

prologue

In the days before Nora, I had a job that paid in American dollars. I had a pension plan and benefits. I had regular interaction with all kinds of people who knew how to cut their own meat.

But then, in a heady moment of parental love, I decided to be a stay-at-home mom.

Now, I can just hear the applause of Phyllis Schlafly, Dr. Phil, Oprah. Namely, *all people who don't stay home*. And I'm not saying they are wrong to put the hope of America in the hands of mothers. I'm sure what I do is very noble. The stay-at-home mom raises children who will change the world! She is a warrior! A freedom fighter! A revolutionary!

But to be honest, there are days when I would trade all the Play-Doh in the world for one quiet pedicure and a hefty Christmas bonus. In American dollars, of course.

chapter/one

“Lovely.”

“You think so?”

“You’ll be the fairest of them all.”

“That’s quite the compliment.” I squeezed my eyelids tighter to protect my corneas from jabs of purple eye shadow.

“Can I look yet?”

“Not yet, silly. You need lipshtick.”

“Lipshtick. Of course.” I opened my eyes and puckered up.

My nearly four-year-old daughter, Nora, stood before me, face centimeters from my own. A flock of black eyelashes, expertly emphasized with Max Factor, framed wide blue eyes. A tiara struck a precarious balance on her crown of thick brown curls. She stuck her tongue out in concentration and drew a wobbly line of Chinese red near my lips, catching a few teeth en route. Stepping back to view her work, she sighed with pleasure. “All done.”

“Fantastic,” I said, rising from the footstool on which I sat. I held out my hand, bowed deeply. “Shall we?”

Nora smiled, scrambled to her feet. She pulled herself up to her full three feet of height and tilted her chin to an orator’s pose. “The pumpkin car is waiting.”

“Awesome,” I said and took her hand.

She stopped, looked up with reproach. “Mommy, you’re the prince.” She had a touch of purple shadow, a sprinkling of blush and clear lip gloss. Such are the advantages when your makeup is done by someone with fine motor skills. “*I’m* the princess and *you’re* the prince. You have to talk like a boy.”

I looked down at my getup. Yards of white satin stuck out in a triangle starting at my waist. My wedding dress had experienced a renaissance as a result of Nora’s princess fixation. I’d made the mistake of showing my daughter our wedding album and had been forced to reveal the sacred dress with the best twirling radius in the house. Nora didn’t seem to mind that I couldn’t zip up the back. Exposed skin didn’t bother her as long as it didn’t affect my ability to spin on demand.

I cleared my throat and lowered my voice. “Fine, my lady. I am your prince, as long as my dress doesn’t cause any confusion.”

Nora ignored me completely. She was practicing her own moves in a cheap princess imitation I’d found at Target. A better mother might have sewn a frilly play gown, or at least tried for vintage glamour from The Salvation Army. I’d shunned home ec in high school, had precious little time for thrift store digging, and was not a better mother.

“Prince?” Nora asked.

“Yes?” I replied.

Nora stopped spinning, hand on hip.

I cleared my throat and switched to baritone. “Sorry. Yes?”

“Where’s the palace?”

What? Our cluttered house that hasn’t been dusted since

'03 doesn't strike you as a fitting place for a ball?

My chance for retort was curtailed by the ringing doorbell. I swished toward the entryway, pulling a ratty cardigan around my shoulders to hide the gap in back. I peeked through the cut-glass window in our front door. The mailman waited with a stack of mail and an electronic clipboard. I pulled the door open and tried to avoid eye contact. I couldn't really move my eyelids due to the weight of purple caking, so this wasn't too difficult.

He smirked and showed me where to sign.

I scribbled in silence, then exchanged the clipboard for a certified letter and a stack of bills.

"Nice outfit," he said, ripping off a receipt.

"Thank you." I swished backward and curtsied as I closed the door.

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"MommyMommyMommy!"

"Coming." I left the bills on the table and returned to the ball. Nora was hopping by the couch, alternating feet.

"Mommy, I need to go potty."

"Okay. Call me if you need help."

"I *do* need help. With my dress." She was scurrying toward the bathroom while trying to keep her knees together.

I followed her and reached around to gather the tulle as she yanked down her underwear.

"I can't! I can't!" Nora's eyes filled with panic. In the not-so-distant past, wearing the contents of an emptied bladder wouldn't have raised a little eyebrow, but now the idea of wet

pants made Nora shiver with disgust. I hurried to help her bare all.

I scooped her up and sat her tush on the toilet seat, bunching pink layers in my hand to keep them from the bowl below.

Nora sighed and let her head fall into her hands. “Made it.”

“Next time let me know a little earlier and we’ll have plenty of time.”

“Mom,” she said, voice muffled, “you’re the prince.”



An hour later I threw a sixth Chinese-red cotton ball into the bathroom trash can. The voice of Mister Rogers as Lady Aberlin droned from the living room, where Nora sat in her dress munching handfuls of Goldfish. I had forty-five minutes to cast off my princely role and return to that of June Cleaver, casserole in hand, when my husband, Jake, returned from work.

I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My green eyes were still combating stubborn purple film, but that was a good distraction from the wrinkles that had started to surface. At thirty-two, I felt younger than I looked. After removing evidence left by the deft hands of Madame Nora, Makeup Artiste, I looked my age in dog years. I ran my fingers through my shoulder-length honey brown hair. Nora got her curls from me, I hated to say. I’d battled them all my life, enduring hours of straightening treatments and spending embarrassing amounts of money on flatirons. My current lifestyle,

however, prohibited lengthy grooming rituals, so I was trying to embrace my curly self. Judging from today's look, I had a long way to go.

Much to my daughter's chagrin, my everyday wardrobe wasn't very regal. I tossed my wedding dress onto the bed and picked up worn jeans and a striped orange and blue T-shirt. Pulling my arms through the sleeve holes, I vaguely recalled a time when I would dress for the workday. In another life, I'd taught Spanish at Springdale High School on the south side of town. Those were days of skirts, hose, and sensible pumps. Now I was content with variations on a comfortable theme: jeans, shirts, and all forms of sweatshirts. On wild and crazy winter days I donned a sweater, and Jake could convince me to dress up on date nights, but as a rule, I was happy to donate my work clothes to those less fortunate rat-racers.

I tiptoed past the family room and into the kitchen, dodging the creaky boards in our hardwood. My passage unheeded by the Goldfish eater, I opened the fridge and took out broccoli, mushrooms, gingerroot, and strips of beef sirloin. Stir-fry tonight, per Jake's request. I'd even marinated the meat. I'd never learned to sew, but cooking hadn't been as elusive. Nobody would ever confuse me with Twiggy, but there was something to be said about dying fat and happy. Smug with a rare moment of organization, I dragged our wok out of the pantry and set it on the stove top. Broccoli rinsed and mushrooms brushed, I set the cutting board before me.

"Mommy, will you color with me?" Nora stood in the doorway to the kitchen, blue and green marker streaking the front of her dress, bodice to hem. Another reason I shopped at Target. She held a fistful of uncapped markers in one hand.

An open coloring book was sandwiched between her elbow and hip.

“I have to cook dinner, sweetie.” I peeled off two cloves of garlic from the bulb.

“Pleeeeeease?” Nora asked. Two markers dropped on the floor. “Ten minutes?”

I looked at her rainbowed face and wanted to kiss the Crayola genius who’d developed washable technology. “Five minutes.”

“Six.”

“Five.” I followed Nora to the kitchen table and helped her spread out the supplies. “What are we going to color?”

“This one.” She pointed to the open page. A toothy giant loomed above a frightened Jack standing by the beanstalk.

“Really?” I asked, unsure. “He looks like he’s not very nice.”

“Yes, he is,” Nora said, coloring the giant’s teeth in bold brown strokes. “He’s a nice giant. Jack is happy to see him.”

Is that why Jack is sweating and trying to run off the page? I started coloring the beanstalk orange. The green was being used for Jack’s hair. “What happened to your Noah’s Ark coloring book?” A parade of paired-off animals seemed more cheerful, at least until the rain began to fall.

“I think it’s in Daddy’s car.”

I doubted it. Somewhere along the way, our daughter had heard this excuse for a missing item and had taken to ascribing car blame when household objects disappeared.

“We’ll have to check when he gets home from work.”

“Let’s go see Daddy at his store.” Jake owned Elliott Paints, a store committed to serving and supporting the local

economy, keeping houses bright and colorful, and entertaining pint-sized customers with paint swatches and wallpaper books. Trips to visit Jake at work had an intrigue I couldn't place but didn't fight.

"Daddy will be home soon, peanut." I capped my marker and rose from the table. "In fact, I'm sure he'll want to finish coloring this page with you."

"Noooooooooo," whined Nora. "*You* have to finish it. It hasn't been fifteen minutes, Mom."

"But it *has* been five minutes," I said, hobbling to the kitchen with Nora clinging to my leg. Pink tulle billowed around her waist. "Nora, let go."

She slapped the floor with both hands. "No," she said, her eyes trained on mine and her bottom lip pushed out into a lump of sass.

I stopped. "Excuse me?"

"You're excused. Did you burp, Mommy?"

"Nora, did you just say no to your mom?" I crouched down to her eye level. Her lids were still smudged with purple shadow. The pouty mouth and kissable cheeks left over from infancy were tempting, but I did not allow myself to be wooed.

Nora looked toward the door, hoping either for escape or for Jake's entrance as distraction.

"Nora, when Mommy asks you to do something, you say, 'Yes, Mommy.'"

She said nothing, just stared at the door.

I turned her chin toward me. Her eyes remained fixed to the left.

"It seems to me you need a time-out to think." I scooped her up and headed toward The Time-Out Chair in the guest

bedroom. Initially, we'd tried holding time-out in Nora's room. That stopped when I'd come in to see her standing on top of The Chair, naked and singing to a flock of toys, books, and dolls that had miraculously migrated to a neat row in front of her. The guest room had far fewer temptations, at least until she developed an interest in comforters and sheets with low thread counts.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Nora wailed, thrashing her skirts into my face. "I'm ready to be nice! I'm ready to be nice!"

"I'm glad," I said, setting her down on the red chair. "We can talk about it when the timer goes off." I paused in the doorway. "I'll be back in five minutes."

"Six," she moaned through tears.



Five minutes later the microwave timer beeped and I heard Nora call, "Am I done?"

Piling the chopped vegetables into a bowl, I turned on the burner and swirled oil into the wok. "Come into the kitchen, please." A better mother would have gone to her child and had a heart-to-heart about disobedience and how it breaks down the structure of a God-fearing society. But my wok was starting to smoke.

Nora stood in the doorway, not a tear in sight. Short-lived remorse, apparently.

"Nora, why were you in time-out?"

She twirled. "I don't know," she sang.

"Do you need five more minutes to think about it?" I asked as I stirred the meat sizzling in seasoned oil.

“I obeyed my mom.”

“Disobeyed.”

“Disobeyed.”

“What do you say to me?” I turned from the stove.

“Sorry, Mommy,” Nora said and ran to bury her face into my leg.

I crouched down to hug her. “I forgive you,” I said into her curls.

“I forgive you, too,” she said before prancing back to the table.

I shook my head and reached for the broccoli.

Close enough.