



CHAPTER 1 PREVIEW

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## CHAPTER 1: MOTHER'S SECRET

My grandmother was born in a lighthouse on a rock in the North Atlantic. My mother buried a secret under an icy silence. And I had a lousy love life. I do not believe these events are isolated anomalies. They are ripples of a single, entangled emotional lineage. This is the story of how I have figured it out. How I gazed into the depths of loss, pulled myself back and shook my curls hard. It's how I found myself.

Rubbing airplane sleep from our eyes, my daughters and I step onto a downward escalator at Ottawa International Airport. It is past midnight and the custodian-proud gleam of the terminal is stark against the inky night. My younger brother, slightly creaking at 50 yet still a well of Canadian hospitality, had promised to make the forty-five minute drive to pick us up. I've often said that an airport pick-up is a true act of love, and one past bedtime is served only by the love-struck or dog-loyal family. Andy is the latter. From my perch at the top of the moving staircase I scan the small gathering of welcoming faces below and cannot see my brother. Could he be late? Might he have gotten the date wrong? I begin to consider the cost of a taxi when a pair of blue jeans makes me stop for some reason I don't consciously understand. These are not the legs of my stalwart little brother. The faded denim shoots up from two worked in running shoes and ends at the hips of a sturdy, older man. The jeans are crowned by a giant sign that obscures the rest of his body. It's a neon pink poster board hurriedly purchased at an

office supply store on the way to the airport. I can't see his face and upper body but I notice the tremor in the two sets of knuckles that grip each side of the poster. My stomach begins to flutter. The sign's message is clearly written. Bold strokes of bright red Sharpie ink trumpet his mission: LOST BOY LOOKING FOR HIS WENDY!

It's him. Him. My stomach goes unsettled. This is the man I have never met. No word about him ever slipped while I was growing up. Aunts bit their tongues. Cousins were sworn to silence or told he was dead. My grandmother said her Rosary and kept her head firmly in her prayer book. He was the man who lived only in the memories of my mother. While she stayed true to my father and busily raised three children, this man lived inside her. He was her secret. He was her heartbreak. She loved him from afar in so many acts of sublimation, Sigmund Freud would have been proud. Specifically, his secret presence injected itself into her lessons to me about love and female sexuality. He was both a warning and a shame. Though he was never mentioned, he somehow lived in my life. And now, more than twenty years after my mother's death, I am about to meet him.....

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I should have known about my mother's secret all along. I mean, there were so many obvious clues in my childhood. Road signs that pointed over and over to this free range man who was living a parallel life beside her, often not far from where we lived. But hindsight is twenty-twenty and children wear blinders. They

focus intently on growing up. Psychologists call it primary narcissism. In a young child's psyche, parents and their past lives are, at best, supporting characters. Kids star in their own show while extras – friends, siblings, parents secrets -- move in and out of scenes. If it doesn't affect the main plot, that is, human development, it mostly gets ignored. But that doesn't mean there isn't a cost. The story about my mother's secret is like rereading a favorite childhood novel with an adult eye. Just like I never knew there were Nazi's in *The Sound of Music*. My childish recollection had the Von Trappe's as a happy singing family joined by a cute neighbor boy in brown clothes. The same surface-happy memories of my own family were also tucked in my noggin. I was too distracted by my mother's determination to make us normal to notice that there was something very abnormal about us. I simply didn't notice Rolfe's brown uniform or stop to consider why the Van Trappe's had to move.

As adults, surprising "aha!" moments change everything. This is the story of a series of "aha!" moments. It that started when I was 35 and in a career-girl identity crisis. I had no ring on my finger except a Cartier "friendship" ring that was a vague promise of nothing. I was pregnant with my first child, licking tears from the corners of my lips in a therapist's office in Los Angeles because life hadn't worked out the way my mother had told me it would. It ended fifteen years later when a long lost cousin --- one from the nutty side of the family -- found me on Facebook. Holding a glass of red wine over my white carpet, her lips dropped an information bomb in my living room. In an instance, the cousin who

broke the family code of silence had switched places with me. Now I was the nutty one. That bomb confirmed all my hunches and led me to the final pieces of a family puzzle. A completed puzzle that, when finally viewed in full-blown Technicolor was Rolfe in a Nazi uniform. My elephant in the living room. The nakedness of the Emperor.

Somehow all this tweaked a nerve in my girl-psyche and allowed me to finally find real love. To trust authentic feelings of security. To fall in love with kindness instead of men who left me feeling lonely and longing. No, I'm wrong. It didn't tweak something. It made me take full control of my feelings and actions. This meeting of my mother's lost man was the culmination of decades of inner and outer work, where I pieced together fragments of inter-generation psychology and banned them from operating in my life.

The first clue about my mother's secret was her tone whenever she talked about falling in love with my father, which wasn't often at all. Her tone was flat. It wasn't giddy or blushy. It was matter-of-fact. She told me their first date was to attend mass together. Period. No romantic details. Move along. Nothing to see here. I was supposed to believe that church was the governor of her heart and the writer of their love story.

As I remember it, she did allow a girly high-pitch tone when she told the story of Daddy's wedding proposal. Women love their diamond ring stories. According to her, Daddy had secretly and deliberately scratched a record album to make the needle stick in an endless broken record repetition. When Mom went over to adjust

the stuttering needle she was shocked and awed to see a diamond ring spinning around on the vinyl. It was a blazing .33 carat diamond – yes, one-third of a whole carat! – something she was very proud of. Her own mother’s ring had been a very narrow gold band with no stone at all. I wear my grandmother’s ring on a gold chain around my neck today... still wondering why of Elsie’s four daughters, my mother, her least favorite, inherited the ring.

Anyway, the broken record spinning the .33 carat ring was Daddy’s proposal. Wordless and faulty. Besides this story, her love story included one oft repeated, firm fact: My mother was a thirty-one year old virgin when she married my father.

This fact was indisputable. I challenged her only once. I was in college and we were in the kitchen sipping tea as if we were friends. I was mouthy. She, dogmatic. There was a 33-year wall between our Blue-willow cups yet it wasn’t wide enough to sever the invisible thread that bound us.

“C’mon, mum,” I flirted. “Tell me the truth. People fuck.” The word was testy. I was too old to be shut down, to have my mouth washed out with soap.

“People have been fucking since the beginning of time,” I continued, “And they’ll keep doing it.”

Her laser blue eyes glared, and she spoke with her bottom teeth jutting out. “I was a virgin when I married your father!” At the time, I dismissed her vehemence as anger over my potty mouth. My mother never liked my sailor slang and I slathered it thick when I was young and rebellious. That’s why I missed the clue. I was busy being proud of my own defiance as I shimmied out of her

nest.

I assumed her virginity was the reason she could tell me nothing about sex. Ellen Frances Ronayne, the prettiest daughter of a depression era, working class Irish Catholic family in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, was a full-grown, Catholic woman with no sexual experience when she married my father. For eighteen post-puberty years, she solidly said her Rosary, worshiped the Virgin Mary and pursued a career as a legal stenographer. That was it. Which, given her attractiveness, was amazing. But I knew nothing about the power of beauty back then, nor had I heard the juicy little statistic that eighty per cent of humans have sex for the first time by their 19th birthday.

As for my virgin mother, spectacularly, in 1959, at the eleventh hour of her youth, she was able to snag a twenty-two year old, tall, handsome, college-educated officer of the Royal Canadian Navy. My father. For this, I give her major kudos. Not only was she, ahem, old, but she was a left-handed working class girl with bad hearing and no teeth. Mom had lost all hearing in one ear to scarlet fever as a baby and all her teeth to gum disease at the age of twelve. As for the left hand, this was the 1930's afterall. Her shameful left wing had been tied in a sling in kindergarten and she was forced to scrawl with her right hand. Thus, she wrote badly on either side. But my mother was the mistress of reinvention and compensation. She eventually learned to type and, being a trained ambidextrous, became the Michael Jordan of keyboards, slamming out a cool 70 words per minute. A typewriter was a fixture on our kitchen counter and always her primary means of composing the

written word. I thought every kid had their lunch bag love-notes neatly typed on index cards.

Besides knowing how to whip up sweet lemonade out of life's lemons, my smart mom had another saving grace: her beauty. She was a curvy five-foot-two with legs six feet long with a killer smile. Her dentures were a secret barely anyone knew about. In fact, I never saw them once. Really. I never saw my mother's teeth out of her head in the 18 years I lived with her. No bubbling in a glass on a bedside table a la an Efferdent commercial. But she once told me she'd lost all her teeth as a kid. So I believed her. I believed everything she told me.

And there was not a darned thing wrong with my mother's eyes. Bright, translucent blue, they flashed ethereal life and danced hard with every gazer. Nor was there anything wrong with her mind. This high-school educated woman put herself through secretarial school (because her father didn't believe in educating girls) by waitressing and cleaning houses, and went on to become a legal secretary. This fact she never let me forget. In the 1970's when she found herself buried in dirty dishes, mounds of laundry and ungrateful kids, she would often throw up her hands and scream in exasperation "I am a legal stenographer!"

My father, Bernard "Bernie" Earl Walsh, was the eldest of a Prince Edward Island farm family. As the story goes, his parents allowed him to leave his chores in the barn to attend Saint Dunstan's University in Charlottetown to embark on the journey of priesthood. According to my mother, a priest with a degree in Philosophy might have a clear shot at being a Bishop someday. But upon



graduation, he delayed. Instead of entering the seminary he told his parents he desired a single year's stint in the Navy. He soothed their worries with the fact that with a college degree, he could enter as an officer rather than an enlisted man. Thus, he would be safe in the officer's quarters in the post WWII Canadian navy. This was to be a one-year gig to see the world. Nothing more. He promised to visit cathedrals and kiss the blarney stone, and would soon be back to enter the seminary and become the prized priest that his Irish Catholic mother yearned for. But alas, he ended up kissing my mother, and much to the dismay of his own mother, their visit to the cathedral had little to do with the past's dusty history and everything to do with the bright promise of the future.

Within three years my mother had popped out three babies. My older brother, Chris, is my Irish twin, just eleven months older than me, and my younger brother, Andy, followed a year and a half after me.

My mother told me she named me Wendy after Wendy Darling from Peter Pan. I've been told that J.M. Barrie invented the name in his original play, Peter Pan and Wendy. Disney made the movie in 1953 and for the next decade mothers became entranced by the name, slapping it on newborn-girl birth certificates all over North America. My mother was one of them. I remember her reading the book to me. We saw the movie and even the play. Even my name was a big fat hint about her secret. Wendy's job was to be mother to the lost boys and take care of her brothers John and Michael. But I had no brothers named John and Michael. So I missed that clue too.

The fact that my mother had been strong enough to maintain her virginity until marriage is astonishing to me today. But I never doubted it then. To top it off, her journey was exactly what she planned for me—her only daughter. From baptism, to first communion, to Catholic confirmation, she steered me down a tunnel of no information other than the obvious Catholic commandment: There will be no bedding without a wedding.

There was, of course, the awkward plumbing lesson; something she must have felt was quite progressive. It was 1970, and I was in the third grade. We were living in our second home in Nova Scotia, but we would have many more homes as a military family. I was working on my spelling homework in our bungalow's dining room table. My brothers were in the living room watching Gilligan's Island.

"I know the kids aren't talking about sex yet at school, Wend-lee," she squished my name into two syllables, "but I want to tell you first, before you get the wrong information." Bleached blonde finger waves steadied her head. Her voice was straight and careful. This was to be an anatomically correct lesson about fertility and conception.

"The husband places his penis inside the wife's vagina," she was clever to imply they must be married. "And then he ejaculates sperm that fertilizes her egg."

I waited for more, sucking on a string of mouse-brown hair that curved around my jaw. A nine year old waiting for the punch line.

But nothing more came. No mention of courtship, kissing,

foreplay, sexual arousal, missionary verses doggy style, orgasm, love, attachment, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, heartbreak, or men who disappear like Houdini after they have shot their load. Just pared down facts that left out all the biggest truths. At the end of her verbal slice of a medical textbook, I had only one compelling question. It was a perfectly earnest question for a nine-year-old, one that demanded to be answered if I was to some day perform this same chemistry experiment. My question was innocent inquisitiveness.

“Mum, when he puts it inside, how does he know when it’s done?” I pictured cookies rising in the oven.

And that’s when she slammed shut the important door she had so gingerly cracked open. Her brow furrowed ever so slightly as she finished crisply, “God tells him, honey.”

Eh?

So, on top of the genital gymnastics, the positioning of which I still wasn’t clear on, the man, I mean the husband, had to get a clear radio signal to God, or the job couldn’t be finished? Got it. I think.

There certainly was no mention of love. In hindsight, this was another big clue. I’ll bet my mother knew little about love. Or, at best she knew that love had let her down. Instead, she adopted the identity of sidelined feminist. As such, she never burdened me with a Cinderella dream of a prince and a castle, but instead noisily stuffed her leftover ambition into my tiny head with words like “independence” and “don’t need a man.” Many of my contemporaries were spoon fed the same messages. Whether they had working mothers of the seventies or housewife mothers who stayed home

and watched feminist battles from the foxholes of magazines and television, they all seemed to bang a Betty Freidan drumbeat. There must be more than being a wife and mother.

My mother left me a big empty black spot where the psychology of love should be. There was not a word about how to get from “hello” to “I do.” She never ever said things like. “Wendlee, when you get married, I hope he loves you to death. I hope you bring me a bundle of grandchildren.” Instead, my mother focused on my career. “You should get a job in PR!” or, “Journalists get paid well. You should be a writer!” Love was flat out never mentioned.

But that didn’t mean that I didn’t have love mentors. In the third grade, David Cassidy and the Partridge family had me belting out the lyrics to the monster hit, I Think I Love You

*I think I love you.  
So what am I so afraid of?  
I'm afraid that I'm not sure of  
A love there is no cure for.*

David Cassidy sang of love as if it was an illness, something to be feared or cured. That’s partly why my first big television star crush was on Dr. Kiley, the young assistant on Marcus Welby, M.D., a TV show that ran from 1969-76. In the show, the two kind doctors had an off-the-charts bedside manner in an era of uncaring doctors.

My mother looved doctors. That should have been a clue too. She never saw a psychotherapist in her life but had close relation-

ships with all her medical doctors, pouring out her heart along with descriptions of the latest aches and pains associated with her chronic illness, Lupus. Her favorite doctor allowed her to chain smoke in his office while he arranged hospital teaching tours for her. She was his star patient. She showcased a rare disorder with symptoms that often stumped the medical community and made her primary care physician beam with pride. His accomplishment? He had diagnosed her first. And he quickly went on to become Doctor Agent.

I must pause here to adjust my lens. In psychology circles this story reads very differently. My mother went through some awful, tortuous medical treatments. She was love struck for doctors who came courting with piercing needles, IV tubes, and experimental medications that blew her up or shrunk her down or left her sobbing on the living room sofa. If I were to channel Sigmund Freud, a man who saw more than his share of tightly-bound, Victorian women inexplicably blind or paralyzed, he would whisper words from his famous tomes --“somatic compliance,” “secondary gain from the illness” and “repetition compulsion.” In short, I strongly suspect that my mother’s body bowed under the squall of her emotions. It gave her a physical outlet for her emotional pain and a new identity for herself. With doctors, my mother was finally seen. Her body, a surrogate for her psyche, was tended to, just enough for her to carry on. In my opinion, Lupus also handily colluded with her mind to reincarnate her learned Cardinal rule: Pain must accompany love. I discovered her painful love life long after she died. Even loving doctors hurt. Just like the men who came before them. But

Doctors were somehow safer. They had boundaries, medical ethics. They were publicly condoned. This painful love was acceptable. But this medical trauma was, in my opinion, Freud's compulsion to repeat.

With television's Marcus Welby MD my mother's celebrity crush was on the older Dr. Welby, and, following an unseen path, (one of many I would journey along) I imagined myself with the much cuter, Dr. Kiley.

When I was lonely or scared, I would lie in my small bed at night and imagine Dr. Kiley stroking my head and telling me everything would be alright. And I had reason to be lonely or scared. My father was mostly at sea. My mother was usually ill or attending to my brothers. And I was seriously, heart-poundingly, terrified of the dark. But Dr. Kiley's soothing voice got me through those nights. Dr. Kiley was the epitome of love. He was my imaginary attachment figure. My surrogate father figure when anxiety got the best of me.

Trust me. This stuff stays with you forever. When I was working as an entertainment reporter in Los Angeles in my late-twenties, I was assigned to a red carpet event where I got the shock of my life. I had been interviewing celebrities for years and was quite jaded by that point. The glow of most stars had little effect on me, but this one took me by surprise. I watched a beautiful Barbra Streisand walk the red carpet, and on her arm was her new husband, James Brolin—the actor who played Dr. Kiley on *Marcus Welby, M.D.* Dr. Kiley himself was walking toward me! Honestly, my knees nearly buckled and my heart jumped out of my chest. I grabbed the

arm of the cameraman beside me not sure if I was going to sprint or faint. In an instant, years of childhood anguished nights flooded my mind. I always got through those nights with my imaginary Dr. Kiley at my side. And here he was, striding toward my microphone!

Luckily for me, because I would have been completely tongue-tied, the diva (or, more likely, shy) Ms. Streisand didn't stop to talk to the media, and the couple breezed past in an instant. But my skinny legs didn't stop quivering for what felt like an hour.

So let me recap. Love for me was a murky idea about genital gymnastics mixed with a sad longing and the promise of a cure. Sex was something shrouded in mystery and negativity. Later, psychology textbooks (and a whole bunch of therapy) showed me that I had an anxious-ambivalent attachment style: chronic longing that vacillated with emotional avoidance. I would chase any guy who couldn't love me back yet become an ice queen or a female Houdini if a dude offered me consistent attention. "He's too nice," I would complain to my girlfriends, crinkling up my nose as if I'd picked up a noxious scent. This pattern showed up all over my love life. For thirty years, I hotly pursued gorgeous pain and carefully dodged authentic love. But what I didn't know was that I had inherited the whole business. This wasn't me at all. This mess belonged to my mother and her mother before that. Granted, I was innocently pre-loaded with a heartbreak gene and what went on in my early childhood enlivened that gene's destiny.

When I was in mid-life graduate school, studying Psychology, I was inexplicably drawn to an area called attachment theory. When people inquired why, I gestured to my pregnant tummy or

milk-swollen breasts. My cover story was that I wanted to give my daughters a healthy attachment style. But the real seduction for me was the research that linked early life attachments to adult romance. I was obsessed with the science of love. Probably because I had failed so often in relationships and I knew this was more than bad luck.

I learned that romantic attachment style begins with a biological predisposition. Some babies are born simply needing more stroking and attention than others. Indeed, some children reel with separation anxiety for years, clinging to mother's skirt or daddy's trousers long after others have bounded off in search of frogs or flowers. And how parents react to that needy baby is crucial. Patience and kindness can program even the most anxious to trust love and later seek out gentle lovers. But a too-early push, a prolonged separation, or a failure to regularly console when a bumpy playground sends a child running for arms can be a prescription for excruciating longing. For these young children, adult love becomes a journey of rebounding between familiar losses.

But what about those other babies, the ones who are born happily sailing from womb to toddler bed with barely a whimper? All goes well if the rocking arms respect the need to wiggle free. But if Mommy or Daddy have unmet needs of their own --- needs to over bundle, stroke intrusively, force a bottle on an already full tummy – then baby can learn that love is smothering and engulfing and must be avoided at all costs. These are the girls who hook-up and run from beds, the boys who hide behind the safety of texts. For the avoidant, love demands that one must stand sentry against



an invasion and defend or vanish when love gets too close.

Finally, what of the baby of any biological ilk who faces a damaged parent, one with wild emotions, (chemically induced or not) who treats a child like a punching bag or a pet or a big giant burden to ignore? What of that child? What of that version of love? Sadly, this too becomes a blue print for adult love.

We all come into the world with an attachment style that can blossom or die, depending on how it is pricked or prodded by our environment. And our most influential environment is our primary relationship. Today, neuroscientists huddle around MRI screens looking as brilliantly demarcated straitum, tegmental and amygdala light up or go dead when subjects are shown pictures of lovers or threats. Attachment style can be seen in our neurochemistry!

And modern attachment therapists have another tantalizing theory: A parents own trauma can be transmitted to the child. In other words, unresolved problems from a parents' life can cause and even perpetuate mental issues in their children since small children and parents function as one emotional mind. Babies have no experience of the world. They depend on their parents to provide emotional cues about what is safe and what isn't. And who are they to argue if their parents are full of fear about everything? Take for example the well recognized, phenomena of anxiety and depression seen in the children and grandchildren of holocaust survivors --- even ones born and raised in a tony Connecticut suburb who never saw a European war zone.

But there's more. As if modeling emotions isn't enough of an

influencer, to top it off, a parent's trauma puts a biological stamp on a child's future by actually changing genes -- genes that are most likely expressed in the third generation. In other words, your grandmother's shit stays sleepy silent in your mother, and then voilâ, it blasts out in you because it's now germinated in your DNA. (Makes me look harder at my unexplained fear of the dark.)

This stuff has been well documented when it comes to expression of genes that program our physical health. For instance, the high rates of hypertension in African-Americans are likely linked to the devastating conditions of slave ships. Those who carried a "salt retaining" gene survived the dehydration and diarrhea of those traumatic voyages. Then, because of the travesty of slave ownership, they mostly mated with those who carried the same genes. Today, nearly half of all African-Americans suffer from high blood pressure, while blacks in virtually all other parts of the world have the same rates as whites.

Other, research is being done in the area of genes associated with obesity. Because many Americans experienced starvation during The Great Depression some researchers theorize that today's high obesity rates are the legacy of their grandparents' trauma. Those who survived carried a gene that helped them live on fewer calories. Their grandchildren live with this legacy. Many people with obesity who lose more than one hundred pounds, still gain the weight back while on an 800 calorie a day diet!

But when it comes to genes that program our personality, our mental health, and our attachment style, the research is only now emerging, much of it in studies with animals who have much

shorter life spans and can be studied across generations.

As for me, I fully believe that my mother's buried secret, and my unfortunate love life date back to one treacherous ride in a row boat in Newfoundland in 1907.

So what did you think? I'd love to hear from you.  
Please feel free to email me your thoughts and I'd  
even love some constructive feedback.

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