something not right, that turret window still you can see from here, from outside, but which can't be reached from within. The ghostly brag of your childhood: "We have a mystery room. The window shows from the front, but you can't go in, there's no door. A doctor lived there years ago and gave secret operations, and now it's blocked off." The window sits like a dead eye in the turret.

You see a ghost, something like a spinning statue by a shrub.

1978. Bury her in the cold south sideyard of that Halloween house. Your brother and his kids are there. Hug. The minister in a tweed sportscoat, the neighborless fields, the crossroads are all like some stark Kansas. There is praying, then someone shovelling. People walk toward the cars and hug again. Get inside your car with your niece. Wait. Look up through the windshield. In the November sky a wedge of wrens moves south, the lines of their formation, the very sides and vertices mysteriously choreographed, shifting, flowing, crossing like a skater's legs. "They'll descend instinctively upon a tree somewhere," you say, "but not for miles yet." You marvel, watch, until, amoeba slow, they are dark, faraway stitches in the horizon. You do not start the car. The quiet niece next to you finally speaks: "Aunt Ginnie, are we going

to the restaurant with the others?” Look at her. Recognize her: nine in a pile parka. Smile and start the car.

1977. She ages, rocks in your rocker, noiseless as wind. The front strands of her white hair dangle yellow at her eyes from too many cigarettes. She smokes even now, her voice husky with phlegm. Sometimes at dinner in your tiny kitchen she will simply stare, rheumy-eyes at you, then burst into a fit of coughing that racks her small old man’s body like a storm.

Stop eating your baked potato. Ask if she is alright.

She will croak: “Do you remember, Ginnie, your father used to say that one day, with these cigarettes, I was going to have to ‘face the mucous?’ ” At this she chuckles, chokes, gasps again.

Make her stand up.

Lean her against you.

Slap her lightly on the curved mound of her back.

Ask her for chrissake to stop smoking.

She will smile and say: “For chrissake? Is that any way to talk to your mother?”

1977. At night go in and check on her. She lies there awake, her lips apart, open and drying. Bring her some juice. She murmurs, “Thank you, honey.” Her mouth smells, swells like a grave.

1976. The Bicentennial. In the laundromat, you wait for the time on your coins to run out. Through the porthole of the dryer, you watch your bedeviled towels and sheets leap and fall. The radio station piped in from the ceiling plays slow, sad Motown; it encircles you with the desperate hopefulness of a boy at a dance, and it makes you cry. When you get back to your apartment, dump everything on your bed. Your mother is knitting crookedly: red, white, and blue. Kiss her hello. Say: “Sure was warm in that place.” She will seem not to hear you.

1975. Attend poetry readings alone at the local library. Find you don’t really listen well. Stare at your crossed thighs. Think about your mother. Sometimes you confuse her with the first man you ever loved, who ever loved you, who buried his head in the pills of your sweater and said magnificent things like, “Oh God, oh God,” who loved you unconditionally, terrifically, like a mother.

The poet loses his nerve for a second, a red flush through his neck and ears, but he regains his composure. When he is finished, people clap. There is wine and cheese.

Leave alone, walk home alone. The downtown streets are corridors of light holding you, holding you, past the church, past the community center. March, like Stella Dallas, spine straight, through the melodrama of street lamps, phone posts, toward the green house past Borealis Avenue, toward the rear apartment with the tilt and the squash on the stove.

Your horoscope says: be kind, be brief.

You are pregnant again. Decide what you must do.

1974. She will have bouts with a mad sort of senility. She calls you at work. “There’s no food here! Help me! I’m starving!” although you just bought forty dollars’ worth of groceries yesterday. “Mom, there is too food there!”

When you get home the refrigerator is mostly empty. “Mom, where did you put all the milk and cheese and stuff?” Your mother stares at you from where she is sitting in front of the TV set. She has tears leaking out of her eyes. “There’s no food here, Ginnie.”

There is a rustling, scratching noise in the dishwasher. You open it up, and the eyes of a small rodent glint back at you. Shriek, as in cartoons. It scrambles out, off to the baseboards behind the refrigerator. Your mother, apparently, has put all the groceries inside the dishwasher. The milk is spilled, a white pool against blue, and things like cheese and bologna and apples have been nibbled at.

1973. At a party when a woman tells you where she bought a wonderful pair of shoes, say that you believe shopping for clothes is like masturbation, everyone does it, but it isn’t very interesting and therefore should be done alone, in an embarrassed fashion, and never be the topic of party conversation. The woman will tighten in her lips and eyebrows and say, “Oh, I suppose you have something more fascinating to talk about.” Grow clumsy and uneasy. Say, “No,” and head for the ginger ale. Tell the person next to you that your insides feel sort of sinking and vinyl like a Claes Oldenburg toilet. They will say, “Oh?” and point out that the print on your dress is one of paisleys impregnating paisleys. Pour yourself more ginger ale.

1972. Nixon wins by a landslide.

Sometimes your mother calls you by her sister’s name. Say, “No, Mom, it’s me. Virginia.” Learn to repeat things. Learn that you have a way of knowing one another which somehow slips out and beyond the ways you have of not knowing one another at all.

Make apple crisp for the first time.

1971. Go for long walks to get away from her. Walk through wooded areas, there is a life there you have forgotten. The smells and sounds seem sudden, unchanged, exact, the papery crunch of the leaves, the mouldering sachet of the mud. The trees are crooked as backs, the fence posts splintered, trusting and precarious in their solid grasp of arms, the asters spindly, dry, white, havishammed (Havishammed!) by frost. Find a beautiful reddish stone and bring it home for your mother. Kiss her. Say: "This is for you." She grasps it and smiles. "You were always such a sensitive child," she says.

Say: "Yeah, I know."

1970. You are pregnant again. Try to decide what you should do. Get your hair chopped, short as a boy's.

1969. Mankind leaps upon the moon.

Disposable diapers are first sold in supermarkets.

Have occasional affairs with absurd, silly men who tell you to grow your hair to your waist and who, when you are sad, tickle your ribs to cheer you up. Moonlight through the blinds stripes you like zebras. You laugh. You never marry.

1968. Do not resent her. Think about the situation, for instance, when you take the last trash bag from its box: you must throw out the box by putting it in that very trash bag. What was once contained, now must contain. The container, then, becomes the contained, the enveloped, the held. Find more and more that you like to muse over things like this.

1967. Your mother is sick and comes to live with you. There is no place else for her to go. You feel many different emptinesses.

The first successful heart transplant is performed in South Africa.

1966. You confuse lovers, mix up who had what scar, what car, what mother.

1965. Smoke marijuana. Try to figure out what has made your life go wrong. It is like trying to figure out what is stinking up the refrigerator. It could be anything. The lid off the mayonnaise, Uncle Ron's honey wine four years in the left corner. Broccoli yellowing, flowering fast. They are all metaphors. They are all problems. Your horoscope says: speak gently to a loved one.

1964. Your mother calls you long-distance and asks you whether you are coming home for Thanksgiving, your brother and the baby will be there. Make excuses.

“As a mother gets older,” your mother says, “these sorts of holidays become increasingly important.”

Say: “I’m sorry, Mom.”

1963. Wake up one morning with a man you had thought you’d spend your life with, and realize, like a rock in your gut, that you don’t even like him. Spend a weepy afternoon in his bathroom, not coming out when he knocks. You can no longer trust your affections. People and places you think you love may be people and places you hate.

Kennedy is shot.

Someone invents a temporary artificial heart, for use during operations.

1962. Eat Chinese food for the first time, with a lawyer from California. He will show you how to hold the chopsticks. He will pat your leg. Attack his profession. Ask him if he feels the law makes large spokes out of the short stakes of men.

1961. Grandma Moses dies.

You are a zoo of insecurities, a Las Vegas of neurosis. You take to putting brandy in your morning coffee and to falling in love too easily. You have an abortion.

1960. There is money from your father’s will and his life insurance. You buy a car and a green velvet dress you don’t need. You drive two hours to meet your mother for lunch on Saturdays. She suggests things for you to write about, things she’s heard on the radio: a woman with telepathic twins, a woman with no feet.

1959. At the funeral she says, “He had his problems, but he was a generous man,” though you know he was tight as a scout knot, couldn’t listen to anyone, the only time you remember loving him being that once when he got the punchline of one of your jokes before your mom did and looked up from his science journal and guffawed loud as a giant, the two of you, for one split moment, communing like angels in that warm, shared light of mind.

Say: “He was O.K.”

“You shouldn’t be bitter,” your mother snaps. “He’s financed you and your brother’s college educations.” She buttons her coat. “He was also the first man to isolate a particular isotope of helium, I forget the name, but he should have won the

Nobel Prize.” She dabs at her nose.

Say: “Yeah, Mom.”

1958. At your brother’s wedding, your father is taken away in an ambulance. A tiny cousin whispers loudly to her mother, “Did Uncle Will have a hard attack?” For seven straight days say things to your mother, like: “I’m sure it’ll be O.K.” and “I’ll stay here, why don’t you go home and get some sleep.”

1957. Dance the calypso with boys from a different college. Get looped on New York State burgundy, lose your virginity, and buy one of the first portable electric typewriters.

1956. Tell your mother about all the books you are reading at college. This will please her.

1955. Shoplift a cashmere sweater.

1954. Do a paint-by-numbers of Elvis Presley. Tell your mother you are in love with him. She will shake her head.

1953. Smoke a cigarette with Hillary Swedelson. Tell each other your crushes. Become blood sisters.

1952. When your mother asks you if there are any nice boys in junior high, ask her how on earth would you ever know, having to come in at stupid nine-thirty every night.

1951. Your mother tells you about menstruation. The following day you promptly menstruate, your body only waiting for permission, for a signal. You wake up in the morning and feel embarrassed.

1949. You learn how to blow gum bubbles and to add negative numbers.

1947. The Dead Sea Scrolls are discovered.

You have seen too many Hollywood musicals. You have seen too many people singing in public places and you assume you can do it, too. Practice. Your teacher asks you a question. You warble back: the answer to number two is twelve. Most of

the class laughs at you, though some stare, eyes jewel-still, fascinated. At home your mother asks you to dust your dresser. Work up a vibrato you could drive a truck through. Sing: “Why do I/ Have to do it now?” and tap your way through the dining room. Your mother requests that you calm down and go take a nap. Shout: “You don’t care about me! You don’t care about me at all!”

1946. Your brother plays “Shoofly Pie” all day long on the Victrola.

Ask your mother if you can go to Ellen’s for supper. She will say, “Go ask your father;” and you, pulling at your fingers, walk out to the living room and whimper by his chair. He is reading. Tap his arm. “Dad? Daddy? Dad?” He continues reading his science journal. Pull harder on your fingers and run back to the kitchen to tell your mother, who storms into the living room, saying, “Why don’t you ever listen to your children when they try to talk to you?” You hear them arguing. Press your face into a kitchen towel, ashamed, the hum of the refrigerator motor, the drip in the sink scaring you.

1945. Your father comes home from his war work. He gives you a piggyback ride around the broad yellow thatch of your yard, the dead window in the turret, dark as a wound, watching you. He gives you wordless pushes on the swing.

Your brother has new friends, acts older and distant, even while you wait for the school bus together.

You spend too much time alone. You tell your mother that when you grow up you will bring your babies to Australia to see the kangaroos.

Forty-thousand people are killed in Nagasaki.

1944. Dress and cuddle a tiny babydoll you have named “the Sue.” Bring her everywhere. Get lost in the Wilson Creek fruit market, and call softly, “Mom, where are you?” Watch other children picking grapes, but never dare yourself. Your eyes are small dark throats, your hand clutches the Sue.

1943. Ask your mother about babies. Have her read to you only the stories about babies. Ask her if she is going to have a baby. Ask her about the baby that died. Cry into her arm.

1940. Clutch her hair in your fist. Rub it against your cheek.

1939. As through a helix, as through an ear, it is here you are nearer the dream flashes, the other lives.

There is a tent of legs, a sundering of selves, as you both gasp blindly for breath. Across the bright and cold, she knows it when you try to talk to her, though this is something you never really manage to understand.

Germany invades Poland. The year's big song is "Three Little Fishies" and someone, somewhere, is playing it. **N**