

## "People Like Us"

I never had grey hair until my father died. Even in my fifties, I've been lucky enough to be able to forego the ritual most women put themselves through just to look a smidgen like their former selves. But here I am, three months after the funeral and Nicole is rubbing the black stuff onto my scalp, carefully wiping away any drips so I don't look end up looking like my ex whenever he had it done. He of the wandering hairline. She bends my head to get at the nape of my neck and says, "You know, Mom, I think you're really going to have fun with this. It's a new adventure for you."

My chin is touching my chest and I momentarily wonder if I should buy a new bra for the puppies. Might have been twenty years since I last thought they were worth being back where they originated and got me one of those fancy push-ups. Howard didn't even notice. He was a guy who would notice anything, everything that wasn't attached to me. Tractor. Dog. Dirt. Our daughters got the most attention and that was good enough for me but occasionally I wouldn't have minded being considered with a tad more interest than a loose fence post or dip in the driveway. "It's a bit nerve-wracking, actually," I say into my boobs. "Haven't done this since I was younger than you are now, you know."

Nicole's face is suddenly beside my boobs, too, trying to reassure me, or, how do they say it now? *Play me up*? "I know, I know. Dad was the only guy you ever dated and you haven't been in the game for almost twenty-seven years and back then it was easy because as long as you were a nice girl you could find a nice boy to date you. But you shouldn't think about it like that, Mom." She takes the face cloth off the table and dabs at a drip near my ear and it reminds me that I should clean them or candle them or something. What if my date looks into my ear and sees a clump of wax or hairball? Howard didn't get waxy ears until he was far into his forties but

by then everything else about him reminded me of our cows, too; stiff and lumpy and smelly and about as much conversation out of him. “I’m telling you, Mom,” Nicole says, “it’s still like that, really, but with the whole social media thing thrown into the mix. Don’t even have to leave your house to meet a guy, you can do it from the comfort of your house right at your computer. Kinda like home-shopping in a way.”

“Buying one *would* be easier,” I say, to which I get a playful swipe on the shoulder. “Then I could get anyone I wanted, no questions asked.” *Damn those questions*, I thought. I promised myself I was going to be honest for the first time in my life, but that is almost impossible to do when you have your daughters hovering over your shoulder, checking out everything you type. I could feel their breath on the back of my shoulders as they tittered amongst themselves each and every time I attempted to bare my soul to the virtual world. This is why I created two profiles. One of the me they all know and love and one of the me they have never known and I’m not sure they’d love as much. Or maybe they would, it could just be me being me and all but there’s something fundamentally wrong with being dishonest to those closest to you. I’ve always thought that and it’s always eaten me up, though never enough to be truthful about it. My father knew, and I know he knew that I knew he knew, but he never said anything to me about it. I think that’s why I loved him so much. My one confidant, the one person who knew the real me and loved me no different, now dead underground with Nana’s rosary curled around his rigoured fingers.

“They ask the same questions to everyone, Mom, and that’s the only way they can find the perfect match for you. “

“So that’s why that kid from Zimbabwe showed up. And the married guy from Oklahoma. Or that stripper in Vegas. Perfect matches for me.”

Having finished getting at my roots, Nicole massages the goop over the rest of my hair. “It’s because you weren’t selective about it, Mom. You didn’t set your perimeter tight enough because you were too nice when you answered the questions. You were never going to date anyone in another continent. “

“Maybe I would.” I say.

“And you’d never date a Muslim or Buddhist.”

“Maybe I would. I don’t want to discriminate.” I wag a disapproving finger into the air.

She shakes my head a little too roughly. “No, you wouldn’t. I still go to church with you every Sunday, remember? Not the Muslim or Buddhist temple. You may say you can look past differences like that but that stuff is pretty major, Mom, and if you tried it and it didn’t work out you’d take the failure as proof that the system doesn’t work which only serves to justify your thoughts in the first place.” She sounds so grown up, I think.

“I get it, but maybe something different would be good for me, you know?” Something totally different. Something more like the real me.

“Sure, I guess,” satisfied that my hair is fully saturated, Nicole covers my head with a submarine- yellow grocery bag, *Superstore*, I believe, carefully tucking my ends in and seals it with a tight knot at the front of my forehead. “But not everybody is going to be right for you, and you shouldn’t want them to be, either. Then you’d end up with another generic relationship and you wouldn’t be happy.”

“My marriage to your father was *not* generic,” I say, even though the word *generic* sounds absolutely right on the button. Underwhelming, even more so. “We were perfect for each other at the time, really, but we were kids and when you’re that young it’s easy to make decisions at the snap of a finger. Nothing ties you down, not that you girls tied us down or

anything, but the world was ours and we didn't have to care about anything but ourselves." I stand up to pour myself a coffee and the grocery bag crinkles in my ears. "But when you get older you have bills to think about and a mortgage and health issues and everything else that comes with being an adult. That's when you can see those little things in your partner that annoy you or trouble you, you know, the things you can do without. And that's what marriage is, a bunch of things you can do without and a wee bit of the good stuff."

"Don't be so cynical." She says and sets the timer on the stove to go off in twenty-five minutes. "Dad's not that bad."

I take a sip of my coffee. "Of course he isn't, dear. He's perfectly fine for someone else." Nicole bumps my foot. "Of course I loved him; still love him, honey, just not in a way that would make either of us happy. Does this make sense to you?"

She shrugs. "I guess." And in that moment, she is the girl I remember at sixteen, crestfallen and broken on hearing the news of our separation.

There is a knock on the door and Jamie comes whirling in as she usually does, all sparky and rambling as though in the middle of a conversation. "So, you are gonna be so surprised, Mom!" She kicks her shoes off and presents a glittering pink gift bag at my feet. "Okay, so I know it's not your usual good luck type of gift but you were due for it anyway, and I just love the color." She is vibrating, literally shaking with anticipation, as she has since she was a child whenever she was excited. Nicole pours and passes Jamie a coffee and they wait in front of me, sharing those Christmastime looks like they were children again.

I nudge the bag with my foot, eyeing it suspiciously. "Should I be scared?" I ask, knowing that with them the gift could be the most random thing that would never make sense to me but perfectly sane to them.

“C’mon, Mom! Open it, open it!” Jamie moves toward the bag because I am obviously not doing it fast enough so I snatch it up, take my seat, and place it on my lap. Not too heavy. I’m sure it’s clothing of some type. They keep telling me how I need to update my look and though they haven’t quite mentioned *school marm* yet, I’m sure they would have if it was in their vocabulary. I peek into the bag and part the pink tissue paper with a hand. The soft, flawless paper is a terrible contrast to my bulbous knuckles and rough, patchy skin. I make a mental note to get a manicure before my date and wonder if they can work any kind of miracle to make my hands look, well, not so *worked*. I eventually get past the morbidity of my farmer’s wife’s hands and pull out a creamy yellow sundress. The fabric feels like softened butter and as I rub it between my fingers, my skin catches and snags on it and I’m afraid I’ll ruin it before I even get to try it on.

“Isn’t it pretty?” Jamie asks.

“Lovely,” I say because it is. It’s soft and satiny and I know that it’s cut to hide my hips, thin my waist and put all the focus on the puppies, which have grown so large over the years they are practically their own country. I imagine myself in the dress, the fabric settling in bumps over my butt and pulling, no, *screaming*, at the tension over my chest. A nice shawl could cover that up, I think.

“There’s more,” Nicole says, and prompts me to dig back into the bag.

This time, I pull out lace panties and a bra, one of those expensive ones from the specialty shop that I always liked and needed but couldn’t quite afford. The cheaper, full support versions I typically settle for need replacing every year when the elastic breaks down and the puppies travel to my belly. They are like they’re own timer, really, because with every inch they drop, they accurately tell me how much longer I have to purchase a replacement bra. Five inches

above my belly button and I've got about a month, three and I'm past due. "This one should fit you properly, Mom," Jaime says. "You really should go in and get a fitting done, so it can be perfect for you, but we stole a couple of the Commanders and brought them into the store and they sized you from there so we could still surprise you."

"Still calling them that, huh?" I smile at the nickname they've given my bras.

"It fits, given the job they have to do," Jamie says and hoists her own buds toward her chin, getting no farther than her armpit..

"I said I'd give you some of mine if you ever want it," I told her. "I have enough for each of you and maybe we could just use the rest to help some breast cancer survivors or something." I say it in jest but have always secretly wished it were as easy as that. Then I'd only have back pain from working on the farm. And putting up with Howard's crap, of course, but that part is mercifully almost over.

"Mom," Nicole says, "the bra is going to make you look awesome. I'll bet you'll want to show 'em off to the world when you're wearing it."

I nearly spit out my coffee at this one, but I figure I'd let them have their excitement. I smile that mother's smile that tells them simultaneously I love them but I think they're crazy. This is when Jamie instructs me to try it on. I politely explain that I'm afraid my hair dye will ruin it and that I would try it on later. I don't tell them that I'm not sure I want to see what exists on that skin my breasts have taken liege upon. Could be a village of something under there, but knowing that would require actually seeing the area and none of the dollar-variety bras I've purchased since the girls were born have given me that benefit. I wonder, then, if this miracle sling they bought me has the word *crane* embroidered anywhere on its equipment.

It's when I'm in this mental tug-of-war with my long-lost underboob skin that my offspring exchange this look. A look that tells me there's more and that I might not like whatever the *more* is. "What?" I ask and eye them up. Nicole will crack first, I know, so I train my eyes on her.

"What?" Nicole's voice cracks, waivers like she knows she's been caught but she's not willing to admit it. Her eyes seek out her sister. Looking for backup, I suspect.

"Nicole?" I question like *The Great Inquisitor*, but I get nothing.

Jamie holds my shoulders, and I'm an arm's length away from her face when she says, "We have another surprise for you."

"Oh?" I say, and wonder if it's anything like the surprise of a spa day and complimentary Brazilian wax treatment by a not-so-gentle German woman, just last week. I am only now able to sit with comfort and without the desire to put an ice cube between my cheeks and let it melt into oblivion, cursing my children until I get that numbing relief, and then again when the freezing wears off.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Nicole says to Jamie.

"Tell me," I say and gently pry away the cup of coffee Nicole holds against her chest as though it might protect her. I've never been violent and never will be, but I give one hell of a grilling when needed. Already, and before my girls even begin to explain their latest scheme of which I am obviously the victim, I prepare myself to take whatever assault it is and return it with full force. Their eyes tell me it's a big one. I plant my face just inches from my baby girl's face. She is sweating and nervous. "What did you do?" I ask, each word the staccato thrum of a gavel.

"We, uh..."

"We did you a favor," Jamie says.

"Because we love you," Nicole adds.

"And that is?"

"We created you another profile on the dating site you're on. We used all of the same pictures and most of the same information that you have on the other one, but changed a few things that we thought were more like the real you so you could meet someone that might actually work for you," Jamie tells me. "We just don't think you're going to get the kind of people you really want with the way you answered your questions. "

I set my coffee down. "Excuse me? You did what?" I feel the hot flush of my father's temper rise in my cheeks. An accompanying headache at the base of my skull crawls toward my ears and pounds my temples. "Take it down."

"We will," says Jamie confidently, if even a little brazen. "After you try it our way, just once. Try it your way with, uh, what's his name again?"

"Willard," Nicole says, her eyes on the floor.

"Right, Willard. You go on your date with Willard tonight and then go out with Dale tomorrow and if you're unhappy with our pick, then we'll remove your profile and no harm done." She has rehearsed this, I can tell.

I say nothing because there is nothing to say. I've been betrayed by my own children, the ones I birthed for a combined forty agonizing hours, the ones who pledged their loyalty to me when Howard and I separated even though I never once asked for it. I toss the rest of my coffee in the sink, rinse the cup and quietly walk to the door. Jamie and Nicole watch me slip on my Crocs, something else they tell me to get rid of because the shoes apparently became unstylish when I first put them on. I slip my purse on my shoulder and the Superstore bag slips off my ear,

so I tuck it back into the wet mess of a helmet and wipe the dark goo from my fingers onto my good pants.

"Mom -," Nicole starts but Jamie interrupts as she always does.

"We did it for you, Mom. It's because we love you, can't you see that? We just want you to be happy." Her voice falters a bit at the end and I know she's on the verge of tears, but I think that crying just might do her some good. See how it feels to be sad for a moment, like me all the time. I don't wish unhappiness on my daughters, just reality.

"Then you should have kept your nose out of my business," I say, and take my keys and leave my own house.

"Mom!" I hear them call me. "Mom! We need to rinse your hair out! Come back and just let me rinse your hair out!" Nicole calls to me in deep, choking sobs, but I don't look back

It takes nearly twenty minutes of driving to calm myself down and another ten to remember that I still had the damn bag on my head. I realize, then, that I've stormed out of my own house and that if I go back, even to wash the dye off my head, I will have surrendered yet again. I loop back to Connie's house and pray that Carl isn't home. The last thing I need is him meddling in my business and reporting back to his best friend Howard that I've gone off the deep end.

I pull into Carl's vacant spot on the driveway and knock on their door. My head is tingling a bit more than it should, so I ring the doorbell, hoping for a quick entry. Inside, steps like hoof beats clamour toward me and crash against the door, rattling the frame. Salvador, their Great Dane, yowls and brays and scratches the metal, awaiting a belly rub from whomever is unfortunate enough to twist the knob and open it. I decide against knocking again or giving Salvador any reason to break the barrier down. Knit and bitch, I remember then, Connie is at her

Tuesday knit and bitch with her gaggle of hens. Never cared for that group much because all they do is talk about women like me. Connie, I know from thirty years of friendship, is the exception in that group.

"So what do I do now, Salvy?" I say to the dog on the other side of the door. He whines and I know that it would do me no good to whine back. No good at all. Instead, I creep around to the side of the house. Carl always did a better job of maintaining his bungalow than Howard ever did with ours and I'm pleased to see the garden hose, neatly coiled, ready for use. No thistle underfoot, no stinging nettle or poison ivy stealing it's way between the concrete foot pads, no Salvador poop to step on, just a neat little garden hose waiting for its ultimate purpose. I untwist the knot and pull the bag off my head, careful to bend over so the dye doesn't drip on my clothes. The water is icy but I know I'll have to give my hair a good rinse otherwise I could end up looking like my impatient ex usually does.

The pressure stings my scalp and I try to change the setting but it won't budge. Ten minutes goes by and the water runs clear, though it also froze my head about nine minutes ago so I'm not entirely sure the pressure hasn't completely scalped me. Old Yeller, Connie's mustard-coloured geriatric neighbour who feeds on prying, hacks, "can't afford a per-fessional, Maude? That stuff'll turn that head of yours greener than snot," she coughs and takes a long pull from her portable oxygen mask. She is walking across the street, barefoot, in an old nightgown that is so sheer from age her panties and accompanying day-time leak-proof pad is visible.

"I accidentally locked myself out of my house when I was watering the garden so I thought I'd get my spare key from Connie," I call to Old Yeller, who continues to advance with surprising speed.

"You want me t- to," Old Yeller coughs and sputters and nearly chokes on the liquid that is slowly drowning her lungs, "get you a towel or somethin'?" She takes more oxygen and turns her head and spits onto the driveway. Brown mucuousy spittle drips down her chin and she pinches the thin material on her breast, brings it to her chin and wipes the slime away. The result is a gooey splatter over her left breast that makes the material transparent and leaves the tip of her nipple exposed. It's grey and I find myself momentarily horrified at the prospect that I, too, may one day have grey, albeit much larger, nipples.

"I think I'll be fine," I say, "but thanks for the offer."

"You know," Old Yeller says as I ring out my hair, "these days you don't really see a woman with her head on the ground. Usually up in the air with all her fancies and such. They're like clouds, you know, those fancies. All muddled together and they look like they're real, you know, like you could touch 'em." She coughs again and takes yet another chest full of oxygen, replaces the mask to its holder and turns the machine off. She pats the pocket of her nightgown and draws out a hand-rolled cigarette, which she lights and takes almost a dozen quick puffs, letting the smoke escape from her dry, parted lips, rather than blowing it away.

I laugh a little. "My head's attached the same way it was when I was born," I tell her. "Dad used to say it was screwed on good and tight so it didn't go floating away."

Old Yeller huffs something I can't quite hear, then says, "your head doesn't have to be in the clouds to see them, deary. Nor do you have to touch them to know they are real. I think that I'll be somewhere there up in those clouds soon enough and you know what? When I'm in the clouds, I won't be thinking a damn thing about anything else. I'll be free." She says this with the cigarette tucked in the side of her lips "Free like a fucking bird, pardon my French." She finishes her cigarette and claps me on the shoulder. "Do what you need to do while you're here, Maude,

or you just might die sooner than me." Old Yeller clears her throat, fights something up and swallows it back down.

"I'll try," I say and watch her scuffle back toward her house across the street. The day is warm, almost hot, so I let my hair dry in the sun and rub some lipstick onto my cheeks. I'm not exactly date-ready, but I'm determined to meet Willard on my own terms.

Willard turns out to be an older, fatter version of Howard, with waxier ears. (I checked when he wasn't looking.) He is condescending, the way he calls me "old girl" and "people like us" as though I'd naturally fall into the out of shape, used up, out-of-options category with himself. We eat Thai food because I insist on it (Howard never liked ethnic food), and I listen to him gabble about his antique restoration business. Willard pulls up his zipper frequently because his pants are too tight and his groin is puffy and lumpy like twined beef. He does this without realizing it and it makes me wonder how long he's had the lower gut, whether it crept up on him like my saddlebags or sprouted up on him one morning, like my grey hair. But I listen to his stories and allow him to call me "old girl" and say nothing about the food he unintentionally spews in my direction as he eats with his mouth open. I let him feel like the date is going well and he's on his game because, whether I like it or not, we are somewhat in the same category. We are past our prime and the skin that once tightly held our bodies together is growing tired, so we are lumpy and sagging and smell increasingly like medicine.

It's not my place to tell him he no longer has *it*, whether he ever had *it* or not. People my age need to stick together or we'll be overrun by bullheaded youth. Jamie and Nicole would poke fun at Willard and the thought just makes me more determined to stick it out and let him attempt to kiss me at the end of the night. Willard seems to talk more to my boobs than to my face but he is unapologetic about it, probably thinks I appreciate the attention, that an "old girl"

like me would be grateful for the slimy eye-rape. I check my watch and know it's going to be a long night.

Willard does attempt to kiss me. We walk around the fountains in the park and under the bridge where all the bums sleep and the druggies defecate. Willard has chosen this spot, beside the concrete bridge pier that is tagged with a giant walking, talking penis from whose mouth splurts a leaky bubble that says "free hugs", to lean in for a kiss. I turn my cheek and offer a hug, to which he says, "that it, eh?" I smile politely but Willard does not return it. Rather, he zips his pants up one last time, nods curtly at me, turns on his heels and walks in the direction the hookers were trolling. Our town is a nice one, but every place has its own asshole, my father would say. Willard has taken me to, and deserted me in said asshole.

I share little detail with Jamie and Nicole the next morning and they know not to ask. Coffee is unusually quiet and I am feeling a tad guilty about my behaviour, as they seem of theirs, but we don't speak of it. There's nothing alluring about me, really, but the yellow dress they've given me makes me feel different, somehow. Not even in the way it nips here or tucks there, but maybe in the way it also frees me, the dress feels like it's always been mine. It's bold and brave, like the me I've always wanted to be but hid to everyone but my father. It feels like, well, home.

The girls flatten my hair so I'm all sleek and shiny when the doorbell rings. "He better not be a dipshit," I say.

"We love you, Mom." Nicole says and both girls are biting at their lips nervously.

"What?" I say.

"Just, know that we did this for you. You deserve this, Mom," Jamie says and gives me a quick squeeze.

Before I can lecture them on whatever they've done to deserve lecturing, the bell rings again, followed by a friendly and melodic tap-tap-tap-tap... tap-tap. I eye the girls wearily, smooth out the wrinkles on the front of my dress and open the door.

Dale is standing there, flowers in hand, with the most charming grin a person could have. "Hi," she says, "you must be Maude."

I, too, am biting my lip, unable to hold back tears.

Dale frowns, apologetic. "I'm sorry. Did I come at a bad time? I can come back later," she says as my daughters break into tears of their own, three of us crying in front of a confused stranger.

I wipe my face with the back of my hands and offer one to Dale, who readily accepts my invitation inside. "We were just having a moment, is all," I say. "But a good one, I guess, though you'd never think it buy watching us blithering like babies." Dale laughs. I laugh. Nicole and Jaimie laugh.

I laugh. For what seems like ages and since when seems like forever, I laugh.

