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## Impossible Memories



*One need not be a chamber to be haunted,  
One need not be a house;  
The brain has corridors surpassing  
Material place.*

—Emily Dickinson

Two men wait outside the heavy fir door, the header so low they'll have to duck to enter. Seven months pregnant with me, my mother is somewhere inside, cooking, perhaps, at the cast iron stove in our roughly finished kitchen. The flat half of the stove stays warm year-round, taking the chill off the unheated room. Above the narrow countertops and windows, blue willow plates and mismatched wine glasses sit on shelves wedged between exposed two-by-fours, while two straw-covered bottles of Chianti dangle like buoys from a roofing nail hammered into the wall next to Mom's homemade cotton curtains.

The kitchen, added to our old wooden house in the 1930s after its conversion from a general store to a home, has gaps near the ceiling where ivy has slipped inside, its grasshopper tendrils finding easy purchase on the coarse interior walls. Mom likes the ivy and the ark-like feel of her home, with its nooks and crannies, its hand-hewn rafters, its windowpanes of wavy glass. This eccentric house, ripe for imaginings, is a welcome change after seven years of trailers and army base lodgings, each as spartan and predictable as the last.

Though it's the middle of July, the thermometer has barely cracked seventy degrees—too chilly for a dip in the ocean or even one of the kettle ponds sunk among the pitch pines of Wellfleet's back roads. So Mom is at home with her five children, none of them yet a teenager, the house no doubt pulsing with their careening and pranks.

I can't, of course, know for sure what my mother is doing. Maybe she's not in the kitchen at all but sitting at her black Singer sewing machine listening to the Everly Brothers' new hit "All I Have to Do Is Dream" on the transistor radio as she makes a shirt for one of my brothers. Or perhaps she's feeding scrambled eggs to my older sister Thelma, a toddler but the easiest of her children. Or maybe she's writing a letter to her estranged husband, stationed in Germany, to beg, again, for a divorce. Never mind; it's July 14, her thirty-second birthday, and Mom, who loves celebrations as much as her children do, likely has a cake in the oven.

While I can't know what my mother is doing, I do know what she has heard: a knock on the front door, two or three raps at once hesitant and hard. I imagine her wondering why no friendly voice has followed the knock, no *yoo-hoo!* or *Shirley!*—or why anyone would knock in the first place. There's no lock on the door, no way to bar entry, no need to. It's the Outer Cape in 1958, a salt-sprayed arm curling into the Atlantic, a string of fishing villages where tenacious year-rounders negotiate nature and summer tourists rent it. And in Mom's ancient saltbox on Lecount Hollow Road, there's little worth envying or stealing.

Perhaps she imagines one of her friends is outside the door, there to surprise her with a handful of birthday flowers or a box of chocolate fudge. No matter the draw, she would be moving more slowly than usual, and not just because of her wide belly. A month or two earlier, one doctor after another at the Hyannis hospital had dug into her right foot, prying loose the snapped tip of a sewing needle that had lodged first in the nubby rug where Mom had dropped it and then into metatarsal bone when she stepped on it.

After the surgery, Mom had rustled up a pair of crutches but couldn't manage them on our house's narrow stairs, so if she was busy in one of the two upstairs bedrooms when the knock sounded, she would have laughed at herself as she crawled down backward, keeping her center of gravity low to stop from toppling over.

The "wittiest girl" of her high school class and a party girl long after (she once told me she kept having children because she liked the company), Mom surely hurried as best she could toward the sound and the diversion it promised, perhaps running her fingers through her short auburn curls and tossing her apron, printed with windmills and Dutch maidens, onto the back of a Windsor chair she was refinishing. Or maybe she slapped on some red lipstick and checked her teeth in the mottled, gilt-framed mirror she had wrangled from her parents' attic and hung on nicked pine walls the color of burnt honey. She knew she was attractive, even when pregnant, a card she'd played her entire life.

However well-composed Mom might be, the house was surely a mess, its flotsam and jetsam of handed-down clothes and dinged furniture strewn with random beautiful objects she had salvaged from yard sales or her parents' more orderly past.

One of the two men standing outside the door was a familiar face around town, someone Mom shared an occasional laugh with down at Al Graham's piano bar on the harbor, though I imagine he was not smiling so much as grimacing in the cool, bright sun. Perhaps he was shifting uneasily, favoring the leg that had never fully healed from a knife stab during an off-Cape scuffle. Given their friendship, it must have taken some arm-twisting to get him to Mom's doorstep, to play his part in this birthday errand.

The other man—young, raven-haired, blue-eyed—was the last person Mom expected or wanted to see. She hadn't crossed paths with him for two years, had been grateful for the ocean that lay between them, for the first of six pregnancies where she hadn't fended off his punches or cigarette burns or shoves off the bed.

But there he was, Ben Harrow, her nightmare of a husband, muscles twitching in anticipation. And next to him stood Wellfleet's chief of police, who held a warrant for my mother's arrest.

Though I couldn't see the violence that followed, science tells me I could feel it, and while I can't consciously remember it, my body surely holds its traces. Mom was in her third trimester, when my developing brain was forming hundreds of synapses a second. How did the furious firing of Ben Harrow's fists and curses ricochet through the synaptic firings in my brain? As Mom's cortisol levels spiked, were mine shooting high? As she flung her wedding ring at him, as she shielded herself, as the chief of police intervened to arrest Ben, as well, were the early neural networks for extreme emotion and its correlate, extreme behavior, carving enduring pathways in my gray matter?

This is what could be called an impossible memory: inscribed but unreadable, a guess and a ghost. Though other ghosts populate this memoir, Ben Harrow's is the most haunting, and this early experience of him—a bodily trace I can neither consciously remember nor touch in the physical archive of scars—remains at once invisible and diffusely present, a radioactive element in a constellation of phenomena that lights one of the many ways I could describe my childhood. This episode also alludes to the lifeblood of nascent memory, its fountainhead: who we are in relation to our mother, first in the womb, and then during our journey outside of it.

I did not learn about this birthday surprise until I was forty years old, five years after I started interviewing my mother as I raked our family's past for clues to my present. I knew she regretted her first marriage. But nothing I had heard in our earlier interviews, much less during my childhood, had prepared me for the jealous vengeance that drove Ben Harrow to Mom's door, for what happened in that roughly furnished kitchen, or for the shocking arrest and trial of my mother, which lie at the heart of