

*Death, Pancakes, and Martha Stewart*

Last night I ventured north to have Sunday breakfast with my parents. Not entirely by choice, though I was more than willing, but mostly because of my duty as their contribution to the world, their biological life's singular goal. It's not as if I particularly enjoy spending time with them, but as sons and daughters are obligated to do, I love them terribly. Hi mom and pop, I say as I open the door to our communal heart, I'm back from life, and I smell pancakes.

Our home, apart from being a generic, memory-stuccoed two-story on a modest patch of green, is squishy, valved, and irreplaceable. My mother had worked to make it that way, carefully selecting different American dreams as each new season rolled around and posing us for countless photos so that we could remember all the good times Kodiak has said we've had. Our favorite gift from Martha Stewart, a dishtowel and oven mitt set with the pattern name of "Colonial Elegance," was what mom used to place a steaming hot pile of weekend in front of my father.

Hey, look what the cat dragged in! My father opens his arms, Alexandria summons me into port. The sun tumbling through the window behind him is his lighthouse. Our little med student, our little busy bee. How's the thriving metropolis?

Oh, you know, thriving. Crime is down, art installations are up, and we're in the running to host the Olympics in eight years. I breathe in the strong scent of his Kiehls aftershave as I'm crushed closer. It should be a universal law that all fathers smell of Kiehls, I decide. Kiehls and baseball, or maybe, if that athletic endeavor was too specific, simply a large, grassy, freshly-mowed field. And mothers, I think as I'm showered with

lipstick kisses, might reek of umbilical and placenta. Though, to mask that bond from any who did not happen to inhabit her uterus at one time or another, perhaps Chanel No. 5.

So, my mother starts as she takes the seat across from me. Any new boys in your life?

They're men now, I remind her as I start cutting up a pile of pancakes. And yes, I've started something recently with someone. I try to leave it at that, as vague as possible, but, as parents are prone to do, they begin asking questions.

What's his name? Is he another med student? What does he look like? Does he come from a nice family? Does he get pulled over in airports? Is he a communist? How about a socialist? Does he love America?

Martin, yes, tall and blonde with kind hands and eyes, I haven't met his family yet, no, no, no, and I would assume so.

The summarization of my new favorite human being seems to placate them, and we all settle back into quietly devouring the happiness of my childhood mornings. I take a moment to look around the kitchen. Martha's been visiting again, it seems. Though, in truth, Martha is the third parent in this household, so she's not visiting as much as she's co-inhabiting. New curtains for the window above the sink, new tablecloth. Sometimes, even though I appreciate the contributions Martha has made to this family, I wish I had a static home interior growing up. It would be nice to have one house in my memory to crawl back into when I'm cold instead of several carbon almost-copies. In all my WASPy privilege, I'm glad I've found something to complain about. It wouldn't be home without it.

You must be tired from all your schoolwork, my father says, his glasses slipping further down the bridge of his grotesquely Roman nose with every chewed movement of his jowls. I remember med school. It wasn't a cakewalk.

Oh, yeah. I'm pretty busy. Otherwise I'd come visit more often. But I'm on track to graduate early, so I suppose it's all worth it.

Good, good. You're our only, our baby! We know you'll be successful. Just don't forget to find a good man and give us grandbabies some day! My mother's face contorts happily, and she looks like she might levitate up through the ceiling. Which is a rare occasion, because she's only done that three or four times since the sixties, when it was a much more regular occurrence.

The rest of the morning is uneventful. Nothing of great importance is shared, save for pancakes, and I feel no great desire to move back home. Though, as our conversation progresses, underneath the Kiehls and Chanel I begin to smell weariness and age. Or maybe I've smelled them this whole time. Both these things should not be lingering around my immortal parents, but I know that one day in the next fifteen years or so Martha will come to co-inhabit with me, instead. Martha can't die. Maybe she'll make it easier.

Well mom and dad, I say, rising from my chair and moving to place my plate in the sink. I'm going to head out. It's a long way back to the city, and all this country air is giving my lungs false hope.

Oh, my mother's face falls. But you've only been here for a couple of hours.

For a second, I feel bad. I know, I'm sorry. But I've made plans with Martin for this evening and I have a big test coming up that I need to start studying for. You know how it is, dad.

Sure, sure. He smiles, but his eyes sign disappointment. Good luck, sweetheart. Make us proud!

I give them both long, lingering hugs and begin the walk to the door. As I step into the foyer my mother calls out and catches up with me. She presents me with a new Martha apron and a set of dishtowels. For your apartment, dear. You never know when you're going to need to entertain a certain young man or his family, and there is no better representative of domestic talent than Martha. I take them, letting her hold me again before I escape into another part of the world. I inhale deeply, smelling maternal instinct.

Bye mom.

It's dark and cold as I step out the door. Just past seven, if I had to make a guess. Winter. I reach for my car keys, hesitating slightly. It's chilly, and if I went in again I know it would still be ten in the morning, bright and warm. They're always ten in the morning.