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Woman & Home

The Adults

Alison Espach


PHOENIX

They arrived in bulk, in Black Tie Preferred, in one large clump behind our wooden fence, peering over each other's shoulders and into our backyard like people at the zoo who wanted a better view of the animals.

My father's fiftieth birthday party had just begun.

It's true that I was expecting something. I was fourteen, my hair still sticky with lemon from the beach, my lips maroon and pulpy and full like a woman's, red and smothered like "a giant wound," my mother said earlier that day. She disapproved of the getup, of my yellow fit-and-flare dress that cradled my hips and pointed my breasts due north, but I didn't care; I disapproved of this party, this whole at-home affair that would mark the last of its kind.

The women walked through the gate in black and blue and gray and brown pumps, the party already proving unsuccessful at the grass level. The men wore sharp dark ties like swords and said predictable things like, "Hello."

"Welcome to our lawn," I said back, with a goofy grin, and none of them looked me in the eye because it was rude or something. I was too yellow, too embarrassing for everyone involved, and I inched closer to Mark Resnick, my neighbor, my maybe-one-day-boyfriend.

I stood up straighter and overemphasized my consonants. There were certain ways you had to position and prepare your body for high school, and I was slowly catching on, but not fast enough. Every day, it seemed, I had to say good-bye to some part of myself; like last week at the beach, my best friend, Janice, in her new shoestring bikini, had looked down at my Adidas one-piece and said, "Emily, you don't need a

one-piece anymore. This isn't a sporting event." But it sort of was. You could win or lose at anything when you were fourteen, and Janice was keeping track of this. First person to say "cunt" in two different languages (Richard Trenton, girls' bathroom, *cunnius*, *kunta*), an achievement that Ernest Bingley decried as invalid since "Old Norse doesn't count as a language!" (Ernest Bingley, first person ever to cry while reading a poem aloud in English class, "Dulce et Decorum Est"). There were other competitions as well, competitions that had only losers, like who's got the fattest ass (Annie Lars), the most cartoonish face (Kenneth Bentley), the most pubes (Janice Nicks).

"As a child, I shaved the hair off my Barbies to feel prettier," Janice had confessed earlier that morning at the beach.

She sighed and wiped her brow as though it was the August heat that made her too honest, but Connecticut heat was disappointingly civil. So were our confessions.

"That's nothing," I said. "As a child, I thought my breasts were tumors." I whispered, afraid the adults could hear us.

Janice wasn't impressed.

"Okay, as a child, I sat out in the sun and waited for my blood to evaporate," I said. I admitted that, sometimes, I still believed blood could vanish like boiling water or a puddle in the middle of summer. But Janice was already halfway into her next confession, admitting that last night, she touched herself and thought of our middle school teacher Mr. Heller despite everything, even his mustache. "Which we can't blame him for," Janice said. "I thought of Mr. Heller's hands and then waited, and then nothing. No orgasm."

"What'd you expect?" I said, shoving a peanut in my mouth. "He's so old."

At the beach, the adults always sat ten feet behind our towels. We carefully measured the distance in footsteps. My mother and her friends wore floppy straw hats and reclined in chairs patterned with Rod Stewart's face and neon ice cream cones and shouted, "Don't stick your head under!" as Janice and I ran to the water's edge to cool our feet. My mother said sticking your head in the Long Island Sound was like dipping your head in a bowl of cancer, to which I said, "You shouldn't say 'cancer' so casually like that." A woman who volunteered

with my mother at Stamford Hospital, the only woman there who had not gotten a nose job from my neighbor Dr. Trenton, held her nose whenever she said "Long Island Sound" or "sewage," as if there was no difference between the two things. But the more everybody talked about the contamination, the less I could see it; the farther I buried my body in the water, the more the adults seemed to be wrong about everything. It was water, more and more like water every time I tested it with my tongue.

Our backyard was so full of tiger lilies, nearly every guest at the party got their own patch to stand near. Mark ran his hands over the orange flower heads, while my mother opened her arms to greet his mother, Mrs. Resnick.

My mother and Mrs. Resnick had not spoken in months for no other reason than they were neighbors who did not realize they had not spoken in months.

"Italians hug," my mother said.

"We're Russian Jewish," Mrs. Resnick said.

"Oh, that's dear," my mother said, and looked at me. "Say hello, Emily."

"Hello," I said.

It was unknown how long it had been since they borrowed an egg from each other, but it didn't even matter because my mother noticed how tall Mark had become. "Very tall," my mother said.

"Yes, isn't he tall?" Mrs. Resnick asked.

"How tall are you, Mark?" my mother asked.

Everybody suspected he was taller than he used to be, but shorter than our town councilwoman, Mrs. Trenton, who was so tall she looked like King Kong in a belted pink party dress observing a mushroom garlic cream tart for the first time. She was so tall it only made sense she was granted a position of authority in our town, my mother said once. And Mark was a little bit shorter than that, in a very small, unnoticeable way.

Most of the adults stood at the bar. Some reported flying in from Prague, Geneva, Moscow, and couldn't believe the absurdity of international travel—it took so long to get from here to there, especially

when all you were doing over the Atlantic was worrying about blood clots, feeling everything clumping and slowing and coming to an end. Some needed to use the bathroom. Some couldn't believe how the roads were so wide here in Connecticut and, honestly, what did we need all that space for?

"It's presumptuous," said Mrs. Resnick. She took a sip of her martini while a horsefly flew out of her armpit. "So much space and nothing to do but take care of it."

I looked around at the vastness of my yard. It was the size of two pools, and yet, we didn't even have one. My mother had joked all summer long that if my father wanted to turn fifty, he would have to do the damn thing outside on the grass. We had all laughed around the dinner table, and with a knife in my fist, I shouted out, "Like the dog!"

"If we had one . . .," my father said, correcting me.

"It's the nineties," my mother added. "Backyards in Connecticut are just starting to come back in style."

But soon, it turned out it wasn't a joke at all, and at any given moment my mother could be caught with a straight face saying things like, "We'll need to get your father a tent in case of rain," and after I hung up on Timmy's Tent Rental, she started saying things like, "We'll need three hundred and fifty forks," and my father and I started exchanging secret glances, and when my mother saw him scribble *THAT'S A LOT OF FORKS* to me on a Post-it, she started looking at us blankly, like my father was the fridge and I was the microwave, saying, "We'll need a theme."

"Man, aging dramatically!" I shouted at them across the marble kitchen counter.

"And a cake designed to look like an investment banker." She wrote it down on a list, her quick cursive more legible than my print.

"No! A map of Europe!" I said. "And everybody has to eat their own country!"

"No, Emily," my mother said. "That's not right either."

Everybody was invited. Was Alfred available? Alfred was our neighbor who always gave the comical speech about my father's deep-seated character flaws at every social event that was primarily devoted to my father, which was every event my mother attended.

"Like how he questions my choice of hat at seven thirty in the morning," my mother said, as though my father wasn't there pouring himself some cereal. "It's just that the brim is so notably wide, he says. Well, that's the point, Victor!"

Or how he called the Prague office with a mouthful of Cocoa Puffs every morning and my mother said, Victor, you're a millionaire, that's gross, and my father chomped louder, said, *it's puffed rice*. He just doesn't get it, my mother said. He walks out to the car every morning and comes back in asking me how is it that a car can get so dirty!

At some point, they always turned to me, the third party. "Emily, would you explain to your father?" my mother asked.

"Well, Jesus, Victor! We drive it!" I shouted. I never considered the possibility that we weren't joking.

"Isn't Emily so beautiful?" my mother asked Mrs. Resnick, twisting her gold tennis bracelet around her wrist.

My mother asked this question everywhere we went. The grocery store. The mall. The dentist. Nobody had yet disagreed, though the opinion of the dentist was still pending.

"Don't you think that if the dentist really thinks I am beautiful he can notice it on his own?" I had asked my mother once, fed up with the prompt. "Don't you think pointing it out to the dentist just points out how *not* beautiful I must be?"

"It's just a point of emphasis," my mother had said. "It has nothing to do with you, Emily. Just a way into conversation."

"Adults need things like that," my father sometimes added.

But Mrs. Resnick hesitated, while Mark scratched a freckle on his arm like a scratch-n-sniff.

"Mother," I said, and rolled my eyes so Mrs. Resnick and Mark understood that I too thought this question was unacceptable.

Mrs. Resnick had a bad habit of never looking at me, so she tried to size up my entire existence using only her peripheral vision. Medium height. Dirty blondish brownish hair. Scraggly, mousy, darling little thing that apparently had no access to an iron or a bathtub.

Hours before the party, my mother tugged at her panty hose, wiped

her fingers across my cheeks, and said, "Go take a bath. You'll come out smelling like the beach." This was strange, since I just got home from the beach. And I never knew why smelling like the beach was always considered a good thing, especially when the closest beach was the Long Island Sound, and I wasn't even allowed to stick my head under.

"I don't want to take a bath," I said. "I don't like baths."

"Everybody likes baths," my mother said.

I did not like baths. I understood the warm water felt nice against my skin, but after five minutes of sitting in the tub, it became painfully apparent that there wasn't much to do in there. I would pass the time by shaving every inch of my skin, including my elbows, and reciting jingles I heard on the television—"Stanleyyy Steemmmmer," and "Coca-Cola Classic, you're the one!" When I would be older, one of my boyfriends would work as a flavor scientist for 7Up and would be addicted to bathing with me, his body on mine nearly every night, spilling water and secrets about the beverage industry, explaining that New Coke was an elaborate marketing scheme, designed to taste bad, predicted to fail, so they could reintroduce Coke as Coca-Cola Classic and make everyone want it more. "It worked," he would say, filling my belly button with water as I sang. "Look at you, giving them free advertising in the tub."

"I've thought about it," I had told my mother in the kitchen, "and I don't want to smell like the beach. I'd much rather smell like something else, like a wildflower or a nest of honeybees."

"Emily," my mother had said. "I don't even know what that is supposed to mean."

I had explained that Mark, who was a junior lifeguard at Fairfield Beach, had found a box of dead kittens floating at the edge of the shore when he combed the sand before his shift was over. Mark said they were the saddest things he had ever seen, floating by a broken buoy, curled up like they were sleeping. "But they weren't sleeping," he had whispered in my ear. "I mean, they were *dead*." I explained to my mother that smelling like the beach meant smelling like a place where tiny animals could not survive, where cardboard boxes contained not presents but sad corpses of beautiful things that were now impossible to love. My mother sighed and blended the garlic.

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"Yes, very beautiful," Mrs. Resnick finally said, and this settled all of us into a strange sort of ease. Mrs. Resnick straightened out the hem of her lime green dress, and my mother pointed out that my father had recently planted tiger lilies in our backyard. Did they go with the neighborhood décor?

"This neighborhood has a very specific floral nature," my mother said.

Mark and his mother nodded. They already knew this.

"Well, you kids be good," my mother said, and stuck her fingers to my lips in a not very covert attempt to remove the Revlon. "And take some pictures, please."

That morning my mother had shoved a Polaroid camera in my face and said, "We need a party photographer! It could be you!" like it was a career move she might make me interview for. I snapped a picture of the two women walking away from us, our mothers, mine tall and alive in a coral party dress that was cut low enough to suggest breasts, and Mrs. Resnick walking next to her, rounder at the hips, in a lime green fabric with pearl embroidery so high on her chest it suggested that once upon a time, in a faraway land, there were these breasts. The skirt was cut at the calf, making her ankles look fatter than they should have. "Cankles," Mark said in my ear. "Calves and ankles that are the same width."

My mother picked up two empty beer bottles and a dish of shrimp tails off the ground before making a full waltz back into the center of the party, Mrs. Resnick wiped her glasses clean with a napkin, and I thought, Those poor adults. Doomed to a life of filth, finding it everywhere they went. At the beach, the only thing my mother could see was the empty Fanta bottles, sandwich wrappers, Popsicle sticks littering the sea, and when the sun set over the water, Janice's mother said it looked just like when she sorted through the garbage can with a flashlight after Janice threw out her retainer. My mother and Janice's mother shared a big laugh and quickly grew hot in their chairs, dried out from Saltines and peanut butter and talking. They walked to the water but never went in, moving away from the waves like the mess was nothing

but an accidental oil spill that would turn their toes black. Janice and I sat on the wet sand and rubbed the water up and down our newly shaved shins, while our mothers looked on, nervous about the way we were already abusing our bodies. They held up sunscreen bottles, rubbed cream on our noses. We fussed, squirmed, accused them of horrible crimes, threatened to wipe it all off in the water, stare straight into the sun until our corneas burned and our flesh flaked off, until we had taken in the worst of the Sound with our mouths. They sighed, tugged at our faces, threatened to bring us home, to end our lives right there! But I was never scared. I knew our lives were just beginning and that their lives were ending, and how strange it seems to me now that this was a form of leverage.

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I like the feeling of Belgian endive against my upper lip," I said to Mark an hour later at the vegetable table, running a piece of it against my mouth. My mother thought it was best we served vegetables with names nobody felt comfortable pronouncing. Stuffed Belgian endive for the Americans! she had shouted, and witloof chicory salad for the Europeans! And if anybody is to say, *Where's the pâté de foie gras?* tell them the God's honest truth, Emily: 'tis not the season for ridiculous meat spreads.

"I like foods based on their textures," I continued.

"You're weird," Mark said.

"Shut up," I said. When Mark insulted me, it felt like praise.

I looked around for my father but instead saw his two brothers, Uncle Vince and Uncle Vito. Our last name was Vidal, so their names always seemed like a joke to me—Vince and Victor and Vito Vidal—but my grandmother believed names that invoked alliteration produced successful people. Galileo Galilei. Harry Houdini. Graham Greene. And my grandmother would have continued the list if she were still alive.

My uncles were talking to Dr. Trenton. Dr. Trenton's son Richard was in my class at school and had told everybody that his father gave Mrs. Trenton a brand-new nose (and removed our senator's jowls). "Mr. Trenton was literally redesigning his wife the way he wanted to!" I had told my parents at dinner, my rage calculated and ultimately irrelevant.

"Where's your father?" I asked. Mark's father hadn't attended a neighborhood function in over two years now, and I wondered how he got away with that. I could barely remember what he looked like, even

though he was one of the few adults who had always made it a point to talk to me at these patio things, probably because the other adults wouldn't talk to him. He wasn't a crowd favorite, my mother had said once, as though people should be ranked like sports teams. She said Mr. Resnick asked too many questions. "He was always like, 'Quick, what's the only river that goes north and south on the equator!' Honestly? This isn't school. It's a party!"

"The Congo," I had said.

"Don't be absurd, Emily."

It had been years since anybody had seen him. I missed Mr. Resnick, how he would walk by me, put a hand on my shoulder, point to his forehead, and say, "Quick! A widow's peak, or a man's peak?"

"He's at home," Mark said. "Where's your father?"

"Whereabouts unknown."

We laughed. Mark and I liked the adults most when they were gathered together at parties. Alone they were boring—boring and powerful—saying any boring thing and getting away with it. At dinner, all my mother wanted to know was, "Have we estimated our summer expenditures?" even though there were a million other good things to be discussed, and my father looked at the pot on the stove and all my father wanted to know was, "Is this actual seaweed?" And when I stabbed my fork into the kale before my father properly sat down (his arms had to be fully rested on the table so we knew he was almost relaxed), they both said, "Emily, have you no manners?" Or rather, where did I last leave them? And I said, "In my locker at school," because sincerity was a form of weakness at the dinner table. My father looked down at his plate of kale and said, "And thus the carnivores went extinct."

My mother narrowed her eyes and said, "Well, who needs them anyway?"

But when they were all together at my father's fiftieth birthday party, when I lifted the aluminum foil covering the food trays to sneak a shrimp in front of all the adults, my mother smiled and said, "Oh, children." Just like that, the differences between us were darling.

The birthday party was so much like a corporate networking event, some of the adults introduced themselves with name, title, business;

Henry Lipson, vice president, Stratton and Stratton. My father was one of the more successful investment bankers with Lehman Brothers. Everybody knew this. That was why he was leaving the New York branch soon, to bring his talents overseas. Everybody knew this too. Alfred announced it by the vegetable table.

"He's leaving," Alfred said. "Even though nobody will talk about it. But it's final. He's moving to Prague."

"I know," Mrs. Resnick said. "I heard."

My mother approached gravely with a tray of dead shellfish. "Alfred," was all my mother had to say to end the conversation and make Alfred eat some shrimp. Mrs. Resnick walked away, claiming shellfish allergy. "Everybody is so allergic these days," said my mother. "Don't you think it's getting a bit pretentious?"

Whatever their title, the adults all had the same question. Where in the hell are the napkins, Emily, if not right on the table?

"I don't know," I said to Alfred. "Don't worry. I'll take care of this."

I took a picture of the empty spot on the table where the napkins should have been. I was a fourteen-year-old girl documenting the invisible failures of our party and Alfred thought that was the funniest thing he had seen so far that night. He puffed on a cigar and the white smoke curled out his nostrils and some seemed to get caught in his nose hairs. Sometimes, when he smiled, he looked as though he couldn't even breathe and that this was hardly relevant.

"Mom," I said. "We have a problem."

"Photograph the guests," she said, without even turning around.

My mother pointed to the napkins and sent me to light the candles that had gone out. I meandered through the white chairs with white lace tied around the backs and watched Mark by himself at the vegetable table appraising the squash. I wanted to return to him, but as soon as the party started, I had acquired all these chores from my mother, whose lipstick was starting to crack at the corners of her mouth, something that happened to her when she was talking and drinking too much, which was something that happened to her when she was nervous, wiping her mouth with a napkin after every sip. I lit the candles and listened to the adults around me, the way their words sounded coming out of their mouths.